

UKMA News

The newsletter for members of the UK Metric Association *m*

Volume 1, Issue 1

January 2003

Why a members' newsletter?

This is the first of what it is hoped will become a regular newsletter for all members of UKMA.

The need for such a newsletter has become evident from some of the e-mails appearing on the Smartgroups forum. These show that members are wondering what the Committee is doing about, say, writing to the Met Office or countering the activities of the sign vandals. Other members have suggested courses of action which are either already in hand or have been rejected or deferred as unwise or premature. →

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Lord Howe to brief colleagues

Chris Keenan

Chair of UKMA

An important meeting was held at the House of Lords on 22 November. Arranged at Lord Howe's request, it was attended by UKMA Committee members, plus Press Officer, Roz Denny, together with Chris Huhne, MEP, Anne Attlee, Jim Humble (the last Director of the Metrication Board), and Jim Spinks, an independent Trading Standards consultant. UKMA sponsors Ian Taylor, MP and Lord Taverne had also hoped to attend, but other obligations prevented them.

After thanking UKMA for the briefing papers supplied ahead of the meeting, Lord Howe described the contacts he had been making with people in industry and academia. He would contact Sir David John of the BSI, and supply him with our briefings. Other possible supporters included Ian Gibson of the Commons Science Select Committee, and Lord Oxburgh. Lord Howe suggested adding material to develop the briefings to point out public awareness of metric in sport and other non-motoring areas, to prepare a more political, safety-based argument, and highlight this at government level. He felt that

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The Committee apologises for the lack of communication in the past, and we hope that this newsletter will fill the gap. The intention is to produce it approximately 3 – 4 times per year as and when there are important announcements or news items.

UKMA News will in no way replace the Smartgroups forum – which will continue. Instead, the newsletter will be e-mailed to all members (whether they participate in Smartgroups or not), and if and when membership can be expanded to postal members, then it may be possible to produce a hard-copy edition.

For this first issue, Committee member Robin Paice has agreed to act as editor, but a volunteer is sought to edit it on a more permanent basis. *m*

Target date for 2003 AGM

The next AGM and Annual Conference is expected to be held on Saturday, 12 July 2003 – venue yet to be confirmed but probably in London. (Put the provisional date in your diary)

As last year, it is hoped to arrange a visiting speaker followed by debates on major metric issues and campaigning tactics.

Elections for officers and committee places are planned to be organised electronically in May.

The deadline for constitutional amendments would be 31 May 2003.

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Website to be revamped

Phil Hall

Webmaster

A “working group” led by UKMA Chair, Chris Keenan, has been formed to develop and improve the UKMA website

Background to the present site

The present UKMA web site was conceived and implemented by our Chairman in 1999. It was published with a view to countering the misinformation being perpetrated by the media and others about metrication and the metric system. It provides useful references to unbiased, accurate sources of information as well as its own commentary, with contributions from knowledgeable and respected people.

It has evolved gradually over time and has served its original purpose admirably.

Reasons for the new site

The time has arrived for the site to be developed further so that its role becomes more pro-active in the realm of persuasion as well as giving information. It is now seen as a key component of the future campaign of the UKMA.

New structure

The new structure is still under review but so far the following main

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concentrating on political supporters can be a two-edged sword, as many of those likely to express support publicly are also well-known supporters of the EU. This has the potential to undermine our cause.

We discussed publicity and possible efforts to attract significant funding. Lord Howe offered to put his name to further articles, which we would draft for him. It would also be very beneficial to involve other parliamentary friends in writing feature articles.

Following a briefing on the involvement of Liberty in the Metric Martyrs' case, Lord Howe said he would contact Anthony Lester, QC, on ECHR issues, and keep him informed.

Chris Huhne suggested that we could get political resonance if we could demonstrate the consumers were being ripped off through measurement unit confusion. Proper evidence would be needed to get an impact. Chris Huhne and Lord Howe thought that the key people at the Consumer Association were ambivalent about measurement units and would probably advocate that the consumers should choose the units they liked. It was agreed that we should look at updating an earlier survey ("Whiteley Report") of the costs of not completing the process. Chris Huhne stressed the need to have a specific goal if we are to attempt to get funding for this, and suggested groups like Rowntree and Wellcome as possible backers. Lord Howe took it on himself to contact Sir Peter Davies of Sainsburys and James Dyson about possible funding. He also knows Bob Worcester of Mori, and he suggested this contact as a way of developing ideas for surveys, etc.

There was also a suggestion that we write to Trade Associations, and others such as the British Retail Consortium to invite their support.

