

Hard-shoulder heroes

The AA and RAC's roadside patrols are streets ahead in our survey – the UK's biggest and best independent measure of breakdown service providers

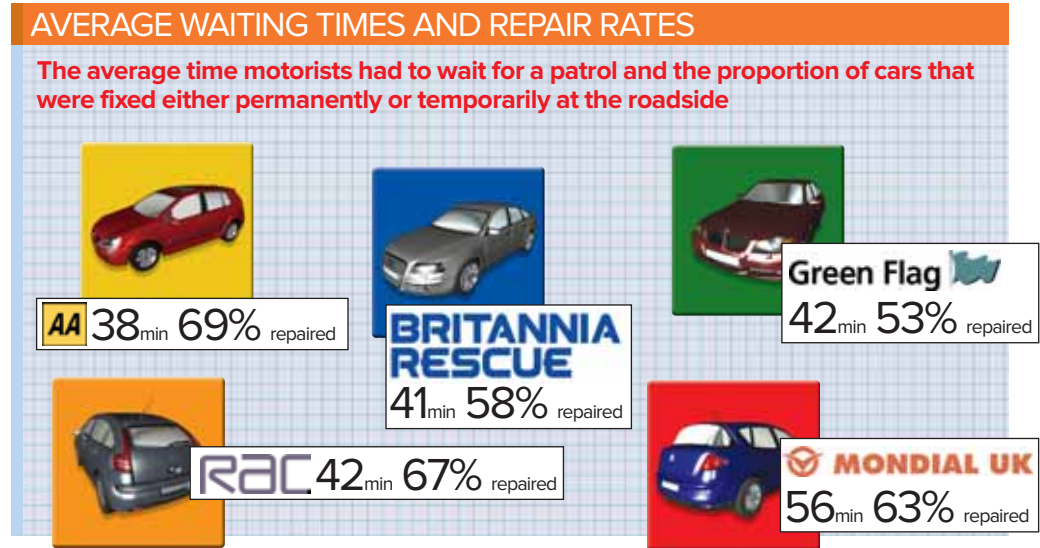
Even the most reliable cars can fall victim to things like flat tyres, lost keys or that old favourite, running out of fuel, so it's good to have the peace of mind that comes with being a member of a breakdown service. But a poor service that has you waiting ages for it to turn up, or, when it finally does, can't fix your car so you can continue your journey, will only add to the stress and frustration of a breakdown.

Who can you depend on?

Covering almost 13,000 breakdowns by cars up to eight years old, our latest survey of breakdown services is the UK's biggest by a long chalk. We asked you to tell us your experiences of breakdown providers – and the results make for interesting reading.

In pole position is the AA – the UK's biggest breakdown service. Although close rival, the RAC, matches the AA in most aspects of its service, including its ability to repair vehicles at the roadside, the AA clinches it on the key measure of waiting time. The AA reaches 47 per cent of breakdowns within half an hour, compared with the RAC's 41 per cent.

Third place goes to Britannia Rescue. A good performer in our 2006 surveys, Britannia's crown has slipped this year: it repairs fewer vehicles at the roadside than the AA and RAC, and satisfaction with its patrols' politeness and the way breakdown situations were handled is also lower than



with the two front runners. Britannia uses a network of local agents to respond to breakdowns (see 'Branded best', opposite).

With lower scores in some key areas, Green Flag sits in fourth place. At 42 minutes, its average wait isn't bad – no longer than the RAC's – but its poor repair rate, which sees only just over half of problems solved at the roadside, is a real issue.

Mondial Assistance – a newcomer to our survey – will surely be disappointed to take last place. While Mondial's scores are reasonable in most areas, it's dragged down by getting to only two thirds of breakdowns within an hour. On average, it keeps

stranded motorists waiting 56 minutes.

Mondial doesn't sell cover direct to consumers, so it's not in our price table, opposite. Instead, it provides manufacturer-branded breakdown assistance for certain makes of new cars, such as BMW, Jaguar, Land Rover, Mazda, Mercedes, Mini, Mitsubishi, Subaru and Suzuki. In response to our results, Mondial said: 'The bespoke service received by customers tailored to their specific vehicle should outweigh the additional waiting time. Additionally, much of our customer base resides in the Southeast, where prevailing traffic conditions have a major bearing on speed.'

The AA reaches 47 per cent of breakdowns within half an hour

USING THE TABLE

Performance

Speed Percentage of patrols arriving within 30 minutes/one hour. **Repairs** How often patrols repaired faults at the roadside. **Skill** How well customers felt company dealt with their situation.

Score

Speed	30%
Repairs	20%
Overall service	20%
Politeness (phone)	10%
Politeness (patrol)	10%
Skill	10%

COMPANY	PERFORMANCE							SCORE (%)
	SPEED (less than 30 min)	SPEED (less than one hour)	REPAIRS	OVERALL SERVICE	POLITENESS (PHONE)	POLITENESS (PATROL)	SKILL	
AA	47%	85%	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	77
RAC	41%	82%	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	75
BRITANNIA	39%	86%	★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	72
GREEN FLAG ^a	37%	84%	★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	69
MONDIAL	22%	64%	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	67

^a Green Flag is a Royal Bank of Scotland company, so it also provides roadside assistance for Churchill, Direct Line and Privilege Insurance

Branded best

Drivers more satisfied with branded patrols



Branded patrols fix more cars

The words 'breakdown service' may conjure up images of a mechanic in a neatly pressed uniform turning up to save the day in a smart liveried van. But this isn't always the case – many breakdowns are actually seen to by independent mechanics operating out of local garages in their own vehicles.

