



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Regional Development

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill: Sustrans

17 June 2015

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Trevor Clarke (Chairperson)
Mr Seán Lynch (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr John Dallat
Mr Alex Easton
Mr Chris Lyttle
Mr Cathal Ó hOisín

Witnesses:

Ms Anne Madden	Sustrans
Mr Steven Patterson	Sustrans

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I welcome Steven and Anne, who are familiar to all members of the Committee. Would you like to make a brief presentation, Steven?

Mr Steven Patterson (Sustrans): Yes. Thank you, Chairman and members.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): You will appreciate that most of the ground has been covered, but we will still have a few questions for you.

Mr Patterson: That is absolutely fine. We have an oral statement that will take maybe five minutes, and then we will answer any questions. I will try to be as quick as I can. There might be some repetition.

This presentation is in addition to our written evidence. Sustrans supports a default 20 mph speed limit on residential streets in Northern Ireland. It is a vital tool in achieving the cycling revolution and improving the safety and quality of life of those living in and visiting our urban areas. A 20 mph limit creates safer streets, bringing numerous benefits to places and people. It helps to reduce the risk and severity of collisions, and it encourages people to walk, cycle and spend more time in an area. The reduced speed makes it easier to cross roads, particularly for children and older people, and the whole community benefits, including businesses.

People are seven times more likely to survive a crash at 20 mph. As well as preventing injury, a 20 mph limit promotes healthy exercise and long-term savings in health and social care. We welcome the introduction of the Bill, but, rather than trying to define and sign 20 mph streets, we are of the view that 20 mph should be the default position. Roads currently 30 mph would become 20 mph, with the Department having the ability to exempt streets and set a speed limit of 30 mph, or perhaps 40 mph, in some locations.

We encourage the Regional Development Committee to support an amended Bill creating default 20 mph limits in residential streets. The main criticism of the Bill, when debated in the Assembly, was the cost of signage. Sustrans's recommendation, which requires signs only on the few remaining 30 mph roads, would be a much more cost-effective solution.

We understand the term "residential road", as defined in the Bill, to include urban town centre streets whose primary usage is commercial or shopping and on which there may be few or, indeed, no houses. The term "residential" could be understood by the public to mean solely streets where people live, but our understanding is that that is not the intention of the Bill.

There has never been a greater commitment in the Northern Ireland Assembly to encourage and enable people of all ages and abilities to lead a more active lifestyle and to travel safely by sustainable means. Current policies, including the DRD bicycle strategy, the DOE road safety strategy, the Health Department's framework for public health and targets in the Programme for Government outline encouraging government intentions. Indeed, the Committee's inquiry into and subsequent report on cycling set out in a very positive manner the benefits to investing in this mode of travel. However, one of the main barriers to developing active travel is that many people do not feel that it is safe to walk or cycle on our streets. A survey carried out as part of the Connswater Community Greenway in east Belfast found that 60% of residents thought that the roads were not safe to cycle on. There are several design changes to our road network that would make roads feel safer for vulnerable road users. They include better-quality pavements, more pedestrian crossings, segregated cycle lanes, better-surfaced roads and physical traffic-calming measures. We support a significant investment in all of those. In addition, having cars and lorries travelling at 20 mph on most of our urban roads would be a very positive core measure to encourage active travel.

Our paper outlines the many road safety benefits. You have heard those from the previous two witnesses. Twenty miles per hour is good for people. Research carried out in south Edinburgh, a 20 mph pilot area, found that residents felt that the new speed limit had a range of positive impacts, the most often mentioned being improved safety for children walking and cycling. Twenty miles per hour is also good for business. It is inviting and provides high-quality urban environments with less traffic noise and cleaner air. It also attracts shoppers and increases dwell time. In Bristol, area-wide 20 mph pilots led to increases of 12% in walking and cycling, and 35% of people felt safer. We think that it is a good thing that delivery vans and lorries travel a little more slowly in urban, built-up areas.

We understand that the PSNI has concerns about its ability, within the current resource, to enforce 20 mph. We think that, given the cost to the Northern Ireland economy of road collisions and people leading inactive lifestyles, there is merit in looking at increased funding for active travel, and that includes enforcement measures. A senior police officer in Edinburgh said that the limited resources available to the police there would be focused on 20 mph zones around schools and on any particular accident black spots.