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headings have been identified:

- Quick summary of 'Why metric is better'
- News headlines, archived press releases and contacts for the media
- Dispelling anti-metric myths [possibly]
- Retail (alcohol, clothing sizes, fruit & veg, NFCG survey)
- Cookery (weights and gas marks), Guild of Food Writers guide
- Education (National Curriculum, children's mathematical ability)
- Transport (road signs, speedometers, and metric in public transport and road construction)
- Legislation (especially what's available from HMSO site)
- Detailed information (UKMA style guide, BIPM guide, links to US, Australian etc sites)
- UKMA information (membership, media contacts again)

Much of the original site will be retained in appropriate sections of the new site.

Plans for launch of the new site

The new site will be developed in-situ on a new host based on templates for each page. The detailed content will be developed gradually but those sections still under construction will have a light but active content pending more in depth development. It is expected that the new site will go public early in the 2003 once the initial version is settled.

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Tackling the media

Roddy Urquhart

Secretary of UKMA

Eighteen months ago the UK Metric Association rated scarcely a mention in the news media. With the Government rarely speaking up for metrication and with plenty of pro-imperial organisations around, the result was that frequently only the "imperialist" view got quoted.

Over the last 15 months the UKMA has had a programme of working to get the pro-metric view better represented in the media. We have made a modest start but never get the level of attention that "newsmakers" like the so-called "metric martyrs" or Tony Bennett have received.

This report summarises activities since the last report at our AGM.

Press Releases

Press releases are normally used to announce "news" - in other words some event or announcement of something that has happened. Press releases are picked up by newspaper, TV or radio newsrooms who evaluate whether something is "newsworthy" enough to follow up. Newsrooms are not usually interested in mere "opinion" unless it directly relates to some news event.

So far the UKMA has done little to "make news". We have not tried to "amend" price per pound signs in supermarkets. We have not been taken to court. In the absence of such "stunts", often our best hope of making the news is to be able to comment on the events from the pro-metric point of view. This is typically achieved by providing a quote in the press release - usually in the name of the Chairman.

We have issued press releases around two stories:

- the Austrian theme pub story in October and
- the Tony Bennett court case in November.

In each case the stories were mainly reported in the local media. BWMA and "metric martyrs" had people to visit Worcester, so not surprisingly got better coverage than we did. A quote from Chris was published in a Times article. The Tony Bennett case was mainly reported in the local Kent news media.

We do also publish practical advice for using metric. In these cases we hope that a newsroom will forward the release to appropriate journalists. This can be "hit and miss" but there have been some successes (see below). We sent out two releases one relating to metric versions of traditional Christmas recipes and the other giving user-friendly metric roasting times for a Christmas turkey.

Radio Debates and Interviews

Radio debates and phone-ins offer an excellent chance to air our views in a more free format than say a TV interview or newspaper report. Robin Paice had a chance to put across our views on metrication through a 3 Counties Radio debate with Tony Bennett. Usually the presenters usually work to ensure that each side has a chance to properly represent their views. Such discussions often move on to a phone-in and on that occasion, Phil Hall joined the discussion. (A tape recording of that broadcast is available – at cost – from Phil).

Radio phone-ins are a great opportunity for any UKMA member to put across our point of view.

As a result of the turkey roasting press release, Roz Denny got an interview with BBC Radio Wiltshire where she was given a good opportunity to air the pro-metric view.

Web Reports

Getting into national TV or newspaper reports is quite difficult. But just as local newspapers or local radio can be valuable media outlets the same can be said about some websites.

Our views on the Worcester Austrian theme pub got published in some food and drink industry websites. The Christmas turkey advice got widely used on local radio websites.

Style Guide

The last element in our news media campaign is the Style Guide. In the summer we sent out copies of the Style Guide to the large circulation newspapers and websites. One concrete result has been revisions to the Times internal Style Guide. The Times has made some modest, but welcome, steps in the direction of metric, with much foreign travel reported in kilometres and with body sizes given in metric and imperial.

It is understood that the Guardian has also posted our Style Guide on its notice board.

UKMA's current Style Guide focuses on general news coverage. However, measurement unit usage has specific requirements in areas such as cookery, gardening, automotive, slimming and weather. A specialised style guide covering food, cookery and slimming is under development, and other specialist style guides may be planned in the future.

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Manifesto progress

One of the points made by Lord Howe and others at the 22 November meeting was that campaigners need to have clearly established principles and policies for completing the metric changeover. He and his colleagues need this in order to persuade colleagues to stick their necks out and join in the campaign.