Green Flag, which uses a network of 6,000 local contractors rather than directly employed mechanics, asks customers: 'Do you want an ice-cream van with spanners, or do you just want to get moving again?'

But our survey reveals that 'ice-cream vans with spanners' arrive faster and are better at getting you moving: branded patrols (such as most of those from the AA and RAC) repair 72 per cent of faults at the roadside, compared with 47 per cent by local contractors; and average waits are shorter – 38 minutes for branded patrols versus 47 for local contractors.

Branded patrols' superior repair rates are reflected in the fact that 70 per cent of customers report complete satisfaction, versus 50 per cent for local contractors.

Contacts

Best Buy providers

AA 0800 085 2721; www.theaa.com

RAC 0870 572 2722; www.rac.co.uk

Further contacts For contact details and further policy details for all the companies listed in the price comparison table, log on to www.which.co.uk/breakdownservices

ROADSIDE REPAIR AND RECOVERY PACKAGES

There is an enormous range of breakdown providers and packages to choose from. We've compared prices of 'repair and recovery' deals, which start from £32

As well as roadside repair, most breakdown packages include recovery (so if your car can't be repaired you'll be taken to a destination of your choice). We've chosen roadside repair and recovery as the level of cover for our price comparison table. Which? members can log on to www.which.co.uk/breakdownservices for details of all available breakdown packages.

Some packages offering this level of cover may also include extra benefits, such as home cover, emergency accommodation or a courtesy

car – although these could push the price up.

Apart from the AA and the RAC, the breakdown companies in this table mostly use local contractors rather than their own branded patrols (see 'Branded best', left). This means fewer overheads and lower operating costs so, like Britannia and Green Flag, they're usually a bit cheaper. However, we received too few survey responses for these smaller breakdown companies, which means we're unable to rate their performance reliably.

COMPANY	EXTRAS	COVER PERSON OR VEHICLE	PERSONAL (£)			CAR (£)	
			INDIVIDUAL	JOINT	FAMILY	ONE CAR	EXTRA CAR
AA Option 200	RD	Either	92	119	163	92	n/a
AGE CONCERN Motor Breakdown Services	HR, HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	59	30
AUTOAID AutoAid	HR, HC, AC	Person	34	34	n/a	n/a	n/a
AUTOHOME ASSISTANCE UK Plus	RD	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	77	39
AUTONATIONAL RESCUE Total SuperService	HR, HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	88	44
BREAKDOWNDIRECT.CO.UK Breakdown Direct 201	HC, AC, RD	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	54 ^a	45 ^a
BRITANNIA RESCUE Standard	RD	Vehicle	103	103	n/a	74	41
CHURCHILL Churchill Rescue Service		Either	92 ^b	92 ^b	n/a	66 ^b	see ^c
CSMA^d Standard Cover	RD	Vehicle	n/a	79	n/a	50	27
DIRECT LINE Recovery	RD	Either	97 ^b	97 ^b	97 ^b	59 ^b	see ^c
ELEPHANT.CO.UK Roadside Recovery	HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	50	45
ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSPORT ASSOC'N Silver	HC, AC	Either	121	169	212	74	20
EUROP ASSISTANCE UK Driver Assist	HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	45	45
FIRST CALL GB LTD Roadside Rescue	HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	32	n/a
GEM MOTORING ASSIST Recovery Extra	HR, HC, AC	Person	80	104	137	n/a	n/a
GREEN FLAG Recovery	RD	Either	97 ^b	97 ^b	n/a	59 ^b	see ^c
HALFORDS/HOMESERVE Level 2	HC, AC, RD	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	40	32
LIBRA RESCUE (AUTOHOME LTD) Librarescue	HR, RD	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	98	n/a
MORE THAN Roadside Assistance & Recovery	HC, AC, RD, EC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	49	49
NORWICH UNION RESCUE Rescue and Recovery		Either	see ^c	n/a	n/a	see ^c	n/a
PERFORMANCE DIRECT Car Breakdown	HR	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	70	70
PRIVILEGE INSURANCE Recovery	RD	Either	97 ^b	97 ^b	n/a	59	see ^c
RAC Solutions 1	RD	Person	104	126	169	n/a	n/a
SAGA SERVICES LTD^e Essential		Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	37	17
TESCO Total Care 1 Car	HR, HC, AC	Vehicle	n/a	n/a	n/a	79	n/a

USING THE TABLE Extras In addition to roadside repair and recovery, these features are included at no extra cost: HC = hire car, HR = home repair, AC = accommodation, RD = relief driver, EC = European cover

^a Price is for cars under 11 years old ^b 'Minimum price' – prices quoted individually ^c Prices quoted individually ^d Available only to current/previous employees of the civil service and organisations with roots in the civil service (eg BT, Post Office) ^e Buyers must be 50 years or older