

Speeding Up Slowing Down

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Introduction

This paper is a development of the one I presented at the Graz VeloCity conference. There I explained that vehicle speed was not until recently regarded as a serious issue in UK discussions about Transport policy. As a result, a coalition was formed in 1998, chaired by myself, to press for change.

The coalition was called the Slower Speeds Initiative and was composed of nine lobby groups: the Children's Play Council, the Cyclists' Touring Club (CTC), Environmental Transport Association, Pedestrians Association, Pedestrians' Policy Group, Road Danger Reduction Forum, RoadPeace, Sustrans and Transport 2000.

These bodies had a common interest in seeing improvements in UK road safety, with speed reduction a central part of this. One of the problems we faced was that British politicians believed they had almost the best road safety record in western Europe, measured by casualties per 100,000 population. In fact for cyclists and pedestrians, especially children, our record – measured by distance travelled – was extremely bad. Danish adults cycle twelve times as much as us, but with a casualty rate one-tenth our level.

The public perception of the lack of safety on our roads is by far the biggest single deterrent to cycling in the UK. This explains our very low national average of cycling – only 2% of journeys to work for example.

In my Graz paper I commented that modelling work by the CTC had indicated that even halving our casualty rate would bring noticeable increases in cycle use. For example, the figure for Birmingham rose from 1.7% of all journeys to 6%. For Nottingham the figures were a rise from 3% to 9%.

Lower speeds clearly had an important part to play in improved safety, which is why the CTC and Sustrans were the main financial contributors in founding the Slower Speeds Initiative.

The S.S.I. groups also believed that lower speeds could help re-generate local communities, increase independent child mobility, and help the new sustainable transport objectives now coming from national government.

So the Initiative agreed to ask for six main measures:

1. Much more traffic-calming
2. An expansion in use of speed cameras
3. Making traffic law enforcement a central part of police work
4. Reforming traffic law, to end the bias in favour of motorists
5. Restraining the vehicle, in particular by the use of speed limiters in cars
6. Informing the public

Our first campaign aim was to get the Government to review the whole topic of speed. We began work in time to gain this commitment in the UK's new Integrated Transport Policy of 1998.

The U.K. Review Of Speed Policy

This episode turned out to be a curious affair. Many good ideas were aired and interesting examples of good practice were presented. The issue of speed was debated at meetings throughout the country. International literature was read and discussed.

The report itself states (paragraph 34) that “from the national and international literature there is overwhelming evidence that lower speeds result in fewer collisions of lesser severity”. It also says (35) “Driver error is a contributory cause in over 90% of accidents: driving too fast is a driver error in judging what is safe”.

One would have thought with this background that there would be radical recommendations for change. Instead the review suddenly stops: “Before a national speed limit could be applied, we have to reach agreement as to what constitutes a village” (150). “What constitutes a country lane?” (155). The whole section on rural areas is disappointing and there are long and worrying sections on why drivers disregard speed limits because they “do not understand them”.

However, in other respects the Review does make progress. Much wider use of 20 miles per hour areas is encouraged; lower speed limits for many villages are suggested: and campaigns will continue to inform the public of the dangers of speed.

Two important legal changes are under way. In the first, local councils and the police will be allowed to keep enough money from fines to pay for the cost of more speed cameras. Secondly, there is to be an examination of the wider issues of road traffic law.

The Review makes it quite clear that successful “Speed Management” is a partnership of the police, local government and the public. Engineering, education and enforcement are all necessary. The example of Graz is quoted, together with the “HomeZones” of the Netherlands.

Also, speed is accepted as a “quality of life” issue. Paragraph 56 says “Long streams of fast traffic contribute to the severance of communities ... This can cause social exclusion in communities by making it more difficult to form support networks and, for those without cars, to get to necessary facilities such as shops, schools and medical services”.

With regard to traffic-calming, “road engineering measures remain the most effective method of reducing speeds in urban (and some rural) areas”. Traffic-calming is also taken to mean measures such as on-road signs, road line markings and new ideas such as vehicle-activated signs at particular hazard spots.

There has been much debate in the UK about whether traffic-calming is actually necessary for speed reduction. One study in Liverpool suggested fairly strongly that it is. However Scotland has embarked on an ambitious study of 75 projects without calming.

