

Area-wide 20mph neighbourhoods: a win, win, win for local authorities

Author: Andrew Ross LGiU associate

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Summary

- In January 2013 the government published a revised circular on [Setting Local Speed Limits](#)
- The number of local authorities adopting area-wide 20mph limits is increasing – around 11.5 million people already live in a 20mph committed area
- The [Time for 20](#) and [GO 20](#) campaigns are calling on the Department for Transport to recognise 20mph as the default speed in residential areas to make it cheaper for local authorities to implement the reduced speed limit
- A national conference called [Time for 20mph](#) will be held on 18 February 2014 in London
- This briefing will be of interest to transport planners, urban designers, elected members, road safety teams, fire and rescue authority members, police, public health teams and members of health and wellbeing boards.

Briefing in full

Revised guidance for 20mph limits

Local speed limits are the responsibility of local transport authorities, taking account of national guidance and legislation. In August 2012 the Department for Transport published a draft revised circular on Setting Local Speed Limits (see [LGiU briefing](#)). In January 2013 it published the final revised circular [Setting Local Speed Limits 01/2013](#).

The guidance permits local authorities to introduce 20mph speed limits or zones on:

- major streets where there are – or could be - significant numbers of journeys on foot, and/or where pedal cycle movements are an important consideration, and this outweighs the disadvantage of longer journey times for motorised traffic
- residential streets in cities, towns and villages, particularly where the streets are being used by people on foot and on bicycles, there is community support and the characteristics of the street are suitable.

The circular also updates the guidance for local authorities on introducing area-wide 20mph limits:

'The implementation of 20 mph limits over a larger number of roads, which the previous Speed Limit Circular (01/2006) advised against, should be considered where mean speeds at or below 24 mph are already achieved over a number of roads.'

The guidance also states that:

'To achieve compliance there should be no expectation on the police to provide additional enforcement beyond their routine activity, unless this has been explicitly agreed.'

Recent changes to other relevant guidance

More broadly, draft [National Planning Practice Guidance](#) (NPPG), published in August 2013, reinforces the role planners have to create environments that:

'consider the needs of the most vulnerable users first: pedestrians, then cyclists, then public transport users, specialist vehicles like ambulances and finally other motor vehicles.'

Given the existing evidence on the benefits of lower speeds for pedestrians and cyclists (see Rationale below), area-wide 20mph limits must inevitably be considered as one of the ways to prioritise vulnerable road users.

Since April 2013 local authorities have taken on public health responsibilities. In late 2012 NICE published guidance on [promoting walking and cycling](#) (see the [LGiU briefing](#)), which found that traffic speed acts as a 'barrier' to walking and cycling. To help fulfil their public health duties local authorities should consider lower default speeds as part of creating environments that encourage more active travel modes such as walking.

Finally, police forces have been criticised for suggesting that a lack of resources meant they would not enforce area-wide 20mph limits. [Revised guidelines](#) published by the Association of Chief Police Officers in October 2013 now state that motorists caught driving between 24mph and 31mph will be offered the choice of going on a speed awareness course or a fixed penalty notice fine. If drivers are travelling up to 34mph they could be fined, and if they are speeding at 35mph or more they will be reported to the courts (although note the point above in the DfT circular about not requiring the police to provide additional enforcement for schemes to be successful).

Rationale for adopting 20mph speed limits

With so many priorities for councils to tackle, and dwindling money to spend, why should local authorities press ahead with implementing area-wide 20mph neighbourhoods?

Surveys repeatedly suggest that a speed limit of 20mph is a potential vote winner for councillors. For example, the 2011 British Social Attitudes Survey reported that 73 per cent of those surveyed were in favour of 20mph limits for residential roads. Locally, Oxford's consultation on 20mph limits won the backing of 69 per cent of residents; more than three-quarters of respondents in Chichester backed 20mph limits.

