

## Winter driving skills helped by Devon's Country Mile

In the run up to Christmas, the Department for Transport-funded Devon Country Mile project ran a timely series of Winter Driving days based along the Exe valley from Crediton to Umberleigh. The overall aim of the project is to develop new ways of improving rural road safety, through partnerships with Devon County Council and 'blue light' services such as Devon and Somerset Fire and Rescue, and Devon and Cornwall Police. Studies amongst the partners have highlighted problems on the A377 Exeter to Barnstaple road, with an average of 80 incidents and collisions occurring each year on this 40 mile stretch of endlessly twisting and usually damp tarmac. Around 95% relate to human error, over 10% to adverse weather - and over 80% involve someone living within 12 miles of the incident.

Community Driving Instructor Mike Hull has been heavily involved in the driving days, which offered an hour's free advice and information to those driving regularly on or near the A377. "We've been taking a practical look at winter driving problems," he says. "Coping with big puddles across the road - perhaps where there's a bend ahead... or dealing with fallen leaves, mud, ice, fallen rocks, flooding and plenty more. All the typical winter problems - though drivers did ask for advice on some specific worries like driving on snow, and we've been happy to help with those."

Tony Kneil drives a Vauxhall Frontera 4x4 and lives locally to Umberleigh, where an event was based at the village hall: "I've been driving a long time," he says, "but like all drivers I do have worries: people drive too fast sometimes, and I worry about young drivers particularly. I like to think I'm safe, but I've learnt plenty in just an hour. Things like the two-second rule... didn't know that about gaps between cars... we talked about how four wheel drive vehicles behave in winter: I'm certainly more aware of puddles and the chances of falling rocks, horses and so on - it was well worth it..."

With virtually every event in the series oversubscribed, Mike Hull has been heartened both by the response, and the willingness of regular drivers using a difficult road to take expert advice. "We have seen some common threads," he says, "the road does suffer flooding, for instance, but drivers don't necessarily appreciate standing water could instantly wreak expensive engine damage... and with so many bends, concentration and good advance observation help enormously, while using lower gears gives so much better control in dealing with problems..."

Asked if any overriding messages have emerged from what has proved a well received and particularly successful Country Mile series, Mike Hull turns pensive... "There are plenty of experienced drivers using the A377," he says, after a pause, "but I'm sure brushing up on hazard perception would be helpful for many, and... there's sometimes a tendency to blame others for winter driving problems. Maybe it's time to think about taking ownership of your own actions as a driver..."