Meanwhile UK lorries already have limiters to restrict their maximum speed. Trials with cars have produced very encouraging results (joint study by University of Leeds and Motor Industry Research Association, funded by national Government).

In these, a vehicle’s location is determined by using a Global Positioning System. With a digital map in the vehicle, drivers can be informed of a speed limit in advance. In a more advanced version the engine, brakes, gearbox and fuel supply can be used to slow the vehicle automatically. Trials of driver acceptability seem surprisingly positive, perhaps because the technology is seen as “neutral” and applying to all drivers. It is also worth remembering at this point how many motorists themselves feel threatened by speeding drivers.

Elsewhere Plowden and Hillman have argued for drivers to have greater control over limiters, in exchange for external signals showing the speed at which the vehicle is travelling. There have been trials of this system in North-Rhine Westphalia.

Whatever system is decided on will require EU agreement. But under the “polluter pays principle” speed limiters are more equitable. The cost is borne by the producer and user, not – as is now the case with traffic-calming – by the public, who have to suffer the problem and pay for it to be dealt with.

Afterwards

The UK Speed Review took place during a difficult time politically, which may explain some of its caution. There were complaints that the new Transport Policy was “anti-car”. Our chief police officer was misquoted as saying he wanted “zero tolerance” for speeding. Our Transport Minister, John Prescott, was caught driving 300 metres to a conference of his political party, to give a speech saying we should use cars less.

However we did extensive lobbying by road victim families, direct to our Prime Minister, Tony Blair. This undoubtedly had some influence, because he personally launched the Speed Review and our new national Road Safety Strategy. No-one can ever remember a British Prime Minister launching a road safety initiative before.

Important points of Tony Blair’s speech of 1st March 2000 are:

- “We will ensure all local authorities conduct a child safety audit”.
- “I expect local authorities to introduce many more traffic-calmed streets, focused on schools, or where people live, and on children’s routes to school”.
- “We will do more to protect those who are particularly vulnerable, such as children in deprived areas”.
- “Research shows us that speed, more than anything else, is what is killing people. So controlling speed is at the heart of our strategy”.

Some Conclusions

As ever, many UK policies seem to be half-way between North America and Continental Europe. All I can do is to report our experience and try to draw some conclusions. These would seem to be:

1. Many drivers see calls for lower speeds as not only a violation of their “freedom of movement” but (even worse!) a criticism of their personal driving skills.
2. Politicians at national and local level still greatly over-estimate “motorist opinion” and under-estimate the greater strength of the “responsible motorist + parent + older person + cyclist + pedestrian + resident + public transport user”.
3. As a result measures for lower speeds should be presented in an attractive manner, as “neighbourhood regeneration” or “Safe Routes to School”. (Sustrans has had great success with this in the UK.)
4. What works as traffic calming in urban areas does not always work in the countryside. This may well be an area of interesting design and technical challenges.
5. What works on urban local streets does not always work on main roads. Here reallocating priorities on the road and integration with bus and train use may be the most effective “traffic calming”.
6. There remains a continuing debate about “casualty reduction” versus “road danger reduction”.
7. There are very important advances in technology which may be to our advantage. The main areas of this are in directions and route-choice for drivers, giving messages and instructions to drivers, and in limiting vehicle speeds.
8. Traffic-calming is just one part of “speed management”. It is important to include better driver training, enforcement of road traffic law, partnerships with the police, involvement of health and education authorities, and the promotion of positive messages to the general public.

Some Final Questions

Firstly, we must be clear what we mean by “traffic calming”. Are we talking about purely engineering measures in the road – or do we mean a wider concept, which also includes traffic reduction?

Secondly, examples of good practice are always very useful, especially in those countries which have not yet implemented much traffic calming.

Thirdly, do we need different techniques for local roads, main roads and rural roads?

Fourth, can we achieve lower speeds without traffic calming?

Fifth, is the possibility of saving very large sums of public money by the eventual use of speed limiters realistic?

Sixth, is the Swedish concept of a “Vision Zero”, where there are no road fatalities, one for which we should all aim?

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