

“20s” - RSGB conference Nov 2019

Pat Bates presentation notes 13 Nov 2019

“The view from my desk”. With thanks to my Local Authority for permitting me to present a personal point of view which may not necessarily align with the Authority’s stance. No statistics and no slides in this presentation.

Campaigners campaign. Local Authorities generally do not. Campaigners for default signed only 20s have had a great run of campaigning for a couple of years with very little in the way of an alternative authoritative voice promoting the status quo.

It is not so much that I am AGAINST default 20s. It is more that I am FOR the current policy centred around evidence based decision making producing appropriate road safety solutions specific to particular areas. Simply because I think what we currently do is better and works better than what is being proposed.

Now is the time for both sides to have their say in rational discussion and work out what can ACTUALLY be achieved. I believe there is a reality gap between the aspirations of campaigners and the deliverables. I am definitely FOR effective solutions. When all the technical discussions are said and done, what remains is essentially a hearts and minds issue. I believe that the big question that pro default 20s people have to address comes in two parts - firstly how can the public be won over when they know all the facts and secondly how the public can remain won over when disappointment sets in as vehicle speeds don’t change much after a large scale default 20 is introduced.

I don’t think default 20s are a good idea primarily because I am unconvinced that they can deliver what they promise. A major reason why they can’t deliver is that a very large number of drivers are not yet willing to voluntarily go slower. To achieve compliance to 20mph speed limits we need a large scale change of driver mindset which is not yet here, coupled with either a massive level of enforcement or much more speed reducing engineering.

None of those three things are in place yet and I would be very surprised if huge levels of funding would be committed to putting sufficient enforcement and engineering in place to ACHIEVE actual vehicle speeds of 20mph in a wide area default 20mph speed limit scenario.

When the mindset has been changed it will then be time to consider changing the infrastructure and speed limits. The proposed sequence is the wrong way round at present.

As a nation we are doing better than before for vulnerable road users. Manual for Streets was first issued in 2007 and recommends applying a road user hierarchy to the design process with pedestrians at the top in lightly-trafficked residential streets. And this is a key, it is recommending designing the **new** roads and **new** communities in a people friendly layout. Unless you find ways of **retrofitting** MfS designs to existing roads those existing roads will remain as they are.

If the change of emphasis to better integrate walking and cycling initiatives and lower speed limits (Active Travel in the new language) is to work it needs more than just changing road signs from 30 to 20, it needs engineering.

Making default 20s speed limits in communities designed to MfS principles is straight forward as they have already been designed from the outset so that 20mph is the natural normal vehicle speed.

Making default 20s that work effectively elsewhere is the opposite – it not going to be quick, easy or cheap.

Retrofitting new standards for active travel projects into existing communities has proved challenging over the last 5 years. Let’s not make the same mistake again with default 20s by lumping ‘new’ and ‘retrofit’ together.

Many of us wear several hats and I look after aspects of RS and AT amongst some other stuff. Because of this I talk to many people in road safety and in Active Travel. Unfortunately it seems, in my experience, that not many people are well versed in both disciplines and this is a key weakness. **I believe that bringing RS and AT together must be an urgent objective.**

Many of our physical construction schemes are about improving the lot for pedestrians and cyclists and that often means reducing the dominance of motor vehicles. Motorists often complain about it but they are single minded about their convenience whereas people in Highways and road safety like you and me look at things across the spectrum of all road users.

So, I’m not against slower speeds and have put in some 20s schemes myself - **where we collectively believe they are appropriate.**

And this is the key, I (and many like me) simply don’t agree with campaigners that a default 20 in residential areas is the right way to go.

In a default 20s scenario, we envisage a massive increase in non-compliance – people simply ignoring the new lower speed limit- which will result in minimal ACTUAL reductions in vehicle speeds on most roads. ***It may be a quaint and old fashioned view by most Councils who are the Highways Authority for their local roads, but we still expect speed limits to be obeyed without special police presence. And that frequently requires engineering to achieve success.***
We are not in the business of introducing things that we don’t believe will work.

I agree with Rod and other campaigners that whatever speed limit you have, it should be enforced, otherwise why bother? Where I disagree with them is that I don’t realistically expect default 20s to be enforced any better than the current 30mph speed limits. Whatever the police and politicians may be saying. And speeding concerns in 30mph speed limits is a common complaint in our office post bag/email inbox.

So the case FOR default 20s must centre on finding a practical workable solution, not on some abstract airy fairy aspirational cloud cuckoo land ideal.

Let me move straight on and ask a question:

-Is a result that reduces average vehicle speeds from 29mph in a 30 to 27mph in a 20 a success or a failure? – Let me help you with the answer. If I put in such as scheme under today’s rules and expectations, it would probably NOT be classed as a success.

-Question -Can drivers be made to **comply** with a default signed only 20mph limit ? – I think not on the basis of reasonable expectation that willing compliance would be largely absent because of a lack of widespread enforcement.

Question -Will **casualties** be significantly reduced in a signed-only 20? Possibly if speeds are ACTUALLY significantly reduced **and there is a pre-existing high level of pedestrian activity and current accidents (see the TRL report 421 for details)**. However minimal reductions to actual speeds will have minimal reductions to casualties on most residential roads.

Question -Will air pollution be lessened? No- but see me afterwards for why as there is no time here to devote to an explanation.

There is a need to be straight with the public which I don't believe is the case so far. We don't want people to lay hold of unreasonably optimistic expectations from signed-only default 20s. Because LAs don't want to be flooded with calls from residents disappointed with what a signed-only 20 actually delivers.

ACHIEVING slower speeds in residential areas is a journey, not a 1-off event. It is best approached through lessons learned from the introduction of the Active Travel in the UK. It will take a generation to implement, it should include a realistic plan for behaviour change at the START. It should be **phased in** starting with new and existing communities that are already designed for 20mph vehicle speeds and then developing a plan to retrofit to the roads that are not. And it needs a really big budget for engineering and to enforce compliance.

I will close with....

DfT Setting local speed limits – key points section 1 ...

“People drive at speeds they consider to be right for the circumstances.” **Change the road environment and you can change the speeds.**

In 2016 the Local Sustainable Transport Fund ‘What Works’ report summary for the Department for Transport, it said:

A trade-off between ambition and deliverability, focussing on what can realistically be delivered is key. Take time to do a reality check, adapting the project where necessary.

Wise words

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