

Jack Rix

JAMS, roadworks and middle-lane hoggers are all, arguably, legitimate reasons for road-raging motorists to lose their rag. But it's a sad day when they add children crossing a road to the list.

Astonishingly, however, they have - and the result is anything from intimidation to abuse and even life-threatening manoeuvres, according to the lollipop men and women who face this behaviour every day.

To prove it, we went in search of a busy rush hour road, armed with some of the latest undercover technology: lollipop poles secretly fitted with tiny cameras, which film road ragers in action.

We picked London's borough of Westminster, and teamed up with one of its crossing patrol staff Susan West to see how bad the problem really is. She told us typical offences include motorists driving round her when she is in the middle of the road, sounding their horn while children or other pedestrians are crossing, and swearing and using threatening language.

And that's all in spite of the fact that a lollipop sign has the same legal power as a red light. Failure to take notice can result in a £1,000 fine plus a three-point penalty on your licence.

The situation is getting worse, too. Last year, 1,400-plus 'lollipop-rage' incidents were reported to councils, and dozens of lollipop staff across the UK have been hospitalised after being hit by road-raging drivers.

Critical

In fact, it's become so critical that some authorities are now teaching patrols how to deal with angry motorists - using training techniques originally developed to help bouncers handle drunken party-goers!

And we soon witnessed an incident ourselves - one which proved it's not only cars that disregard the rules. We watched as West stepped out into the road, held up her stop sign vertically and ushered some children safely across.

But the group had barely mounted the kerb when a man on a bike flashed past, narrowly missing the kids. When West shouted after him he turned around and yelled: "There wasn't even anything in my way!"

A Westminster Council spokesman who had joined us shook his head as he witnessed the violation: "Traditionally this was an easy job, but now it's just

plain dangerous," he said. "We've got 12 patrols around Westminster and unfortunately they get this sort of abuse all the time - and we're talking about vulnerable people here." Once the flow of children crossing had dried up, we managed to speak with West. She said: "I've been doing this job for seven years now, although I have had to move positions because my old spot, on Vauxhall Bridge Road, became far too dangerous when a zebra crossing was removed."

Swearing

We discovered that she has had her fair share of near-misses and verbal abuse, too: "I've nearly been hit by a coach. It just kept coming and coming, and stopped inches away from me," she said. "I've had people winding down their windows and swearing at me while kids were crossing in front of them, and then there's the cyclists who just fly past regardless every day."

"I gave one an earful once and he stopped doing it for a while, but then he just carried on as normal. They don't seem to realise that it's illegal."

Westminster still hasn't armed its patrols with the new hi-tech camera kit, which is made by Oxfordshire-based firm Routesafe. It is designed to capture abusive and dangerous drivers in the act, and use the recorded video as evidence - if the case is serious enough to make it to court.

But the firm's product manager Lee Fairbrother says that's not the only benefit. He told us: "As long as there's enough publicity that our lollipops are in use, they will become an effective deterrent. The system also offers peace of mind for the person using it."

We asked the council what it thought of the hi-tech lollipop we'd brought along, as this was the first time it had come across the technology. The spokesman said: "The city is covered in CCTV cameras, parking cameras and Congestion Charge cameras, so it's nothing new for drivers to know they are being filmed! Westminster welcomes anything that helps to protect our staff and children."

He continued: "It raises awareness of what's going on, and acts as vital evidence - especially if the person is a persistent offender."

So, did West think such a piece of kit would make much difference? "I'd love to catch the cars and bikes that have ignored



Give 'em some stick!

Lollipop ladies are set to fight back at abusive drivers... with a hi-tech stick featuring a camera! We saw why it's needed so badly



Product boss of Routesafe Lee Fairbrother (far left) talks our man Rix through the finer points of his company's new invention



We spent time with London lollipop lady Susan West to see the dangers she faces on a daily basis (left). The images above are taken from the array of poles which are already in use across the country

me on more than one occasion – and this camera would definitely help with that,” she said. “It’s heavier than my normal lollipop, but I could get used to it!”

The Routesafe pole looks identical to a standard one, although it does weigh around a third more and costs £890 instead of only £250 for a normal lollipop. Lee Fairbrother added: “It even has the black strip underneath where it says ‘stop’.