We feel strongly that community engagement and, therefore, ownership of 20 mph, should be an important part of the implementation. The experience in Edinburgh demonstrated that this approach works, with communities and local politicians engaged in the process. In the Scottish capital, councillors approved a new speed limit network for Edinburgh in January 2015, after three years of research and public consultation. The consultation included an online survey, public meetings, drop-in sessions, roadshows in shopping centres, and meetings and discussions with key stakeholders. The public consultation led to further changes to the initial proposals, with some streets being added to those getting 20 mph and, indeed, some streets that had been outlined for 20 mph being kept at 30 mph. Clearly, if DRD were to lead in this community consultation, additional resource would be required. Councils could play a key role in facilitating discussion at the local level.

Finally, a 20 mph limit is popular. The results of the consultation process in Edinburgh found that 60% of respondents approved the proposals, with 36% opposed. We encourage the Committee for Regional Development to support an amended Bill creating a default 20 mph limit in residential streets, which would be implemented after a comprehensive consultation process.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thanks, Steven. I refer to your closing remarks:

"We would encourage the Department for Regional Development Committee to support an amended Bill creating default 20mph in residential streets which would only be implemented after a comprehensive consultation process."

How does that differ from the Department's current position, in which it already has the power to do that?

Mr Patterson: We suggest that the default limit change from 30 mph to 20 mph. This may need primary legislation. It might not be a devolved function at the minute, so it might be a UK-wide initiative led from London or the Northern Ireland Assembly might get that function at a devolved level to implement that legislation.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): That is already devolved to us. We have the power here, at the moment, to implement a 20 mph limit. What you propose in the amendment already exists in Northern Ireland.

Mr Patterson: You may be right, Chairman. Our understanding is that, if urban roads are not signed at 20 mph, the default national speed limit for urban areas applies. That might not be a devolved function at the minute, but I can try to clarify that after this meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): My understanding, from speaking to the sponsor of the Bill, is that he understands the current situation to be that, given the consultation on the process, the Department can bring it in. So, by amending that, you would amend it to the position as it stands.

Mr Patterson: If that is the case, maybe we should be looking at a significant roll-out of this across Northern Ireland, where very little of the road network is 20 mph at the minute —

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): How much consideration would you give to a comprehensive consultation process? Are we saying, like most Departments do, that we will consult but then disregard what people say and give it to them anyway, or, if you consult and the residential areas do not want it, will you not go ahead?

Mr Patterson: Our attitude to consultation is that, in each of our cities, towns and villages where the speed limit is 30 mph, the default will be 20 mph, but that, through the consultation process, the Department can define which streets stay at 30 mph. That —

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Is that a consultation process? Since I came into public life, I have found that what I thought consultation was before I was an elected Member — you consult, get opinions and go with an opinion — is not the case. Maybe you are too long in Sustrans now and too close to the Department, because the consultation process that I witness is, "We are telling you what we are going to do. We are listening to what you are saying, but we are going to disregard it".

Mr Patterson: With respect, I would call that "information". A genuine consultation process has to look at a town network, and it has to be local, which is why I mentioned the councils. Take Ballymena, Enniskillen, Larne or Belfast, for example. The consultation has to be at town level. It has to get the key stakeholders together — elected Members, businesses, communities and particularly people who do not have a voice — and decide on an answer to this question: now that Northern Ireland has set a default of 20 mph, which streets should be exempt from that? That is a change to what happens at the minute. The Department's officials tend to implement traffic calming after a basic consultation or information process, whereas this would be absolutely key —

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Are you advocating a clear consultation process in which the opinions of those consulted actually matter?

Mr Patterson: Absolutely, and I think that Edinburgh is a really good example of that. As outlined in our written summary to you, Edinburgh has been going through this for a number of years, outlining the various methodologies that I talked about. There were 2,500 responses to the online survey, and the consultation process led to changes: an additional 3 kilometres of streets got a 20 mph limit, and the proposed speed limit of 20mph rose to 30 mph in 10 kilometres of main streets. Genuine, well-resourced and well-informed community consultation can be hugely important.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Equally, a consultation process could conclude that people do not want something in a particular area. I will move on.

You suggest that 20 mph is good for business. You knew that this question was going to come up again: given that the Federation of Small Businesses and Belfast city centre management are

opposed to a pilot scheme in Belfast city centre, where is your evidence that businesses would welcome it?

Ms Anne Madden (Sustrans): Research in the position paper that we sent through found that, in Bristol —

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Anne, sorry —

Ms Madden: Sorry, do you mean where is the evidence for Northern Ireland?

