

Rescue me

We assess the performance of the major breakdown companies and compare their prices with those of some smaller players

OUR SURVEY

We gave questionnaires to 15,308 *Which?* readers who belong to breakdown organisations. We asked them to keep the questionnaire in their car glove box and to fill it in if they called out a breakdown company. We received 743 responses between October 2004 and June 2005.

USING THE TABLE

Response time

Phone How quickly the call centre answered the rescue call. **Accuracy** How accurately phone staff predicted the time of arrival of patrols. **Arrival <30 min** How often patrols arrived within half an hour.

Patrol

Skill How well patrols dealt with the whole incident.

Repair Whether patrols repaired the car rather than towing it to a garage.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ● ●
Best → Worst

When your car breaks down, you want your rescue company to get to you quickly and get you back on the road. Ideally, you'd also like their staff to be polite. Our survey of *Which?* readers who had to call out a breakdown company shows how well the big four achieve these things.

RAC IMPROVES

Overall, RAC's score has gone up by a massive 15 per cent since our last survey in 2002. Then, RAC seriously lagged behind its rivals for performance and customer satisfaction. RAC told us that it had made big changes to improve its systems, and its customers seem to have noticed. Its patrols were the most courteous to those stranded and they handled the whole incident particularly well.

It's not the only company to see an improvement. Last time, Britannia had the worst repair rate – its patrols were the least effective at making permanent or temporary fixes at the roadside. But its repair performance has now gone up by 17 per cent, making it the best of the four at carrying out roadside repairs. The AA has slipped down a gear and now gets only an average rating for its repairs.

The AA is still top when it comes to the key measure of response times. It gets to 51 per cent of calls within 30 minutes. RAC now attends 43 per cent of incidents within half an hour, while Britannia gets to 35 per cent in this time. Green Flag reaches only a third of customers within 30 minutes – but it does offer a £10 cashback pledge if it doesn't reach you within an hour.

One area where we've seen a drop in scores across the board is in call centres accurately predicting their patrols' arrival time. However, this isn't much of a worry as patrol staff generally arrive earlier than predicted by their call-centre colleagues. Britannia,



Green Flag and RAC now predict the time accurately in fewer than half of all their call-outs. The AA is better but it still predicts accurate arrival times for only 61 per cent of breakdowns.

RAC has driven up most of its scores, while the AA's have gone downhill slightly

TYPES OF COVER

The table on p31 shows the type of cover offered by all the breakdown companies. Most offer vehicle-based packages which cover your car no matter who's driving it. Some offer individual (person) cover which covers you in all cars.

There are essentially four levels of breakdown insurance. Different companies call them slightly different names: for example, Home Start is the AA's home cover.

Rescue/roadside repair The most basic packages allow you to call out a mechanic if you break down away from your home. If your car can't be fixed on the spot, you'll be towed to a local garage. Some companies give you the option of being towed home instead but usually only if you live within about ten miles of the breakdown.

Rescue and recovery to destination In addition to rescue and repair, the company will also get you and your passengers to your destination if it can't fix your car at the roadside – for example, if you're en

Survey results	Politeness		Response time			Patrol		Customer
	Phone staff ^a	Patrol staff ^a	Phone	Accuracy	Arrival <30 min	Skill ^a	Repair	Overall satisfaction ^a
COMPANY								
The AA	○	○	○	★	★	○	○	○
Britannia	★	●	★	○	○	○	★	○
Green Flag	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○
RAC	○	★	○	○	○	★	○	○

^a Scores based on the number of respondents who were very satisfied with this aspect

route to a UK holiday destination. Some packages include accommodation, a relief driver or a hire car but this is usually only with deluxe packages.

Home cover This protects your car if it develops a fault at your home. It usually includes rescue and recovery to your destination, although the AA and RAC let you extend their basic repair packages to your home without the recovery element.

Deluxe cover This includes all the above with added extras, such as overnight accommodation and a relief driver or hire car if your car can't be repaired easily or if you're taken ill and can't drive.

