Is our built environment part of the problem of us moving our bodies less and can it also be a solution? A recent report from Public Health England clearly cites the need to make changes to enhance active travel. 20mph limits can help our public realm be better for more people to walk and cycle regularly. The rationale is simple - provide safer spaces and people will use them.

Public Health England’s document Working Together to Promote Active Travel, A briefing for local authorities references studies which show that Britain’s public realm isn’t cycle or walking friendly enough. Roads need to be fit for purpose - not just for cars, but also for people to keep fitter as they move around. 20mph is a solution. "Active travel" is about building activity into our normal daily lives which are currently far too sedentary for our own health and the nation’s economy.

We need to recognise and reduce those factors that blight our communities. It’s time to tackle the barriers that prevent us doing normal activities like walking to, and around, shops rather than driving to shopping centres. Our built environment is one such barrier. It is common in villages for children to be driven 300m to school because of the danger posed by fast vehicles.

Retrofitting roads for active travel primarily means slower speed limits. Speed is the single biggest factor in determining crash survival rates. People are seven times more likely to survive a crash at 20mph compared to 30mph. It is also crucial to educate drivers on the many benefits of a slower, more courteous driving style that respects the rights of all modes to share community roads equally.

Public Health England’s briefing says: “There is also a growing evidence base on the benefits of 20mph speed limits .. and repeated national surveys show strong public support for 20mph in residential streets. Many towns and cities in England have either implemented or are committed to 20mph speed limits across much of their road networks”.

Its key tasks for implementation include:
“Support 20mph speed limits in residential areas.”

Public Health England’s briefing lists Bristol as case study. It cites 20mph for most of the city’s residential streets (as originally suggested by Public Health) as a contributor to significant active travel and health gains.

Anna Semlyen, National Campaign Manager of 20’s Plenty for Us said “Our bodies have evolved to work better and longer with activity as part of our normal life. Yet too many people are afraid to walk or cycle on their local roads. We need to retrofit streets to help people become fitter as they get around. 20mph makes it feel safer for all ages. It’s a no-brainer – slower equals safer, equals better for people on foot or on bike.”

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2. Anna Semlyen has a Masters Degree in Health Economics