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Yes.

Ms Madden: Rod made a good point: Northern Ireland is starting at a low base, so we need to start talking to the federation and city centre management. We were talking to them recently about a possible cycling day, which would mean closing the streets on a Sunday later in the year. There were positive opinions on that, but any research shows that, the lower the speed limit in certain areas, the safer people feel. There is higher footfall, and you encourage more people into an area, which can only be good for business. We have to begin consultation with our business groups in Northern Ireland to persuade them of the benefits to them. There is data out there that shows that a 20 mph limit is good for business and is not something that they should shy away from. Who wants a superhighway flying past your shopping centre? It does not make much sense. When a city has people on streets, it is the people who go into the shops, not the cars.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): The cars have to get into the streets.

Ms Madden: The cars do not necessarily. More people who shop in Belfast city centre come in by bus. They do not necessarily use their cars. That is a pattern that has been continuing for some time. I can give you evidence of that.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Sorry, I do not mean to be rude, but, I have to say, I hate the expression "Belfast". Life lives outside of Belfast. Bar one member of the Committee, Chris, who represents Belfast — I know that he is a real champion for it — many of us are from different areas. Let me give you another wee piece of evidence. Where I come from, in Antrim, there was a pedestrianised zone, and it killed the shops on the street.

Ms Madden: In Antrim?

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): In Antrim town. It killed them off. Thankfully, because of the master plan, they opened the street up, and now life is coming back to the street. The bus goes through the street, the taxis go through the street and people are going back to shop. There is life outside of Belfast. Please, when you are making presentations, certainly when I am in the Chair, do not always refer to Belfast.

Ms Madden: I was just using that as an example, because I thought we were talking about the city centre management of Belfast.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): It is not the centre of the universe. Chris may have a different opinion on that, but it is certainly not the centre of the universe.

Mr Lyttle: I disagree.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I appreciate that. I thought you would. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lynch: Steven, you mentioned that you had criticism of the Bill in its current form. Will you elaborate and give some greater details?

Mr Patterson: The way the current Bill would be implemented would mean that every street that would be 20 mph would need signs at either end. That would also need traffic orders for every street or for every zone of streets. If it is taken on a small area basis, that is fine. If we really want to make a significant impact across Northern Ireland — given the highway powers of DRD covering the whole area, we can make a real statement here — and roll it out, say, within the period of the next Assembly,

across all residential streets, as Alex Easton alluded to, there have been costings of £6 million to £20 million. They are not our costings. That was one of the main criticisms. We would like to see it as a core across the whole region. There would be cost savings with our approach, which would mean that the default would be 20 mph, and you would only sign the 30 mph streets. If we want to hit the whole region, that is a cheaper option and less bureaucratic.

Mr Lynch: I am interested in exploring that default and how it would impact.

Mr Patterson: I think our approach is radically different. Although wanting to get the same principle as Mr Ramsey's Bill and get the same outputs and outcomes, I think the default needs to be properly explored and costed. We do not pretend to have done that costing exercise, but it would need to be done.

Mr Lynch: Do you believe that that can be acquired within the confines of the Bill?

Mr Patterson: Yes I do. We possibly need to clarify, as the Chairman said, whether the Department has the powers to do that at the minute and whether it is just a matter of how it influences its programme and priorities.

Mr Dallat: Some people who are in favour of this Bill and who are listening in on this, Steven, will regard your contribution as just about as useful as an ashtray on a motorbike. You have let the cat out of the bag. What you said this morning about the consultation, and I agree with the Chairman, makes it no different from what it is now. Why are you not supporting the Bill?

Ms Madden: We are supporting the Bill.

Mr Patterson: We are supportive of the Bill; we just think that it would be cheaper and quicker to implement it based on our model. We are very supportive of the Bill and the outcomes that it hopes to achieve.

Mr Dallat: Is your cost based on money bags or on people's lives?

Mr Patterson: Our cost? Well, as to the £6 million to £20 million, we have not costed either the suggested amendment or the current Bill. I think that that cost was possibly produced by the DRD officers who looked at it. We are trying to get a default 20 mph speed limit in every community in Northern Ireland, whether in a village, town or city, and that is, I think, what the Bill intends to do as well. We are very much on the same wavelength as the Bill.

Ms Madden: Can I just chip in there? I think, John, that there may have been a misconception about how we have presented this, but certainly, our position paper says that we support the Bill.

