

Taking biking into the corridors of power



The National Motorcyclists Council launched last year with the aim of providing a new voice for motorcycling, speaking directly to government. *BDN* finds out more

March 2021 was a pretty hectic time. The UK was in another hard lockdown, a massive wartime-level vaccination effort was under way and the motorcycle trade was just about holding on after enduring 12 months of a global pandemic. So you could be forgiven for missing the launch, at Westminster, of a new motorcycle campaigning organisation. Dubbed the National Motorcyclists Council, the new body claimed that “UK motorcyclists will now gain additional power in Government and Parliament on motorcycling issues.”

The NMC was set up as an ‘umbrella’ body, bringing together a number of existing bikers’ organisations under one banner with the aim of presenting government, MPs, councils and civil servants with a single unified voice on the issues motorcyclists are concerned about. At the launch, its membership was made up of five founding organisations: the Auto Cycle Union, the British Motorcyclists Federation, IAM RoadSmart, the Motorcycle Action Group and the Trail Riders Fellowship. Since then, the National Motorcycle Dealers Association (NMDA) has also joined up, adding a trade voice to the NMC’s remit.

The executive director of the NMC is Craig Carey-Clinch, who’s been lobbying politicians about motorcycles since the early 1990s and is known as “Mr Motorcycling” to certain MPs in Westminster. *BDN* spoke to Carey-Clinch about the NMC just before its first birthday, and he took us through the creation of the new body.

COMING TOGETHER

“At the start of the Covid crisis, a loose organisation of 15 motorcycling groups formed, with the idea to come up with Covid-safe guidelines for riding bikes depending on how the rules changed. It drew together a lot of players, and they asked me to come on board. Then we thought, if we can agree on this, why can’t we agree on other stuff when life gets back to normal?”

So the idea of the NMC was born early on in 2020. But as Carey-Clinch told us, the name had been used before. “Back in the 1990s, when I worked with MAG and MCIA, I was part of a group also called the National Motorcyclists Council. The work we did by combining forces around one or two clear messages was enough to get the UK government to work towards the first ever national motorcycle strategy in 2005.”

The turmoil from the global financial crisis of 2008, plus the change of government in 2010 meant that 2005 strategy never really fulfilled its promise, and the separate motorcycling groups went back to campaigning on an individual basis. Fast forward a decade though, and there’s a new NMC that is attempting to change how motorcycles are seen by those in power.

Carey-Clinch is keen to emphasise that the NMC doesn’t replace the work done by its member groups though. “I see it as rather like a trade association between user groups. We have all the different strengths and facets of the members brought together on issues where we all agree. We don’t replace what the members do on their own lobbying but

complement it where we agree.”

The NMC isn’t an ‘end-user’, grassroots-type organisation either. “The NMC’s not for consumers to join. Our message is, if you want to help the NMC, join one of the riders’ groups.”

What about the industry side? What’s the role of the trade in the NMC? “In terms of the industry, I think NMC sits well alongside the supply side representations so there are two very powerful lobbies both working to achieve results that are good for motorcycling, rather than one very powerful lobby (in the shape of the MCIA) and a whole load of fragmented organisations representing users.”

What about dealers at the coal face? “Dealers can engage directly via the NMDA, and locally through their local rider groups. MAG and BMF often have local meets at dealers, so it’s worth keeping an eye on our news, and getting involved with the key issues of the day.”

NEW VOICE OF MOTORCYCLING

So, that’s what the NMC is. But what’s it planning to do with its new voice? It’s fair to say that the last year hasn’t been in any way normal. And you could see how government wouldn’t be concentrating too much on biking, what with the Covid-19 pandemic still pressing, Brexit hangovers, supply chain woes, soaring inflation, and labour shortages. But the NMC has identified a number of areas where it has made a difference already. Carey-Clinch again: “The achievements so far? We’ve shifted the dial and improved the credibility of motorcycling organisations. →

We've held some events, including a mayoral hustings in London, where we got everyone except Sadiq Khan to attend, and had a debate in Parliament led by Sir Bill Wiggins MP. In terms of how motorcycling is viewed by the establishment, we've replaced fragmented voices with one unified voice. The aim is to change how motorcycling is viewed by the establishment."

There are some big tasks ahead for the NMC too, with immediate challenges including proposed anti-tampering laws which could prevent riders modifying their bikes with non-standard parts, 'net zero' plans that could phase out petrol engines for bikes, and ongoing problems for riders shipping their bikes into the EU for trackdays. There's also the wider issue of the future of transport, giving motorcycling its proper place within an overall plan for transport going forward.

