



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill:
PlayBoard NI

10 June 2015

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne
Mr John Dallat
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Declan McAleer

Witnesses:

Mr Alan Herron	PlayBoard NI
Ms Susan Kehoe	PlayBoard NI

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Lynch): I welcome Susan Kehoe and Alan Herron from PlayBoard NI. You know the format. I ask you to make your presentation, and then we will ask questions.

Mr Alan Herron (PlayBoard NI): Thank you, Chair. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to feed into this important discussion on the Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill.

We support the Bill, and it is our contention that it has the potential to improve the lives of children, young people, families and communities by improving road safety, reducing the severity of road traffic accidents and, importantly from our organisation's perspective, contributing to an increase in street play opportunities. We recognise that the Bill, if enacted, will have cost implications. It is, however, our belief that the legislation has the potential over the medium to long term to result in significant savings to the public purse through, for example, reduced strain on emergency services budgets as a result of a decrease in speed-related accidents. It is also our view that, cost considerations aside, legislation that has the potential to reduce the often paralysing pain of bereavement for families and the wider community is worthy of careful consideration.

I will give the Committee some background. PlayBoard is an independent charity. It is a membership body and the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. For the past 30 years, PlayBoard has been committed to supporting the child's right to play through a combination of activities, including the development and delivery of play programmes at community level, work with primary schools to enhance access to play in school grounds, delivery of play training and support for the play-based school-age childcare sector, and campaigning and raising awareness, with a view to enhancing children's access to play. At the heart of all that we do are the child's right to play and children and young people's views, aspirations and perceptions of themselves and the environment in which they live.

As I said in my introduction, PlayBoard supports the Bill not only because of the road safety element but because we believe that it will contribute to increasing play opportunities in the community. Play is

central to the lives of children and young people. They enjoy being outside playing in their communities, making and sustaining friendships and engaging in playful activities that ultimately support them to develop the full range of skills that they require as they grow towards adulthood. Research has consistently shown that increased access to outdoor play opportunities has a positive impact on children and young people's health and well-being, both physical and mental, supports a connection to the community and the local environment, and creates multiple learning and skills development opportunities. Additionally, the right to play is enshrined in article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Recently, the United Nations, in its general comment number 17 on article 31, highlighted the specific need for Governments to take heed of the need to introduce road traffic measures, including speed limits, to ensure that children and young people are able to play more safely in their communities.

Although we know all about the benefits of outdoor play in communities, the reality is that, for many children and young people, playing in the street is simply not an option. Extensive research has shown that traffic speed and road safety considerations are among the most critical factors in determining whether children are able or allowed by their parents to play outdoors. As a result, outdoor play opportunities are severely curtailed, which impacts negatively on children and young people's health, well-being and social development.

I now hand over to my colleague Susan, who has looked at some of the research evidence that has emerged both nationally and locally.

Ms Susan Kehoe (PlayBoard NI): Thank you, Alan, and thank you, Committee.

As we noted in our submission, in the research that we carry out, traffic is consistently an issue for children, young people and parents. Traffic volume, particularly the speed of traffic, is a source of anxiety for parents and a major reason that they do not allow their children to play in the street and wider community. Back in 2012, PlayBoard ran the Reclaiming Street Play project in the Torrens area of north Belfast. For two hours a week, we closed the streets to traffic. The programme changed the mindset of residents, particularly on the importance of play and on the impact of traffic on their lives. Comments included, "I cannot believe that she is playing so happily with other kids. She never plays outdoors" and, "As a parent, I do not feel comfortable with my child playing out on the street owing to the speed and high level of traffic". Another parent explained, "It is just great. With the road being closed, you do not have to worry about cars coming along. The kids love it, and it gives them a chance to play with one another and parents to meet one another". Closing roads is not what the Bill is about, but the project showed what no traffic in an area looks like and what can be ignited in communities.

More recently, in the summer of 2013, we worked with a group of 10 young researchers aged between eight and 12. They interviewed 111 of their peers about play. Comments from the findings included that it is not safe because cars are driving up and down the street and people are parking their car on the footpath. One in five children interviewed said that they did not have a safe place to play outside and cited cars and traffic as a major inhibitor. The young researchers also drew up recommendations for policymakers, including providing more zebra crossings and restricting cars in areas where children play; closing off some streets and roads for children to play on a temporary basis; and having community police on our streets who understand the importance of play and help us feel safe.