Mr Dallat: Either I have misrepresented it or other people definitely will. I will tell you why, and this is a feather in your cap: Sustrans enjoys a high credibility rating because it is involved in saving lives by providing cycle paths and so on. Therefore, it shocks and amazes me that you have been doing the work of the Department in providing evidence for this.

Ms Madden: No, we are supportive of the Bill. Having listened to the debate at the previous stage, the main concern that Assembly Members seem to have is about the expense of implementing the 20 mph zones. What we are suggesting as an amendment is a default 20 mph limit in urban areas, so that the only signage costs that you have to worry about would affect the significantly fewer 30 mph signs. Effectively, you would have 20 mph as the standard speed limit on the vast majority of our residential streets, which, we contend, would include shopping areas as well. However, that would come following the consultation process, which would have the compliance and acceptance of the majority of people. Where communities wanted to opt out, they could.

We are very much in favour of the Bill: we were just trying to improve it so that it would be easier to implement. Given the current budget constraints in DRD, as we heard earlier, this would be a way of making it happen, because we are very conscious that the issue of money keeps being thrown in.

John, I really resent the notion that Sustrans is at about putting money before people's lives. That is certainly not what we are about and is certainly not what Steven was saying either.

Mr Patterson: For clarity, John, we support the Bill, and the amendment is about how it could be rolled out at less cost and possibly more quickly. We anticipate that our approach would cover exactly the same number of streets as Mr Ramsey's Bill. Mr Ramsey's Bill intends to do it over two years, and we fully support that time implementation.

Mr Dallat: Well, I am sorry if anybody resents anything that I say here, but your presentation seemed to put a lot of emphasis on money. I merely asked the question: I did not make the statement.

Ms Madden: No, I understand.

Mr Dallat: I want to make your presence here today as helpful as possible. While I take it all with a pinch of salt, I know that some of the things said will be used in a robust debate in future to nobble the Bill.

Mr Lyttle: The reality is that we have to consider where to find the funds to do things as a Government, although that seems to have been lost on people at a number of levels. Setting that aside, I thank you for your presentation, which was extremely useful. Sustrans has a leading role in advancing road safety and active travel in Northern Ireland, and I am very grateful for the work you do.

Turning to how this proposed roll-out would differ from that proposed in the Bill, can you provide the Committee with any idea of how, for example, a 20 mph default speed limit in urban areas could be signified or communicated without a £20 million cost for signage and things like that? Are there any points of reference for how that could be done or has been done elsewhere?

Mr Patterson: I do not think it has been done anywhere in the UK on this scale. There is the technical issue of signage, and that would still require a significant investment, but not nearly as high, we feel, as that for the other approach. We believe that community consultation, promotion of the initiative and advertising, along the lines of mandatory seat belts or the smoking ban when they first came in, are absolutely crucial to bring the public along with us in a Northern Ireland Bill. This is not in any way an anti-car, anti-motorist measure. I would suggest that, of the 60% of people in Edinburgh in favour of this, a lot were drivers. Consultation must be at town level as well, because local people, local roads engineers, local communities, local schools and local councillors know their roads, and that is an important element as well.

On the funding, we think, along with Dr Mitchell, that there are significant benefits to Northern Ireland in general, and it could be that other bodies such as the Public Health Agency (PHA), which is involved with Belfast City Council, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and DRD in, for example, the One Plan in Londonderry or the Belfast active travel action plan — apologies for mentioning Belfast again, but the reality is that sometimes these things start in Belfast and roll out — might lend assistance. There are clear examples of the PHA putting money into behavioural change initiatives and the promotion of lifestyle changes. The reality is that there could be a cross-departmental approach to finding more funds, as well. Also, the resources for the community consultation would have to be found, and the skills set to carry that out would be very important as well.

Mr Lyttle: To come back on that, you would require the Executive to make this an Executive priority, if you were going to share funding across Departments. Do you think it is of adequate priority to be looked at in a Programme for Government commitment, for example?

Ms Madden: It should be in the Programme for Government, given the really glaring statistics that the Institute of Public Health has just outlined on road traffic deaths. We note in our report that seven pedestrians were killed on the roads in 2013, according to the latest statistics. There were seven deaths yesterday in that tragic incident in California, just like that; but there seems to be an acceptable level of road fatalities in Northern Ireland, and while there is an occasional outburst of consternation, we just roll on into another year of statistics. I always feel for the families reading reports in the paper that their loved one is another victim to be added to the toll for that year. For that reason, I think it should be a high priority.