Originally this was for crossing patrol officers to write down offending drivers’ registrations in chalk. Our system is moving the game on, and bringing the lollipop into the 21st century!”

He continued: “It may sound like a lot of money but it’s cheaper than a fixed CCTV camera, which would cost around £1,000.” However, Fairbrother is realistic about the number of Routesafes he can sell. “It won’t completely replace the standard sign, but hopefully local councils will buy a few each. They can rotate them around as a deterrent.”

Yet for the technology to make people think twice about road rage, locals must be aware of where it’s being used. Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council has ordered a number of lollipops – and road safety officer Don MacDougall is concentrating on raising awareness. “We’ll launch them with a big publicity campaign so motorists know that they’re being watched,” he said.

And it’s a similar story in Kirklees, West Yorkshire – one of the other local councils to make an early commitment

to the technology. Committee member for Highways and Transportation David Hall explained: “There’s been loads of local publicity and it’s even been covered in the national press. The idea isn’t to catch people in the act, but to prevent them doing it in the first place.”

Kirklees has bought only one lollipop so far, but Hall says it won’t be too long before it takes more. In fact, Fairbrother claims Routesafe is making a first batch of 50, and they’re all spoken for. A further 150-plus councils have shown interest – and that could grow further thanks to Auto Express: after our investigation we learned Westminster Council had agreed to a trial period with the video poles!

This isn’t Routesafe’s first attempt at creating monitoring cameras for crossing patrol officers, either. It also developed a head-mounted unit to serve the same purpose as those embedded in the stick.

But Fairbrother says the lollipops are far superior: “The head-mounted camera looks only where the person wearing it is looking: at the kids or at the ground. It’s not always pointing at the offending motorists.” He continued: “Having the camera in the pole lets you look in both directions at the same time, and it’s activated only when the lollipop is vertical, which extends the life of the battery.”

Whether these hi-tech poles are adopted nationwide or not, they’ve drawn some much needed attention to a serious situation. Only one cyclist ignored the lollipop sign while we were watching – but if trends continue, increasing numbers of lollipop-rage cases are inevitable. And it’s such forward thinking that is needed to stamp out mindless and dangerous driving.

David Sparks, chairman of the Local Government Association’s Transport Board, summed it up: “It’s unbelievable that we have to take this sort of action, but the lives of children are at risk from drivers who are so selfish that they refuse to stop for 30 seconds at a school crossing. Councils should do everything within their power to put an end to it.”

“Our hi-tech new monitoring camera system moves the game on, bringing the traffic lollipop into the 21st century”

Lee Fairbrother, Routesafe



More and more drivers are ignoring crossing lollipop patrols – putting lives at risk

How it works...



Discreet camera records traffic both in front of and behind the crossing patrol

The tilting mechanism

Sign upside down

No pedestrians waiting to cross. Tilt switch is not activated, and the video system is not in use.



THE Routesafe Road Crossing Monitor comprises two high-resolution video cameras mounted back-to-back on opposite sides of the crossing pole. Images from these cameras are fed to a tiny video recorder which is built into the pole itself.

The two cameras are controlled by a handgrip that is switched on when the patrol officer holds it, and a tilt switch, which works depending on which way up the pole is standing. This system is explained in greater detail on the left.

Once they are activated, the twin cameras record real-time images from behind and in front of the crossing patrol officer, of traffic coming from both directions. An optional microphone can be fitted, which can record any verbal abuse received from motorists.

All of the data is captured along with the time, date and any specific site details shown on the screen. This allows the video to be used as evidence in case of a prosecution.

The evidence gathered is put on removable storage cards, much like a normal digital camera. These can be taken out at the end of the day and saved on to a computer. The unit can also be wired up to provide live wi-fi output, which can be picked up by a wireless recorder close by.

Internal batteries will power the pole for up to four hours of recording. Seeing as it’s not always switched on, and the fact that a crossing patrol officer’s shift is rarely longer than an hour at a time, this is more than sufficient.

Sign sideways

Used as barrier to stop pedestrians crossing prematurely. Hand switch activated, tilt switch isn’t, video system in standby.



Sign extended out an angle

Hand switch activated, tilt switch activated, video system recording. All vehicles must stop.



Sign held up high

Pedestrians are ready to cross. Hand switch activated, tilt switch is too, video recording. Vehicles must stop.

