

20's Plenty



Where People Live

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20's Plenty For Us



The case for 20 mph as the default speed limit for residential roads.

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20's Plenty For Us

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20 mph speed limits across a whole community



The information on 20 mph streets reducing collisions and accidents is well documented from existing research and experience of those towns deploying 20 mph limits and zones.

However, most research and experience is based upon what we call “micro” 20 mph sites. These are where the engineering has been done on isolated selected streets or estates. They have been characterised by the default for most roads still being 30 mph and reducing this in areas where past accidents statistics or other requirements have offered benefits from lower speeds on a KSI (Killed or Seriously Injured) basis. Effectively

one would “normally” drive at 30 mph and then “slow down” to 20 mph where such speed limits existed.

Other initiatives such as 20 mph around schools are flawed because most child pedestrian accidents happen closer to home than school. In fact such schemes legitimise an increase in speed in just the places where children are most at risk.

Our latest thinking about lowering speed limits recognises that throughout most towns and urban areas the high level of 30 mph speed limits (60% higher than the kph adopted in Northern Europe) is a threat to vulnerable road users which depresses any modal shift to walking and cycling. Whilst there may have been recent generic reductions in UK KSI’s for pedestrians and cyclists much more could have been achieved. In fact the Health Development Agency predicted in 2003 that child pedestrian casualties could have been cut by 2/3 if residential roads had a 20 mph speed limit. Noise levels and pollution are also kept high by 30 mph speed limits especially if motorists are perpetually accelerating to 30 mph and braking for the next congestion point or traffic lights.

The approach that best matches that of our Northern European neighbours is the “macro” setting of 20 mph speed limits whereby a whole authority has its limit for residential and urban roads set to 20 mph as a default with exceptions being made where it is considered safe to “speed up” to 30 mph. This reverses the expectation of what constitutes a safe speed where roads are shared with vulnerable road users and has become possible through the DfT issuing Circular 01/2006 on the Setting of Local Speed Limits.

The first town to use this was Portsmouth who have set 20 mph as the default speed limit for all residential roads and by exception set roads at 30 mph for arterial and main roads. The features of this initiative were :-

- Completed without any physical traffic calming
- Did not require Secretary of State approval
- Phased in over 18 months
- Completed by bulk Traffic Orders
- Costs £475,000 for 1,200 streets (£333 per street)
- Has already reduced average speeds by 3mph

This is being followed by Warrington, Oxford, Norwich, Leicester, Newcastle and Islington who have already committed to a similar initiative and are being rolled out and piloted. This amounts to over 1.5 m residents in such areas.

There are certain advantages of such macro approach on a town, city or borough basis and these include :-

- Lower costs through bulk traffic orders
- Lower costs of 20 mph signs through bulk purchase and deployment
- Better and cheaper marketing of changes by being able to educate/consult with the complete community
- Clearer understanding of which streets will be 20 mph

However there are two aspects which until now we believe have been unrecognised and not been at all present in “micro” and isolated 20 mph schemes.

These are connected to the democratic process of adopting a 20 mph speed limit as a default and also the enhanced compliance which results from drivers mutually benefiting from living in 20 mph streets.

Democracy and community commitment

Where a “micro” limit is put in place then this is usually decided by traffic engineers with limited consultation and engagement with communities. Whilst traffic engineers may know that such a move “makes sense” this is not always communicated to the communities involved. Even then it would be limited to the residents within those 20 mph limits rather than the drivers, who may live outside of those streets.

However, when a Local Authority decides upon an authority-wide limit then this naturally initiates a debate at citizen, member and officer level about the benefits to the whole community of such a change. This can therefore be widened to include objectives for modal shift, empowerment of those without cars, lower noise levels, lower pollution as well as lower accidents and injuries.

This therefore creates a “collective community commitment” to lower speeds and road danger reduction which would not and has never been the result of previously “micro” and isolated 20 mph schemes.

This maximises the commitment at all levels increases compliance and reinforces police commitment to enforcement.

