



NILGA views on the proposed Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill

NILGA, the Northern Ireland Local Government Association, is the representative body for district councils in Northern Ireland. NILGA represents and promotes the interests of local authorities and is supported by the political parties and independent councillors through membership.

Local councils have been operationally and strategically investing in improving road safety for local communities through their participation and commitment within Policing and Community Safety Partnerships. So much so that Belfast City Council (for example) piloted 20mph speed zones which have been broadly well received. Through this work local government is only too aware of the broad implications of traffic and speed within residential areas, which include amongst others; road safety, members of communities occupying public areas, and air quality.

The services and powers available within local government have now been augmented with community planning, development planning and management, enhanced economic development responsibilities, the power of general competence and soon, by regeneration and enhanced community development responsibilities. These vital strategic additions are transforming councils' ability to improve the lives and experience of their local people, businesses and visitors to their areas, and the quality of the areas as a whole. In particular, community planning powers, if fully optimised will bring collective identification of need and priorities at a local level which will be informed by communities themselves. As a result structures and service provision can be set up to suit the requirements of local people, communities and economies. Such locally-led, customer led structures are well placed to determine appropriate response and measures at a local level.

The stated main objective of the Bill is to reduce the number of accidents and fatalities on the roads and create a safer environment in this region. Local government supports this principle and commends the intent of the Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill in addressing what are too often tragic impacts of traffic and speed. However, the Association has reservations about the measure that is being proposed to deliver these laudable objectives.

The proposed Bill would introduce powers to allow the imposition of blanket 20mph speed limits on residential roads in Northern Ireland. Residential roads are defined generally as those with street lights no more than 185 meters apart, residential areas and those which do not form part of a major thoroughfare. This has been chosen in preference to a zonal approach which local government in Northern Ireland has effectively trialled. Such zonal approaches are common place in England and parts of Scotland where it is evident that they are working well.

NILGA is not fully convinced about the rationale for selecting the blanket approach option which is considered to provide a more substantive and holistic approach to the problems identified. A 'zonal' approach has been ruled out purely on the basis that it is not considered to represent the spirit of holistic change sought. The Association is concerned that imposing 20mph speed limits on all restricted and unclassified roads has the potential to be costly and legislatively bureaucratic due to signage and exemptions that will need to be determined via a Departmental order-making power. It is indicated that this approach was deemed to be the most comprehensive, and a delayed commencement date has been incorporated to facilitate a public awareness campaign to ensure driver awareness of the change in legislation. The Association questions the practicalities and necessity of the proposed measures and requires further evidence to determine their appropriateness, believing that the public awareness campaign should, amongst other stakeholders, be fully communicated to Councils who as above mentioned are dealing with Community Planning and further interdependent powers / services.

In summary, NILGA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the matter, but considers it very expedient to further communicate with Councils as part of the policy and street level appreciation of all of the impacts of the proposals, after which the Association would be content to collate views and offer further comment.

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