For the latest annual kids' life and times survey of P7 children in Northern Ireland, we worked with the Centre for Children's Rights at Queen's University and children to develop questions for the survey on the right to play. Over 2,400 children gave their opinion on the statements relating to play in their schools and communities. The final question was open-ended, simply asking, "What do you think could be done in your school or community to make sure that all children can enjoy playing as much as they can?" Responses included fewer cars on the road, more zebra crossings, larger footpaths, cars slowing down, markings on the road, more street lights and everyone to be treated fairly. Other responses were that drivers can make sure that their car does not go too fast and that they take care, that cars drive slowly around neighbourhoods and that there should be less traffic and more kerbs.

Playing is healthy for children, but it is difficult to quantify. I will give you a personal example. Just last Friday, I told my five-year-old at 5.30 pm to put down her tablet because her friend was outside. Three and a half hours later, at 9.00 pm, I had to convince her to come in. That was three and a half hours of being active. I am lucky to live in a cul-de-sac and to be a parent who believes in the benefits of play, but one of the major inhibitors to parents allowing their children out to play is undoubtedly traffic.

That leads me on to the health benefits to be accrued from play, and, for that matter, from walking and cycling. Back in 2014, the British Academy brought together a group of respected experts from across the social sciences. They were each asked to write a proposal focusing on one issue and one intervention that they believed would reduce health inequalities and could be adopted by local authorities and health and well-being boards. In his proposal, Professor Danny Dorling from Oxford made the case for implementing 20-mph speed limits where a 30-mph limit already exists, on the grounds that that could be one of the cheapest and most effective ways in which to improve public health today. He argues that slowing down cars reduces the risk of pedestrian fatalities, especially child fatalities, and brings about wider benefits such as less pollution and stronger communities. A slowdown would reduce inequalities in cities because it tends to be in the poorer parts of cities that people are most at risk of being hurt and killed by cars. Dorling recalled that, when living in Sheffield, 69 children under the age of 10 were recorded as being victims of a road crash in the poorest constituency, Brightside, between 2005 and 2007. In contrast, in the richest constituency, Hallam, some 11 children were harmed over the same period. Both constituencies — at the time, David Blunkett's and Nick Clegg's respectively — had very similar numbers of children. In a similar vein, the programme Making the Link, which is supported by the Department for Transport and run by the Child Accident Prevention Trust, refers to research showing that children from disadvantaged families were 20 times more likely to be killed as pedestrians and 27 times more likely to be killed as cyclists than children from the most affluent homes. The greater risk is attributed to living close to dangerous roads, having fewer places to play and making fewer journeys by car. I will hand back over to Alan to round up.

Mr Herron: Thank you, Susan. At the outset, I stated that PlayBoard fully supports the Bill. As an organisation dedicated to ensuring that children and young people can play in a way that suits their developmental needs and in the communities in which they live, we think that the Bill is key. If enacted, the Bill will allow us to take an important step towards the creation of child and young person-friendly communities, communities in which children and young people are active participants, in which they are more visible through play and in which they are recognised and valued as having a greater level of importance than modes of transport. That is not to say that, for PlayBoard, the Bill is a panacea. It will not, in its own right, address all the obstacles that restrict children's opportunities for play, such as adult intolerance of children at play or parental fears over stranger danger and the like. It will, however, allow us to begin to create residential landscapes in communities that are safer for children, young people and, indeed, the wider community; that are supportive of the child's right to play; that encourage children and the wider community to engage in more physical activity, such as physical play, walking and cycling; and that place recognition of the play and activity needs of individuals above traffic and transport considerations.

In closing, I will address the issue of cost, which I referenced at the outset. At a time of severe strain on the public purse, it is our fear that good legislation could be dismissed on the grounds of immediate cost. I have seen a range of estimates for the costs associated with the implementation of the Bill, and it goes from £6 million to £26 million. In considering the initial cost, it is important to recognise that the introduction of 20-mph speed limits could be phased in over time. That would spread the cost of implementation. It is also critically important to recognise that the Bill has the potential to make savings now and in the future by reducing immediate strain on emergency services and contributing to the overall improvement of the health and well-being of the population. That would ultimately result in savings for the health service, which is coming increasingly under financial strain. We encourage the Executive to look at the issue on a cross-departmental basis when it comes to cost and potential savings.

