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PUBLIC HEALTH WALES BELIEVES THAT LOWERING THE DEFAULT SPEED LIMIT TO 20MPH COULD HAVE SUBSTANTIAL PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS



OUR POSITION

Public Health Wales believes that lowering of the default speed limit to 20mph, from the current 30mph, in Wales would save lives and reduce injuries. The extent of this saving is sufficient to justify this change. However, there are also likely to be benefits in terms of reduced noise, safer and more cohesive communities that encourage people to walk and cycle, improved air quality and making the areas in which people live more pleasant. This is supported by evidence that the majority of the public would welcome greater use of 20mph speed limits. The evidence suggests the potential for a wide range of public health benefits and few, if any, negative effects.

BACKGROUND

Higher vehicle speeds increase the risk of crashing and the severity of any resulting injuries. Pedestrians hit by a car at 30mph are five times more likely to die than those hit at 20mph, with the greatest risk to the young, old and most deprived.

Vehicle speeds, and speed limits that are too high, have been argued to be an overlooked Public Health problem. Past setting of speed limits has been arbitrary (the 30mph urban limit was set in 1934), but current health related thinking is that speed limits should maximise safety for all road users and minimize costs including travel time, crashes, noise, air pollution, global warming and road maintenance.

Urban, residential area maximum speeds of 20mph are increasingly being advocated for and implemented to reduce crash and injury risks as well as many of the other negative factors associated with cars; noise and air pollution, physical inactivity, community severance and personal isolation and loneliness

WHAT ARE THE PUBLIC HEALTH BENEFITS?

There appear to be public health benefits of default 20mph speed limits in terms of reductions in road traffic crashes (up to 54%), casualties (20% to 56%), casualties in the most deprived areas (26% to 34%) and cyclist casualties (40%). There also appear to be reductions in noise pollution of 1.7 to 3db. Public support for 20mph speed limits is around 75% and a default speed limit of 20mph would also deliver on all seven goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

There is also some evidence that a default 20mph speed limit would increase local business viability and social coherence, reduce community severance, improve air quality by avoiding acceleration and braking, as well as increase walking and cycling. There is also some suggestion of reductions in inequalities and minimal effects on travel times.

WHY NOW?

Wales gained the power to set speed limits in the Wales Act (2017). Welsh local authorities have, to date, been able to reduce speed limits on some roads to 20mph, but this has led to piecemeal changes. Some authorities in Wales have 20mph immediately around schools, meaning that children are protected from speeding traffic at the very end of their walk, when arguably, because there are many other children about, they are probably safest. This risks creating inequalities in children's travel, with some children protected for more of their journey than others. But, it also means that drivers, and more importantly pedestrians, are put at risk by variations in speed limits on residential roads.

For more information, please contact: publichealth.policy@wales.nhs.uk.

Full references and a detailed evidence review are available in a background paper, available on our website.