European cover It's impossible to make a meaningful comparison of European cover packages, as different companies offer very different levels of cover. If you need to drive in Europe, look at the options available from your rescue company as well as specialist travel insurance companies.

COST OF COVER

Because of the sheer number of breakdown packages and their complexity, we've given only a summary of the different tariffs in the table, below. You'll find full details of all the packages on www.whichextra.co.uk/breakdownservices or you can call 0845 307 4000 and quote code CARBST for a printout if you're not online.

Discounts may be available for certain customers – for example, if you have car insurance with the same company. More Than and Green Flag give only tailor-made quotes so it may be worth comparing them with other packages. Arranging cover online and paying by continuous direct debit usually saves you a bit. Prices do tend to fluctuate and special offers appear fairly regularly, so use our prices as a guide only.

BEST BUYS

Improvements at RAC have driven up most of its scores while the AA's have gone downhill slightly. It's all evened out, though, so now there's little to choose between them. Green Flag, however, just slipped below average on the key measure of response times and didn't outperform the rest in any category. So it's out of contention.

Standards are generally high, with more than three quarters of rescued motorists saying they were very satisfied with the service they'd received. And only 4 per cent told us they'd be less likely to rejoin the same company again as a result of their experience.

The AA was quickest to reach the scene, and was the best at estimating the patrol's arrival time.

Britannia's mechanics weren't always very polite but, crucially, they were good at making repairs. The company also came top for answering the phone quickly.

Customers rated highly the courtesy of RAC's patrols and also the way they handled the incident as a whole.

Bear in mind that there is a host of smaller breakdown providers offering very competitive cover. Unfortunately, we didn't receive enough replies from their customers to allow us to rate them. They

may perform well, but until enough of you try them out, we won't know for sure.

Tesco's prices look very competitive across the board. For example, its deluxe package at £79 is around half the price of the AA's and RAC's. However, it uses Green Flag to provide the service, which wasn't as good as the others.

If you are the sole driver of your car, GEM Motoring Assist offers very competitive personal deluxe cover. Its Recovery Reclaim package is cheaper and offers the same protection as its standard package, but in the event of a call-out, you pay for the recovery and reclaim the cost from GEM.



Breakdown service packages

COMPANY

COMPANY	Cover type	Cost of cover (£)			
	Person or vehicle	Roadside	Recovery to destination	Home cover	Deluxe
The AA	person/vehicle	45/39 ^a	89/89 ^b	131/131	163/163
Autonational Rescue	vehicle	40	n/a	n/a	84
Breakdown Direct	vehicle	30	54	n/a	69
Britannia Rescue	vehicle ^c	58	76	102	124
Environmental Transport Association	person/vehicle	76/49	108/99	140/121	162/143
GEM Motoring Assist	person	33	n/a	n/a	57 ^d /75
Green Flag	vehicle	Prices quoted individually			
International Breakdown	person/vehicle	34 (vehicle only)	69/44	n/a	99/64
More Than	vehicle	Prices quoted individually			
RAC	person/vehicle	35/43 ^e	87/83	126/129	157 ^f
Tesco	vehicle	33 ^g	n/a	n/a	79

^a For £58/£64 extra you can extend this to include home cover ^b An extra £32 will add hire car and accommodation options ^c Personal cover (includes extra named driver) can be taken on top of vehicle cover for an extra £29 ^d GEM's Recovery Reclaim package tariff – with this you pay for repairs and other costs and claim them back from GEM ^e For an extra £46 you can extend this to include home cover ^f Personal cover only ^g For an extra £26 you can extend this to include home cover

USING THE TABLE

Cover type

Person or vehicle Whether cover is available for person or vehicle or both.

Cost of cover

(Prices rounded to nearest £.) **Roadside** Basic cover includes repair usually at least a quarter of a mile from your home and tow to local garage if no repair is possible. **Recovery to destination** As for roadside but includes recovery for car and passengers to a UK destination. **Home cover** As for recovery to destination plus patrols will attend a vehicle fault at your home. **Deluxe** All the above plus premium services such as provision of a hire car, driver or accommodation if your vehicle can't be repaired.