

All aboard for the 20 mph journey?

Journalist John Morrison gives his view of the annual conference on 20 mph limits

It's workshop time in the wood-panelled chamber of Camden Town Hall and local campaigners for 20 mph limits are swapping tips with transport engineers, public health officers and councillors. How and when do you consult the public? What's the difference between consultation and engagement? And how do you monitor the results?

The focus at this year's conference is less on the *why?* of 20 mph limits than on the *how?* of implementation. What's the best way of keeping taxi drivers and local bus companies on side? How much money should be spent on consultation? Will government moves to simplify the Byzantine rules on traffic signs make a difference?

I'm trying to look beyond the technical discussions and find the bigger picture. Are we (which means England and Wales) moving closer to adopting 20 mph limits as the norm for residential and shopping streets? If so, how fast is the change happening, and is the government leading it or sitting on the fence?

Two years ago Rod King of **20's Plenty for Us** reported that eight million people were living in local authorities committed to introducing 20 mph limits. Last year the figure rose to 12 million. This year the headline number is 12.5 million – which could be seen as a slowdown in momentum. Rod King doesn't think so.

'New guidance on speed limits from the government in 2013 has caused a lot of local authorities to review their policies, and this is still going on. It has deferred new implementations, but there is much underlying activity and we expect to progress through 2014,' he explains.

The list of local authorities adopting 20 mph limits includes historic cities such as Oxford, York and Cambridge, industrial cities and ports such as Liverpool, Manchester and Portsmouth, Lancashire and the UK's biggest local authority Birmingham. In London there is a core of inner-city boroughs led by Islington, Camden and Hackney, with the City of London poised to join them. Westminster and its neighbour Kensington and Chelsea have yet to join the party.

Equally reluctant are the shire counties of England, many of them Conservative-controlled. Campaigners say the many levels of local government here make changing speed limits far trickier than in the unitary authorities who have led the way.

So where does the government stand? Since 2010 coalition policy has been to facilitate 20 mph limits but not to impose them. Costs are coming down, signage is getting simpler and the Department for Transport, currently represented by junior minister Robert Goodwill, seems to want more local authorities to take the plunge.

'I am very pleased to see an increasing number of local authorities up and down the country adopting 20 mph limits,' Goodwill told the conference in a recorded interview, adding: 'In the light of our localism agenda, I think it is important that local authorities are free to make these decisions. We don't want to dictate to people.'

The government also going to commission comprehensive research into the effects of 20 mph limits, not just on road safety but also on whether they encourage a 'modal shift' away from car use and towards walking and cycling. Nick Cavill, top adviser to Public Health England and a leading advocate of 'Active Travel', says slowing traffic speeds will help people choose different ways to travel, but the evidence isn't there yet to prove that 20 mph limits on their own will reverse the national rise in obesity.

Opinion surveys show a consistent 65-70% public support for 20 mph limits, though people have doubts about both compliance and enforcement. Campaigners are confident that new guidance from the Association of Chief Police Officers in 2013 means police forces will reduce some of the administrative red tape and costs around 20mph enforcement.

So where is the tipping point? When does 20 mph become the norm in urban areas, with exceptions for 30 mph on main roads? Rod King wants the government to recognise the transition is under way and change the signage rules accordingly.

Robert Goodwill seems to accept the argument, but says: 'We're not there yet. At the moment the status quo needs to be maintained. But who knows? As we progress we may get to the point when what you suggest may become the sensible way forward.'

King is encouraged by the minister's words: 'What he says is a big step forward, I believe. I think the government can see that 20 mph is the standard of the future and is beginning to recognise this will not be limited to a few authorities.'

The implication is that the transition may take some time. Motorists may well have to get used to a patchwork of different urban speed limits as they drive from one local authority to the next, which may not be the easiest way to achieve a step-change in behaviour.

I remind Rod King that when smoking was banned in all public places in England and Wales, the change was a national one, and it was quickly accepted. Compliance was extremely high, without any enforcement. He points out that the power to set speed limits has already been devolved to local authority level. 'If the government were to mandate 20 mph it would then have local authorities saying that central government should pay for it.'

There are local authorities, such as my adopted county of Kent, which want as little as possible to do with 20 mph limits and want to stick with the status quo. I'm tempted to adapt the words of Samuel Johnson and say that localism, not patriotism, is the last refuge of the scoundrel, but I don't think Rod King would agree. It is

localism which has opened the door for local authorities to introduce 20 mph limits in their own way and at their own speed. He is confident that despite the uncertainties, the logic of lower traffic speeds will eventually prevail everywhere, not just in big cities. Reading between the lines of Robert Goodwill's remarks, I suspect he thinks the same.

John Morrison is a freelance journalist and campaigner for cycling, road safety and sustainable transport in Kent