

Brake parliamentary reception, 14 July 2015

Speech by Julie Townsend, deputy chief executive, Brake

We often hear that the UK has among the safest roads in the world. It's true that over the past few decades, including since Brake was founded 20 years ago, much progress has been made in cutting devastating road deaths and injuries. 20 years ago, nine people were killed daily on our roads, and 105 seriously injured.

Today the daily death toll has fallen to five, and serious injuries 62.

But while progress has been made, it remains the case that by the end of today, five more families will have had to face an unexpected knock at the door from a police officer, come to tell them that the person they love most in the world won't be coming home ever again, because they have been suddenly, violently, needlessly killed in a road crash. Scores more families by the end of today will be having to deal with the pain and upheaval of a serious injury, many debilitating and life-altering.

Alongside campaigning for safer roads, Brake supports families whose lives are turned upside down by road death and injury. Our support packs funded by the Ministry of Justice are presented to families by police following all UK road deaths, and our helpline supports over 500 cases per year. So we know, far too well, the shock, grief, trauma and bewilderment that results from these casualties – the shockwaves that rip through families and communities.

We also understand, through our work campaigning and engaging schools, communities, and organisations, the wider impact of road danger on people's everyday lives. We know that fast traffic is major cause of concern – and fear – in many places across the UK, including many of the communities you represent and work with. We know road danger is the biggest factor preventing parents from letting their children walk or cycle to school, and holding many people back from taking up cycling. And we are conscious that thousands of premature deaths a year – an estimated 12,000 in the UK – are caused by traffic pollution, the invisible killer on our roads.

There are indications that road safety in the UK may be worsening once more. After decades of progress, casualties went up last year for the first time in 17 years, by 6%, following years of slowing progress. Some of the sharpest increases were serious casualties among people on foot and bike – people using the healthiest, cheapest and least polluting means of travel.

The UK has slipped from its top spot in the European road casualty rankings. And, as has been the case for some time, if you walk and cycle in the UK, you are more likely to be injured or killed per mile travelled than in many of our European neighbours.

This may sound like a bleak picture I'm painting. Yet we are hopeful that much can be achieved in the coming years to prevent road casualties and enable everyone to get around safely.

We are in a much-advanced position now in terms of our understanding of the risk factors on our roads and what can be done to address them.

Brake has been working with our partners Direct Line Group for more than a decade to assess attitudes, knowledge and behaviour, especially among drivers, to inform road safety work. We can see glimmers of hope from this – such as improving awareness about drink driving, and slowly declining use of hand-held mobile phones. But we can also see the myths, misunderstandings and risky behaviours that prevail, and which must be addressed to make our roads safer. Our surveys show, for example, that a large minority continue to think it's acceptable to drive after one or two drinks, and that increasing numbers are using their mobiles hands-free at the wheel, despite the dangers, or using the internet or apps. We can also clearly see the prevalence of risk taking among young drivers.

Combined with the wealth of academic research and international experience in road safety, we believe we have a clear line of sight to the measures that are most likely to be effective in ensuring our roads are not only the safest in the world, but as safe as they can be.

We are as certain as we can be that a system of graduated driver licensing, including a minimum learning to drive period, and post-test restrictions, coupled with better access to public transport, walking and cycling for young people, would help to end the terrible loss of young lives on our roads and ensure all young people can get to work and education safely.

We are convinced by the evidence from other countries that a lower drink drive limit would send a clear message that it should be none for the road, and help to stamp out drink driving at all levels.

We know that 20mph limits across our towns, villages and cities, alongside more traffic free routes and measures to make HGVs safer, would help to create a safer, better environment for walking and cycling, benefitting health and wellbeing as well as road safety.

And we are sure that tougher penalties, and increased traffic policing, would help to deter a raft of risky behaviours on our roads.

We believe that with these forward-thinking policies, and a bold, determined approach to road safety, we can stop the needless deaths and injuries on our roads, so no one has to pay the ultimate price just for trying to get around.

Brake's vision is a world where no one is killed or injured on roads, and where everyone can get around via safe, sustainable, healthy means. We urge the government to adopt a similar vision in its new road safety strategy, and we look forward to working with all of you to help bring this about.