For BRAKE’s 2020 Road Safety Week I was asked to write a blog on the theme of the week.

If 20’s Plenty to protect your MPs where they work in Westminster then why not for you, your children and parents in your community?

I am delighted that a 20mph sign features in the graphics for this year’s Road Safety Week. 20mph limits are now accepted as the norm by global road safety and health organisations as the maximum safe speed for streets where motors mix with pedestrians and cyclists unless segregated and crossing provision exists to ensure their protection. And even before 2020 this included WHO, OECD, FIA Foundation, Global Alliance of Road Safety NGOs, Global Network of Road Safety Legislators, and many more.

Over the course of 2020 the support for 20mph (or its km/h equivalent of 30) as an urban and village default limit has developed enormously. In February, the 3rd Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety endorsed the Stockholm Declaration that included a single call under “Speed Management” which was for 30km/h being such a default maximum urban and village speed. This conference was attended, and the declaration endorsed, by 130 Road Safety Ministers from around the world including Baroness Vere of Norbiton from the UK. In July 2020 the Welsh Government (Senedd) gave overwhelming cross-party support to the setting of a national 20mph limit to replace 30mph for lit roads in Wales. And in August 2020 no less than the General Assembly of the United Nations endorsed setting default 30km/h or 20mph limits as a key foundation for its 2nd Decade of Action for Road Safety from 2021 to 2030.

In addition to this, governmental and local authority responses to the Covid-19 pandemic have included widespread adoption of 20mph limits to encourage active travel and enable safer social distancing whilst walking. And the roll-out of authority-wide 20mph defaults in the UK continues with now 21m people living in authorities where 20mph is the considered norm.

And the scene is being set for far greater compliance with all speed limits as new car models from 2022 will incorporate speed limiting devices as standard. Indeed, the answer to the question “Who will enforce new speed limits?” will be “Jaguar, Land Rover, BMW, Mercedes, Audi, etc” as all manufacturers fit such Intelligent Speed Assistance controls to ensure that drivers keep to the posted speed limits.

Yet despite this, the UK national governments, except for Wales, persist in requiring local authorities to treat 20mph limits as exceptions and demand expensive repeater signs and traffic regulation orders even though more and more authorities are saying 90% of their urban and village roads should be 20mph. Retaining 30mph as a national default is illogical, wastes money and deters many authorities from implementing this recognised life-saving and community-enhancing initiative.

It is absolutely clear that the current national 30mph limit is no longer “fit for purpose” to either protect pedestrians, cyclists and even drivers in our towns and villages, or to provide the safe and sustainable environment for our active travel and public health needs. It was created in the 1930’s on the basis that it was better than not having a speed limit. The idea that it is “national” is ridiculous when authorities covering 30% (21million) of the population have already rejected it in favour of 20mph.

Where a road safety or public health intervention is recognised as being capable of universal application and benefit then it should not be left to some postcode lottery on implementation. It should be set on a national basis for consistency, best value, effectiveness and adherence to global best practice.

The default national 30mph urban and village speed limit should be scrapped and replaced by a default 20mph limit with exceptions only where a local authority can justify a higher speed being safe. Central government policy and inaction on this issue is killing our cities and village communities by supressing active travel and far too often leads to the killing and injury of residents also.

We note that City of Westminster recently set a 20mph limit for all of its roads. If MPs can have a 20mph limit to protect them outside their place of work in London, then let’s demand they provide the same protection to their constituents in their communities around the country where they live. Its time to say that 20’s Plenty for the UK as the national default for built-up areas.

Rod King MBE – Founder and Campaign Director – 20’s Plenty for Us

Note that since writing this article, the Netherlands and Spain have committed to national default 30km/h urban limits.