Thank you for the opportunity to feed into the debate.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Lynch): Thanks for the presentation. I will ask the first question. You heard the Department for Regional Development officials say earlier that provision already exists to bring in 20-mph speed limits: what does this Bill add?

Mr Herron: We have heard on a number of occasions that we do not require new legislation because current legislation already facilitates this. The big issue for us is that, if the legislation currently exists and if it were publicised, I genuinely believe that more communities would be using it. If the legislation is there, why is there not a greater level of awareness about the potential to become a 20-mph zone? The Bill will cement the concept of the 20-mph zone for safety. It will also help to address the wider issue of the need for cultural and societal change. A 20-mph sign on its own will not automatically reduce speed. It will have to have running alongside it an educational and awareness programme. We cannot look at this in isolation; rather, we have to take a long-standing approach to it. We have to

view the Bill as one element. If nothing else, the legislation will help to galvanise opinion. Hopefully, it will also help stimulate communities and encourage those communities to consider this as a very viable approach to addressing road traffic issues but also improving the public landscape for play.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Lynch): The current 20-mph speed limits reduce speed because they incorporate traffic-calming measures. I have one in my housing estate. You are saying that the Bill is proposing 20-mph limits with a sign only and no traffic-calming measures.

Mr Herron: There are different options available. It is not about taking a blanket approach. There are certain areas where signage, with an appropriate local educational process or programme, could be as effective as more expensively engineered approaches. Again, you have to look at each area on its merit before you come up with a decision. There is not any blanket approach that we would propose.

Ms Kehoe: It is also worth remembering that, in the Assembly debate, Steven Agnew said that the Department stated that 20-mph limits will be introduced only where there are already speed limits and that signs will be introduced only where there are already speed bumps. That is very different from saying, "Yes, we can do it". However, what will it actually take to do it?

Mr Dallat: Susan, you heard the presentation from the all-male group of departmental officials. I think that you said that you have a child. On the basis of what we were told by the officials, your child is staying on the PlayStation and the aspirations of PlayBoard are not going to happen.

Ms Kehoe: I see the child growing up and learning to become confident and competent, learning all the skills of leadership and even ordering older children around. Those are invaluable skills that we as a society need in the workplace. That can happen if children are allowed out there to play. It is not in an imposed way, where we say that children have to play in their back garden. We are allowing them out to mingle in the real world, within boundaries of course. We have to set boundaries and permissions as to how far they can go.

Mr Dallat: Alan, in your closing remarks, you mentioned stimulating communities. Are you saying that, with this Bill, there would be something for the community to embrace and that it could work out its needs, whereas, if it were left to the Department to respond on an ad hoc basis to demands from different areas, it would not work?

Mr Herron: In our experience, where we have gone into communities to build capacity and support them to develop specific street play programmes, we have found that, once we open up the streets, whether through street closures or by slowing traffic down, communities come together and begin to mix and bond. Suddenly neighbours speak to each other. In the Torrens example that Susan mentioned, the parent of a disabled child said that it was the first time since the family had moved there that the child had been able to engage with other children. Children simply could not go out, because the streets did not allow it.

The difficulty is that we have created streetscapes in which, when children come home, there is nowhere to play. If they are fortunate enough to have a garden, that is great. They can get some outdoor time. Other than that, they are essentially restricted to the indoors. Parents have very real fears, and we know that communities do not interact as closely as they once did. If you can create a street environment that encourages children to come out and play with one another and adults to come out and engage more, you will have a significant benefit. There will be community cohesion as a result of that community coming together. You will also get a sense that the zones become more enforceable. Communities will take on the onus of saying that it is their community and that, as such, they want to protect their children. You will almost get that sense of self-enforcement. Communities will be empowered to take action on the issue.

Mr Dallat: You are telling the Committee that it is about much more than road safety. You are telling us that it is a tool that will stimulate a community to develop, become cohesive and interact and that, through the aspiration of reducing the number of deaths of children, we will achieve a great deal more. Is that what you are saying?

Mr Herron: Yes, we certainly see that. Our experience is that, where you create an environment in which children are able to play and interact more, you get a whole range of additional benefits, and communities come together. We have examples of play programmes that we have run in Carrickfergus, Antrim and Newtownabbey in which the simple act of enabling children to come

together in a space to play can bring the community together. It can bring adults together and create new connections. Spaces that in the past were perhaps seen as intimidating or closed to the community can be opened up. They become vibrant and active. You can reinvigorate an area.