Driver Benefits



In most “micro” schemes many drivers travelling through such a scheme invariably live on a street with a 30 mph limit. The question going through their mind is “what is so special about these families that I have to slow down to 20 mph when my family gets no similar protection on my street”. The benefit is perceived as being totally to the advantage of the resident and not to the driver.

However, when one introduces a “macro” scheme then the fact that it is highly likely that the same driver will be getting his own street changed to a 20 mph limit provides a real benefit to the driver. This suddenly becomes a two sided relationship whereby the benefits of lower speeds are conferred on both resident and driver.

The decision about an individual driver complying with the new limit therefore gets made in the home, with the family from a strategic and family benefit perspective rather than as a driver suddenly seeing a 20 mph speed limit sign for the first time.

This undoubtedly has the effect of increasing compliance and respect for the lower speed limits. In addition most police forces where authority wide 20 mph schemes are in place are providing enforcement with fixed penalty notices.

Community benefits

The benefits of 20 mph speed limits are most significant in accident and injury reduction. However the benefits go far beyond this for the community and include :-

- Greater modal shift to walking and cycling
- Increased child mobility
- Lower noise and pollution levels
- Greater independence for the elderly and infirm
- Calmer driving conditions with easier side road integration
- Increased amenity in urban centres.
- A greater sense of community wellbeing.
- Increased health through increased walking and cycling.
- Less traffic.

Lower speeds in residential roads is a “win win” policy. We find that 80% of those questioned are in support and the British Social Attitudes Survey found that 75% of drivers were in favour of 20 mph speed limits for residential roads.

Traffic Authorities “doing” 20’s Plenty

The following Traffic Authorities have all initiated a policy of implementing an authority-wide 20 mph speed limit for residential roads.

Portsmouth was the first city to use DfT Circular 01/2006 to implement 20 mph across all residential roads. This was started in 2007 and completed in May 2008 over 5 phases. There was much public engagement with leaflets going out to all families in each phased area.

Norwich City Council voted unanimously to implement 20 mph across the authority. Currently this is being trialled in a small number of roads.

Oxford City Council is currently going through public consultation on implementing 20 mph across the whole authority. There was considerable debate as to whether to include arterial roads as well.

Newcastle. After trialling advisory 20 mph speed limits, Newcastle City Council has decided that, on the basis of Portsmouth’s results, it will convert the advisory 20 mph schemes into mandatory limits.

Leicester has made a decision to gradually roll-out 20 mph across the whole town over the next 5 years.

Warrington has already piloting an authority-wide implementation by means of an experimental traffic order on 147 roads.

Bristol is planning 20 mph as the default across a third of the city.

Islington is the first London Borough to set in place a budget for the implementation of 20 mph across the whole borough.

In conclusion



We believe that these developments are critical in providing a new approach to road danger reduction that involves communities and drivers in a way which is never possible with localised 20 mph schemes or other junction or highway engineering improvements.

It is capable of creating what Fred Wegmann of SWOV (Dutch Road Safety Research Institute) called the “paradigm shift” which is required in the UK if we are to create an environment which is able to provide the same levels of safety for Vulnerable Road Users in the UK as in Northern Europe.

The old methods of localised infrastructure improvements at accident black spots are returning fewer gains per pound spent and we need to move to methods which will provide a far wider benefit across complete towns and boroughs. 20 mph as the default speed limit for residential and urban roads, where inevitably there are vulnerable road users, has to be the most important and effective mechanism for delivering safer roads on a wider basis. It also matches the characteristic of vulnerable road user injuries which tend to be more scattered than motor occupant injuries.

So if you want to find out how a better road environment can be delivered to your community then why not have a look at our website or contact us for further information.

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20’s Plenty for Us is a national campaign that supports those communities wishing to implement 20 mph as the default speed limit for residential and town centre roads. It is available to provide advice, and examples of 20’s Plenty implementations across the country.

Implementing lower speeds that work requires far more than highway engineering. 20’s Plenty For Us can offer practical advice on how to work with communities to maximise driver compliance and community ownership of lower speeds.

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