It's a LIGHTMARE

Safety boon, or dazzling nightmare? Modern car lighting is brighter and more varied than ever before, and for some people that has become a troubling issue. **Sue Baker** investigates.

Ken Perham is a man with a mission. He is infuriated by what he views as over-bright modern car lights – bi-xenon headlamps, LEDs and DRLs (daytime running lights) and he wants something done about it. So London taxi driver Ken is spearheading a campaign against the 'scourge' of cars that dazzle, and he is attracting growing support for his cause. Already the memorably-named Lightmare campaign has won backing from the Driving Instructors Association, which has thrown its weight behind the fight against "the growing road safety issue of blinding lights affecting a driver's ability to perceive hazards".

For years, Ken, a stereotypically talkative cabbie who works mostly at night, has told anyone who will listen what a menace he reckons the dazzle of high-tech car lights to be. Now he is gearing up for a big fight against them, joining forces with another campaigner and vigorously courting publicity for their cause. "I totally believe that the regulations are wrong in allowing car lights that dazzle other drivers," says Ken. "It's just not right."

Lightmare results from the combining of two organisations: Blinded Bi-Xenon, started by 60-year-old Ken, and Drivers Against Daylight Running Lights, a 12-year crusade run by fellow car lighting critic Roy Milnes. DRLs are controversial, vociferously opposed by other organisations that have sprung up across Europe, with the support of some ophthalmologists. But the campaigners seem to be fighting a losing battle. New regulations effective in the UK from February mean that daytime running lights – said to be up to 50 per cent brighter than standard dipped headlights – will now be mandatory for all new European-built vehicles.

A campaign website, www.lightmare.org, is collecting names on a petition that will be used as ammunition to lobby the government. Lightmare argues that enforced use of daytime running lights for cars will be a road safety hazard because they make pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists less obvious to drivers and therefore put these vulnerable road-users at greater risk.

Bi-xenon lights and increasingly popular LEDs (light-emitting diodes) are the other prong of Lightmare's attack. But isn't perception of their brightness more a matter of personal sensitivity than actual glare? I put to Ken a comment made by a lighting expert at Audi, who told me that for people who find themselves particularly affected by car light brightness, it may be more a psychological issue than a physical one.

"Well maybe. I really did think initially that it was an age issue because I'm getting older," said Ken. "But it affects so many people that it's still a problem. Bright xenon headlights, DRLs and LEDs fixate the eye. They should be diffused, in the same way that strip lights in shops have covers on them to diffuse the light and make it more subtle."

Some experts agree. Dr Peter Heilig, professor of ophthalmology at Vienna University, was influential in getting daytime running lights banned in Austria in 2006 when road safety statistics showed a 12 per cent increase in road casualties after they were made mandatory. The DIA head of road safety Howard Redwood supports the UK campaign: "Lightmare has collected a staggering amount of data and produced a very strong case to persuade the UK government to reconsider the current MoT system and the need for daytime running lights."

LEDs have become increasing fashionable on up-market cars since Mercedes-Benz pioneered them in the rear lights of the 1998 S-Class. They first appeared in headlights on the Audi R8, and are now on most up-market cars. Mercedes spokesman Rob Halloway says of high-tech car lighting: "The safety benefits are extremely obvious, and it's better for the environment. Xenon and LED lights use a lot less energy than older car lights."

Car manufacturers have to comply with very strict regulations that specify the angle and intensity of car lights, he points out. "But there can be a big difference between, for example, xenon bulbs fitted as original equipment by manufacturers, and some of the unregulated after-market lighting. That's where a lot of problems can arise." DC

Words: **Sue Baker**