Mr Dallat: Really, it has come full circle. The first vehicles on the road needed a red flag in front of them, and you were not allowed to do more than 4 mph. The car then dominated. In fact, it took over whole communities. I am not picking on them, but how can we get through to the officials in the Department who are critical of the whole thing? How can we tell them that we do not need to return to the red flag but we need to regain communities for the people who live in them?

Mr Herron: It is important to recognise that the issue was being raised in, I think, the 1940s. We have an image from 1940s Belfast—

Mr Dallat: I would not remember. Almost.

Mr Herron: I would not dare imply. We have an image that shows that traffic and traffic speed was reducing play opportunities in Belfast then. It is not a new issue, having been recognised a long time ago.

We deal with a lot of Departments, and sometimes there is a sense that the issues are viewed in isolation and based on how they impact on the remit under which Departments operate. You have to factor in a range of issues. This will improve health and well-being. It will potentially improve the learning capacity in children, which has a knock-on impact on education. That has a knock-on impact on economic development and entrepreneurship. It is about not one simple issue but a cascading model. If you implement one issue, over time, you will get a significant number of benefits for the community and, indeed, the economy.

Mr Dallat: On that very high note, I will stop.

Mr Lyttle: I thank PlayBoard for its presentation. I have a long-standing working relationship with PlayBoard. That was an excellent presentation that you gave today. In fairness to the DRD officials, who got a bit of a challenge from John Dallat there, I am glad that they showed courtesy and wisdom in staying behind to hear your presentation. They deserve some credit for doing that.

I mentioned that one of the benefits of 20-mph speed limits and zones — obviously, they are different things in technical jargon and terminology — is improved mixed use of our streetscapes. I mentioned cycling and walking. You have reminded us in a very clear way to insert child play into that as well. I have two young children, so I know the challenges — I am sure the officials are aware of them as well — posed by sedentary and digitalised lifestyles. I do not think I had quite considered it in the eloquent way that you put forward, which is that many of our streetscapes are effectively enclosing our children in those lifestyles, so there are significant public health and community cohesion benefits as well.

It was really good to hear about the Reclaiming Street Play campaign as well. I have been involved in the Big Lunch, which closes down streets for short periods. I would be interested to hear how you got permission to do that for such a big campaign.

You also mentioned research from a professor who recommended a way in which to change the existing 30-mph limit to 20 mph. I was trying to get at that in the previous session, but I am not sure that I quite got there. What we need to do is work together to find out whether there are ways to get around what, in fairness to the Department and in general, appear to be significant delivery costs.

Thank you for your presentation. It would be good to hear a wee bit more, at this stage or in the future, about exactly what that professor was proposing as a way of delivering what everybody, by and large, thinks is a good policy and a good idea.

Mr Herron: We prepared quite a significant amount of evidence for today, so it may be better, rather than try to sum it up now, to forward that to the Committee as a separate piece to sum up the research and what our findings are.

Mr Lyttle: I appreciate that.

Mr Byrne: I welcome the presentation and the research that you alerted us to, Susan. Where is the best model or example in these islands that you would advocate as something that we should admire?

Ms Kehoe: I guess the models that are highlighted are in Bristol, Portsmouth, London, Edinburgh —

Mr Byrne: Which one in particular?

Ms Kehoe: I will hold my hands up and say that I am not an expert on this. I know that it is the right thing to do. Arguably, London is a very good example to look at, because it is so big. If it can be carried out in London, it can be carried out elsewhere. You will see that there are a lot of reports emerging. Brighton and Hove City Council has a report from back in May 2010 on a 20-mph speed limit zone. You can see a lot of the learning that is happening there.

We have five pilots happening, and I believe that there are issues with three of them, so I do not know whether the five are under way. There is a lot to be learned there from the lessons of what is working, but, equally importantly, there is a lot to be learned from what is not working. You talk about monitoring. There is possibly a bigger argument to be made for re-evaluating the pilots and seeing how effective they have been, through asking why they are different and what is different. You can also look to the UK and wider afield, because 20-mph limits and zones seem to be quite normal in Europe, and I believe that they have been in the Dublin City Council area since 2006. There are wonderful examples out there, but possibly the likes of Rod King from 20's Plenty for Us is in a better position to give you a definitive answer.

The Deputy Chairperson (Mr Lynch): No more members want in. I thank you for coming to the Committee today and for giving the presentation. We look forward to your material coming to the Committee.

Mr Herron: Thank you.