Why GO 20?

Social justice:
Oxford professor Danny Dorling cites 20mph limits as the most important ‘one thing’ that should be done to reduce health inequalities. 20mph limits are a cost-effective social justice tool, enabling people to access cheap transport, and a healthy, active lifestyle, by being able to walk and cycle local journeys (the only free way to get about for most) and access public transport without being endangered. Road casualties disproportionately involve vulnerable road users, particularly children and young people, in lower income areas, so 20mph limits can especially benefit these groups.

Fewer casualties:
Every day five children and 20 adults are killed or seriously injured while walking or cycling on UK roads; every one devastating, every one preventable. Reducing limits from 30mph to 20mph has been proven to reduce casualties. Warrington saw a 27% reduction on residential roads, Portsmouth 22%, Camden saw a 54% reduction in collisions in its trial areas. Further afield, Graz in Austria reduced serious casualties by 25% when it introduced citywide 30kph (about 20mph) limits. There are many more examples. Widespread 20mph limits are endorsed by the World Health Organisation as proven to improve pedestrian safety.

It’s simply because at 20mph, drivers have more time to react and avoid hitting someone, with stopping distances about half those at 30mph. Children benefit especially, since they struggle to judge the speed of vehicles over 20mph, so often make mistakes crossing roads with faster traffic.

Healthy, active lifestyles:
Reducing casualties isn’t the only public health benefit of GOing 20. It makes people feel safer, which encourages more walking and cycling. Seven in ten people (72%) say roads in their town or village need to be made safer for walking and cycling, and eight in ten (79%) say people would walk and cycle more if these roads were safer.

In April 2013, the All-Party Parliamentary Cycling Group recommended 20mph as the urban norm to increase cycling. Where widespread 20mph limits have been introduced, walking and cycling has increased; Bristol City Council’s trial suggested an increase of as much as 20%. As well as giving freedom and enjoyment, this physical activity is known to reduce premature death by 20%.
Happy, flourishing communities:
At the heart of the GO 20 campaign is the vision to turn our streets from soulless thoroughfares to social spaces people can use freely and enjoy, to create active communities where people care about each other and can interact more easily.

Lower traffic speeds and volumes have been shown to improve the ‘sociability’ of streets: people get out more and are more likely to know their neighbours. Local shops also benefit as they receive more footfall from shoppers on foot, bike or public transport.

Less pollution:
More people walking and cycling means less traffic and more carbon-free journeys. 20mph limits also reduce pollution by causing vehicles to travel at a more consistent speed, with less of the speeding up and slowing down that produces most vehicle emissions.

Unaffected journey times:
As 20mph limits cause vehicles to travel at a more consistent speed with less slowing down and speeding up, journey times are barely affected; in fact, they may be smoother, less stressful, and use less fuel. This can be good news for people travelling by bus as well as by car or taxi; bus companies may even be better able to provide what’s most valued by passengers: a reliable service. 20mph trials in Bristol found bus journey times did not increase.

Return on investment:
As well as inflicting horrendous suffering, every road death is estimated to cost our society £1.7 million. Fewer casualties mean less strain on the NHS and emergency services and less emotional and financial devastation to families.

More walking and cycling means better health and prevention of illnesses like heart disease and diabetes, saving the taxpayer more. It can also help local businesses, especially in ailing town centres, by increasing footfall. In short, introducing 20mph limits pays for itself many times over. In Bristol, 20mph resulted in a massive return on investment because of the cost savings to the health service through increased physical activity. They used the World Health Organisation’s Health Economic Assessment Tool to estimate the changes in cost to health as a result of 20mph. They found for every £1 spent they saw a return of £24.72 through increased walking and £7.47 through increased cycling.

Why change the default?
It is great so many local authorities are recognising the benefits of GOing 20 and pressing ahead with widespread 20mph limits in their cities, towns and villages. Brake welcomed government guidance encouraging this in January 2013.

However, while many local authorities have decided 20mph limits are more than worth the cost of implementation, financial considerations remain a barrier to many. Changing the national default to 20mph would solve this by removing the need for local authorities to make legal orders, run their own awareness campaigns and install 20mph repeater signs and other measures to meet regulations and improve compliance. Instead, these measures could be reserved for any major through-routes that remain at 30mph, where appropriate. Setting 20mph as the new national norm may also help improve compliance with minimal need for enforcement, as it becomes a social norm too.

But changing our urban default limit to 20 isn’t just about making things easier for local authorities. It’s about ensuring people everywhere can walk or cycle without fear or threat – and recognising that 20mph is the most appropriate and beneficial top speed in villages, towns and cities, for the sake of people’s safety, health, wellbeing and wallets.
Get on board with the campaign.

Find out more about GO 20, and the coalition of charities supporting these calls, at www.go20.org. Or contact Ed on emorrow@brake.org.uk to offer your support.

End notes
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17. Citywide Rollout of 20mph speed limits, Bristol City Council Cabinet, 2012
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19. The contribution of good public spaces to social integration in urban neighbourhoods, Daniel Sauter & Marco Hüttemoser, Swiss National Science Foundation, 2006
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27. Citywide Rollout of 20mph speed limits, Bristol City Council Cabinet, 2012
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GO 20
make it happen