We should also look at the wider, holistic aspects, as Rod King argued. There are so many other benefits associated with a 20 mph limit, such as getting people more active and ensuring that elderly and vulnerable people and children feel comfortable to use our streets. Without wanting to seem nostalgic, we have lost the heart of most of our towns and cities because we have given so much priority to cars. I drive a car, but the predominance of the car over the person using our streets is something that the Committee needs to tackle. It needs to tackle that through the Executive.

Mr Lyttle: Do you think that Minister Kennedy will be able to deliver the cycling revolution that he said he aims to deliver without significantly increasing the provision of 20 mph streets?

Mr Patterson: As we said, there is a range of measures, including segregated cycle lanes on the main arterial roads of all our towns and cities. We think that 20 mph in residential streets is a good backbone and core default position, in addition to other infrastructure that will contribute.

Mr Lyttle: I want to note that Sustrans does excellent work in rural communities with various greenway projects. I want to make sure that I stand up for our rural neighbours in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Maybe I was a wee bit off, but it just seems that it is Belfast, Belfast, Belfast. I have met Anne and Steven a couple of times, and I value the work that they are doing, but there is life outside Belfast, Chris, and many of us enjoy it on a daily basis.

Mr Lyttle: I am being serious to a certain extent as well. I totally acknowledge that. Genuinely, Sustrans is doing a lot of rural work as well.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): It was in Antrim, and you were there that day.

Mr Lyttle: Yes, absolutely.

Mr Patterson: We have just selected the schools for the third year of the programme, and they range from schools in Castlederg to Newtownbutler, to Larne and the north coast and the south. We have a regional presence. On the Belfast point, we assumed that the two business organisations had objected to the pilot scheme in the urban area of Belfast. That is why we raised the issue of Belfast.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): I certainly did not mean to be rude to Anne. Like Chris, I value your work. If it had not been for Sustrans, I probably would not have purchased my bicycle. I was inspired by some of the work that you are doing. It gets under my skin a wee bit when there are presentations and the only examples that we can pick are those in Belfast.

Mr Patterson: One of the reasons why we support Mr Ramsey's Bill is that it is Northern Ireland-wide and affects every street, within the definition of it having street lighting, in villages, towns and cities. As we have one transport authority that covers the whole country of Northern Ireland, we can have a real chance to make an impact across the region with a Bill like this.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): We have. Going back to John's point, in your presentation and the wording of your amendment, you have asked for meaningful consultation. I do not think that Pat's Bill will allow for consultation. It will mean a blanket approach to Northern Ireland, and that is it.

I would probably support your amendment more than the basis of the entire Bill, given the way that it has been scripted. I support a consultation process, because it is the communities in those residential areas that have to adapt. Your amendment means more than the entire blanket approach, provided there is meaningful consultation.

Mr Ó hOisín: Before we get too gushing about the urban/rural divide, I have to say that I have to put my bike and those of my family onto the rack of the car to drive somewhere safe to cycle. That is the reality.

Like the Chair, I feel that nobody is against the Bill per se. It is perhaps the way that it is drafted. Perhaps you have given us the opportunity to get ourselves out of this.

What I think that you are saying Steven — you will maybe confirm it — is that we are putting in place a default position, which, in theory, costs nothing. That is the starting point. Although, when we add in all the public information and all the rest of it, we will see the cost. There will also be the signage and whatever else. In theory, you are starting with a zero costing. Is that the case?

Mr Patterson: I would not say zero. There would be a lot less. There would still be changes for the signage for 20 mph and the revenue costs of the promotion literature, but we think that it is a dramatically lower-cost solution. I emphasise that it has to be costed.

Mr Ó hOisín: That is the work that needs to be completed, and I certainly think that we need to see that work done. We have a huge range of costings. I think that it was at £27 million or £28 million at one point. That is critical to it. Your amendment has given a breath of life to the potential of this becoming a reality. Certainly as is, the pigeon can fly at the minute.

Ms Madden: I think that you could look at the way in which it has been done in other cities in the UK. We have given the example of what Edinburgh has done on costing and how the default 20 mph limit has been brought in there. Rather than having to start from scratch, we have examples from elsewhere in the UK.

The Chairperson (Mr Clarke): Thank you, Anne and Steven.