

Safety Advisory Panel – 20th June 2012

RESPONSE TO: Regional Committee

2012/18 Lifting of seats and harnesses

Mr Blythe reported that Regional Committee had requested that this item be included on the Agenda. Regional Committee do not disagree with disposing of harnesses and seats when not in acceptable condition, however they request this Panel to explain why time lifting must be used rather than, for example, usage lifting. The Panel noted that the regulation requiring 'in-date' FIA seats was introduced by Rallies Committee and has been in print for at least 4 years, however it has now been decided to reconsider this as the transitional period for older log-booked cars expired at the end of 2011. It was also noted that the introduction of 'in-date' seats for pre-2009 cars has been delayed until at least 2013, seats in these cars must at least be previously FIA homologated, although it was pointed out this allows seats whose FIA homologation has been subsequently withdrawn.

The issue of harnesses was discussed first, the requirement having been in place in stage rallying regulations for some time. It was noted that an appropriate good quality FIA homologated harness can be obtained for in the order of £130, with a 'life' of 5 years this equates to £26 a year, so it is felt that this is not a major cost factor. An appropriate FIA homologated seat can be obtained for about £240, but it was acknowledged that this will generally be for a heavy and bulky seat, so the cost could rise to around £800 depending on requirements and preference. It was also noted that the competitor won't necessarily want the cheapest seat, they will want something that they feel comfortable in and that fits them well.

Seat manufacturers have the option of extending the life of a seat by 2 years, but only following a full inspection so this is generally not done as it involves stripping the seat right down. There is also the added factor of the inspector being wary to put their name to the extension if they cannot 100% guarantee that the seat is in the correct condition.

The Panel acknowledged that usage is the contributing factor in the deterioration of seats and harnesses; they do not generally deteriorate purely with time. The condition of a seat relies on its usage and general history, however the question this raises is how do you monitor the usage and history of a seat? The history of the usage of a seat or harness outside of MSA permitted events will not be known, for example a harness/seat combination could be used twice a year for MSA events, but used all of the time on the road and a handful of trackdays as well, there is no way of monitoring this. Mr Felix pointed out that rally cars run night after night at Pembrey testing and this will never be recorded. With this in mind the Panel feel that to police lifting by usage cannot be done.

The suggestion of getting scrutineers to carry out thorough checks of harnesses and seats was discussed. It was felt that this is impractical, particularly as the scrutineer only has 6 minutes to check over the whole car. If asked to inspect a seat the scrutineer will need to strip it down and it is suggested that a scrutineer inspecting a seat will think to themselves "is it OK? I'm unsure and I'm not qualified to determine so I will not put my name to it...".

The other suggestion discussed was extending the 'life' of FIA seats automatically by 2 years in MSA regulations. The issue here is that this goes against the FIA 'world-wide' regulations and would be considered a backwards step in safety. It was also noted that this would be something brought into question in such as a Coroners Court.

In summary the Panel feel that lifting of seats and harnesses remains the appropriate solution, and noted that whatever form of restriction is used, it will advantage some, and disadvantage others – there is no ideal solution. The Panel also wish to point out that the seat and the harness, both separately and as a combination, are a major safety element of any competing car.