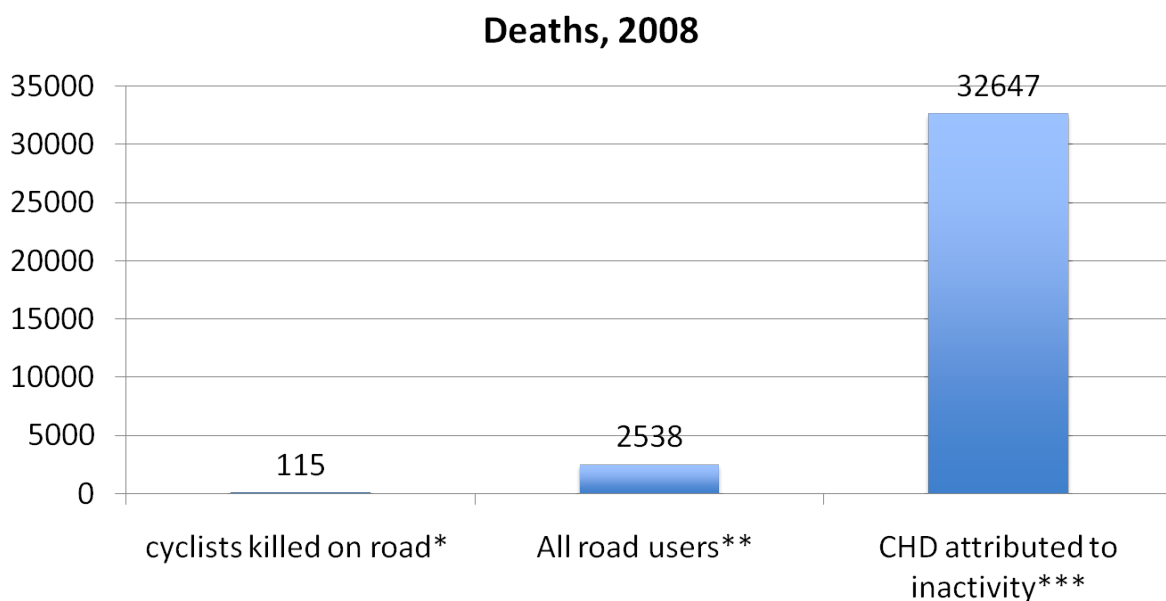
This may be because of the multiple benefits it brings to local people, their neighbourhoods and the wider local economy. These benefits include:

- fewer deaths and injuries: a person is [7 times more likely to survive if she/he is hit by a car travelling at 20mph rather than 30mph](#) – lowering the speed limit to 20mph decreases collisions between vehicles and children by up to 70 per cent (children cannot correctly judge the speed of traffic before they are 12; those living in poorer areas are more likely to be injured in road crashes)
- [increased physical activity](#): Bristol found that reducing speed limits led to a mean increase of 23 per cent for walking and 20.5 per cent for cycling - Britain's kids on average cycle or walk to school less than most other European countries, and making the roads safer would help to increase the number who do
- increased local economic activity: evidence from Living Streets shows that pedestrians spend [2 to 6 times more in local shops than people arriving by car](#)
- better quality of life for local people: slowing traffic down makes walking and cycling more attractive, and can increase social interaction as people become more visible on streets and footpaths – related to this, some authorities have implemented 20mph limits/zones in recognition of their role to [help boost tourism](#), which is a key local economic driver in some areas
- [reduced fuel consumption, and noise and air pollution](#): driving at a more consistent speed is more fuel efficient, quieter and less polluting than frequent stopping and starting – [Cambridge City Council](#) has just been awarded an Air Quality Grant from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to help implement 20mph limits in recognition of the role they have to improve air quality
- less likely to have a car crash: research shows that a reduction of 1 mile per hour in existing low speed areas leads to 6 per cent fewer collisions – a recent [evaluation of a 20mph area in central Brighton & Hove](#) found that there had been fewer collisions as well as fewer road crash casualties and lower speeds.

As set out above local authorities took on public responsibilities in April 2013. Area-wide 20mph speed limits are a cost-effective way of helping to fulfil these responsibilities. The pressure group [20's Plenty for Us](#) has calculated that adopting what it calls Total 20 (default, signed 20mph limits for the majority of roads) costs a local authority £3 per head of population against the cost of a death from a road crash, which is valued at £1.689 million, or a serious casualty at £189,000. It cites

the example of Warrington that recouped its implementation costs by a factor of 8 times (800 per cent) due to the prevention of serious casualties alone.

But the biggest public health gain is the potential for tackling the '[inactivity timebomb](#)' (see graph below). Researchers at University College London have found that half of children aged 7 don't get enough exercise; a lack of sufficient physical activity is reflected throughout the population, with enormous consequences for health and social care spending in the future. [One study](#) found that switching from commuting by car to an active transport mode could create annual health budget savings from £1,121 (cycling) to £1,220 (walking) per person because of the increased health benefits from more an individual being more active.



Graph: The risks of physical inactivity compared with road casualties

Sources: */**DfT Road Traffic Casualties 2009; *** BHF statistics 2010 edition; McPherson et al 2002
Acknowledgement: graph taken from presentation by Paul Butcher, Director of Public Health, Calderdale Council via 20's Plenty for Us

The most obvious counter to these myriad benefits is that lower speed limits means longer journeys, with associated inconvenience for road users and an impact on the economy through wasted time.

The assumption of a longer journey time assumes a comparison between a journey travelled at 30mph versus one at 20mph. In reality, no urban journey through residential areas has a constant speed – think traffic lights, giving way to parking cars, pedestrian crossings and so on – and includes travelling for only a short time at the maximum miles per hour. In fact, [Department for Transport](#) research found that urban traffic flow actually improves at lower speeds.