And the NMC is already representing the biking world to government across all these areas. "Immediate challenges relate to anti-tampering," said Carey-Clinch. "We need to have certainty on that. Our policy is to reject the government proposals as they stand. On net zero, we're challenging the thinking. Why is the UK government hell-bent on going towards a zero CO₂ option for motorcycling, when the rest of the world is looking at net zero from an evolutionary series of multiple tech-based approaches over a period of time? The fear is they force the pace on a single set of battery technologies, instead of innovations like synthetic fuels or hydrogen, and all you get is a massive market shock, because the UK is such a small part of the overall global motorcycle market."

BREXIT STUMBLING BLOCK

On the difficulties with riders shipping their bikes into the EU for track events, off-road riding, or other activities, the NMC is looking to work with its sister organisation in Europe, FEMA – though resolution seems some way off. "I do talk to FEMA regularly," said Carey-Clinch, "and one issue at the moment is this bike shipping problem. The UK government is completely behind us on this, but the problem is that there's very little movement on the other side of the Channel."



NMC executive director
Craig Carey-Clinch

BACKING THE PLANS

WELL-KNOWN ACCIDENT CLAIMS management, crash repair and mobility solution provider Plantec Assist backed the National Motorcyclists Council (NMC) with both sponsorship and participatory assistance, in a move that will undoubtedly strengthen its widening representative role.

Welcoming the company's involvement, NMC executive director Craig Carey-Clinch said: "Plantec will also join the NMC's growing membership base, so further extending the reach and authority that member organisations have created since the NMC was founded.

"Plantec is involved in key motorcyclist-facing areas and is able to support the NMC's work through the knowledge it has gained by working with individual riders. We look forward to making further progress on motorcycling issues with its support."

Garry King, head of sales and development at Plantec Assist, added: "We are very pleased to be working alongside the National Motorcyclists Council and all of its members to share our knowledge, provide support and encourage change in order to ensure safe and sustainable motorcycling for the future."



PLANTEC ASSIST SPONSORS THE NATIONAL MOTORCYCLISTS COUNCIL



A big downside from Brexit then, but Carey-Clinch reckons there's one possible benefit when it comes to motorcycle licensing in the UK. "After Brexit, opportunities are there, and one is to evolve the licensing regime to something more suited to the domestic environment and needs. It's not about making the test easier, that would be silly. What we need to do is maintain standards in testing and training, to make what's there work better."

The biggest challenge though is a more fundamental one. The NMC wants to make motorcycling more visible to those in power, as a solution to the problems of transport in the 2020s, rather than just being seen – as it often is – as a road safety problem. "Future of transport is the major game," said Carey-Clinch. "Where does motorcycling sit in terms of city access and mobility, equality of opportunity, access to work and environmental stuff? Motorcycling has such a huge and key role to play. So instead of trying to deal with consequences of problematic policy, we're really trying to get to the core of it by looking at a national strategic policy for motorcycling. That's the only way we break through this logjam of biking being ignored."

Who supports motorcycling in Westminster then? Does biking have many allies amongst the MPs and peers? "There's Bill Wiggins, Steve Baker, a handful of peers, Fabian Hamilton, Chris Law, Stuart Hosie, Ian Paisley and Sammy Wilson, so we have genuine cross party support in Parliament," said Carey-Clinch. "In government, you won't find support identified on paper, but we are finding an increasing number of allies across

government departments."

It's not just politicians though: the NMC aims to work with civil servants and other stakeholders in government too. "It's about good relationship building, which, long term, results in positive policy. Working with officials is important: dealing with government isn't just about talking to ministers: ministers may decide, but officials are generally in charge of formulating policy, so I like to make sure they're comfortable with what we put forward."

And what about the British prime minister? Boris Johnson has been seen riding motorcycles in the past – his wife Carrie bought him a Yamaha dirtbike in Christmas 2020. But is he a friend to motorcycling?

"Boris rides but we can never draw him on it. I do know Johnson slightly actually, I worked with him on the 'bikes in bus lanes' campaign when he became mayor of London and opened up bike and bus lanes permanently to motorcycles. At the time, I was chatting to him in a couple of meetings, and he sort of 'got' motorcycling. But he didn't really get its potential when it comes to public policy. He was always very friendly – not the buffoon he pitches himself to be a lot of the time – and was quite in charge of what he was doing at the time."

What would the NMC – and Carey-Clinch – say to Johnson, if they get the chance while he's prime minister, then? "I would say it would be good if the PM could remember the fun and joys of motorcycling and empower his transport secretary to take us more seriously."

THE NMC HAS A NUMBER OF EXCELLENT policy papers and other thought-provoking material on its website, especially on licensing proposals: www.uknmc.org