Fortunately, the Committee has this project – the “Manifesto” - well in hand. The purpose of this document will be to be an authoritative statement of UKMA policy setting out how we believe our basic objective of “the full adoption of the international metric system (SI)” can best be achieved. When it is published, it can be used in campaigning and will also be a reference document both for our own members and for decision-makers and the media who wish to understand the case for completing metrication. It is hoped to launch the document sometime in 2003. The latest draft is being circulated separately to UKMA members for consultation, and in addition the outline structure of the document (as approved by the Committee) is also set out alongside: →

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Outline structure of Manifesto

(as approved by UKMA Committee)

1. Summary

2. Introduction

- Who we are
- Copyright statement (*to prevent misquotation and distortion*)
- Current situation
 - a. Half imperial, half metric
 - b. Problems arising (incl costs of running two systems)
- Why metric is better (deal with counter-arguments and myths)
- Slow progress the result of voluntary approach and entrenched resistance
- Costs of conversion (summary – refer to Appendix)
- Successful examples of transitions from imperial to metric
- Need to complete the job

3. Principles of changeover

- Think metric! (don't convert)
- User-friendly metric units (inc non-SI)
- Supplementary indications
- Transitional periods
- Enforcement, compulsion and civil liberties
- General timetable and targets
- Government planning and management of a changeover (incl education/familiarisation campaign)

4. Policy areas

- Retailing
 - a. Packaged goods (incl prescribed sizes/quantities etc)
 - b. Loose goods
 - c. Price marking
- Advertising
- Road and vehicle signage
- Education
- The media
- Estate agency
- Weather reports and forecasts
- Health

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Manifesto – cont. from page 6

Although it is the responsibility of the Committee to act on behalf of the membership, we are anxious to take account of all members' views before launching our considered policy statement. This is important since we need to have a good general consensus on the principles underlying our policy before going on to develop more detailed policy statements. The Committee therefore (a) invites comments on the draft as it stands, and (b) calls for volunteers both to fill any gaps (e.g. short history of metrication in Australia) and to join or form working groups to draft more detailed policy statements on specific topics (such as retailing). So could we have comments and volunteers by 7 February please either via the Secretary (secretary@metric.org.uk) or directly to the editor (robin.paice@btconnect.com). Finally, it is stressed that this project is confidential at present. For obvious reasons, we do not wish it to leak prematurely - so please do not refer to it in your own individual campaigning. The arguments contained in it can of course be used freely.

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5. Conclusion (summary of recommendations)

- Recommended programme of action (who does what when)
 - a. UK Government (and Scottish Executive?)
 - b. (European Commission ?)
 - c. Local authorities
 - d. Manufacturers (via CBI/TUC)
 - e. Retail industry (inc. pub trade)
 - f. Schools, colleges, universities, exam boards
 - g. Media
 - h. Advertising industry
 - i. Met Office
 - j. National Health Service
 - k. General public

Bibliography and references

Appendices

- Idiot's guides, e.g.
 - a. Body size and weight
 - b. Shopping
 - c. Cooking
 - d. Distances, heights and speeds
 - e. House sizes and land areas
 - f. Sport
 - g. Weather
- Style guide
- Detailed costs of conversion
- Summary of SI and approved non-SI units

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Lobbying decision-makers

One of the campaigning tactics which the UKMA Committee uses is that of lobbying decision-makers. This involves researching who are the key decision-makers in organisations and then either e-mailing, telephoning or writing formally to them, trying to persuade them to use metric within their organisations and in their public communications.

UKMA has made a number of representations to various bodies since the Annual General Meeting in July. Some of the letters have been in response to events, while others have aimed to seek allies in fighting for further metrication.

Excluding the letters in response to ARM's campaign to deface or remove metric signage, a total of 14 letters were sent between the AGM and the end of 2002. Of these, 6 were responded to, 5 were effectively ignored (no response received after 6 weeks of sending) and 3 were sent in December and have not been answered so far.

Of the letters sent, 5 were to Parliamentarians who had spoken out in favour of metric (and with whom we wish to have more contact), 5 were sent to plead for better media unit usage (Met Office, Food Standards Agency and newspapers), 3 were written on road signage issues (DfT and RAC). Last but not least we wrote to Andrea Schutz of the Cardinal's Hat in Worcester regarding her problems of selling beer in metric measures. Unfortunately she had been visited by Neil Herron of the "metric martyrs" and by the BWMA and has followed their advice.

In response to the ARM campaign of sign vandalism, we wrote to 8 Councils and other bodies which were under immediate threat. Of these, Portsmouth and Birmingham gave encouraging replies, 5 simply acknowledged or failed to reply, while one (Lee Valley Park Authority) confirmed that following legal advice they were giving in to ARM's intimidation and removing metric signs.

Since July there have been no relevant Government consultations, but we plan to take part whenever an appropriate opportunity arises.

While the response rate to our letters, and in particular the response rate with positive answers, remains poor we should bear in mind that there have been very few formal representations made by UKMA until this year. Just as building contacts with the press takes time, it will take us time to build bridges to government organisations, industry organisations and to parliamentarians.

It can be seen that the response has generally been disappointingly non-committal. Most organisations seem to take the line that while they will comply with the law's minimum requirements, it is not their job to take the lead in completing the metric changeover. Consequently, as long as there is "freedom of choice" and an apparent public preference for imperial, they will continue to offer imperial as their main or at least a supplementary measurement system.

This reinforces the view that the completion of the metric changeover cannot be achieved without the commitment and overt support of the UK Government.

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