A report by the [British Association of Drivers](#) in July 2012 objected to 20mph limits on the grounds that they lead to a higher number of casualties. However, the data and methods used to generate this finding have been disputed by [a number of sources](#).

Adoption of 20mph limits by councils: a snapshot

[20's Plenty for Us](#) tracks the adoption of 20mph area-wide limits by local authorities. There are currently in excess of 50 councils that have either adopted, or are committed to adopting, 20mph area wide limits on residential streets (including, for example, Lancashire, Birmingham and the City of London). According to 20's Plenty this provides coverage for more than 12.5 million residents (almost 11.5 million already live in areas committed to 20mph limits).

Multiple local authorities have conducted scrutiny and task and finish investigations on implementing area-wide 20mph limits: [over 95 per cent have recommended proceeding](#).

The 20's Plenty for Us national conference – [Time for 20mph](#) – will be on 18 February 2014 in Camden, London. The programme will include presenters from a number of local authorities that have implemented area-wide 20mph limits such as Islington, Warrington and Bristol.

Role of elected members

Current thinking appears to suggest that the most acceptable way of moving towards the long-term financial, health and environmental benefits of adopting 20mph towns and cities is by introducing area-wide 20mph limits. The cost implications are far less than for introducing zones across an equivalent area.

Applying limits rather than implementing zones relies on persuading people to change their behaviour rather than the environment necessitating it. There is nothing to actually stop a driver exceeding 20mph in a signed-only area, and the perception may be that he/she has little to lose; in contrast, driving at speed over a hump in a 20mph zone may mean an expensive trip to the garage for repairs.

In this scenario, elected members have a crucial role in achieving the longer-term gains of area-wide 20mph neighbourhoods. 20's Plenty for Us [argues](#) that:

'During the decision making and after the political choice, education and engagement are key to converting the aspiration for slower speeds into driver behaviour change... education, engagement and making the benefits tangible are crucial.'

Elected members can exploit their leadership role to ensure that council staff and partner employees do not exceed the 20mph speed limit. For example, they can require that staff drive within the speed limit to act as 'pace vehicles' that in effect set the speed for all drivers. [Research in Bristol](#) found that community nurses alone collectively drove an average of 3,500 miles every day. Add this to the miles clocked up by bus drivers, binmen and parking inspectors – to name a few – and the potential for this approach is considerable.

Councillors also need to work collaboratively. [GO 20](#) is a coalition that campaigns for area-wide 20mph and includes a range of organisations with local groups such as

Sustrans, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Ramblers and Living Streets. These can be allies in helping to mobilise support locally.

More widely, elected members need to continue to sell the benefits of 20mph streets after implementation – and counter any myths – through utilising communication, marketing and community development skills within the local authority, or hiring in people with these skills if necessary. 20's Plenty for Us suggests that a sign-only approach must allocate a minimum of 10 per cent of the physical implementation costs in [marketing and awareness-raising](#) to achieve ongoing behaviour change. Earlier in 2013 a poster commissioned by Lancashire County Council to promote its roll-out of 20mph speed limits won [Campaign of the Year at the LGComms Reputation Awards](#) (see image below).



Caption: Raising awareness of the benefits of driving at 20mph is an important part of the overall strategy for introducing area-wide 20mph speed limits

Source: Lancashire County Council

Comment

Tap '20mph local authority' into a search engine and it becomes apparent that a number of councils around the UK are currently either considering or introducing area-wide 20mph limits. Add these to the list that have already adopted 20mph limits across their neighbourhoods, and the momentum appears to be with the area-wide 20mph approach.

Reducing speed limits is a rare issue where most of the levers for implementation are in the hands of a local authority. This is an important issue in many localities that the council can do something about, now, without waiting for new legislation or more funding, to help fulfil a range of local priorities from stimulating local economies to improving health.

And yet, the Department for Transport continues to make it more expensive for councils than it needs to be. Currently, the regulations require highways authorities to sign 20mph areas, including repeater signs as set out by existing legislation. The [Time for 20](#) campaign seeks to make 20mph the default speed in residential areas, meaning that councils would sign exceptions to 20mph speed limits rather than to 30mph areas. This would make 20mph limits cheaper to implement (by 50 per cent according to the campaign), and reduce the potential for confusing drivers by changing speed limits within local areas. Arguably reducing this potential for doubt would also encourage police forces to lightly enforce 20mph as the consistent, default speed limit.

Given the potential for lower speed limits to improve health, facilitate local economic activity, reduce pollution and create better quality of life for local people, lowering the cost of implementing 20mph seems a sensible way forward, especially for a government committed to cutting red tape and devolving more power locally. To join the debate, sign up to the [Time for 20mph](#) conference on 18 February 2014 in Camden, London.

For more information about this, or any other LGiU member briefing, please contact Janet Sillett, Briefings Manager, on janet.sillett@lgiu.org.uk