

# Local Transport Today interview with 20's Plenty for Us founder

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[www.20splentyforus.org.uk/Briefings/LTT\\_RodKing.pdf](http://www.20splentyforus.org.uk/Briefings/LTT_RodKing.pdf)

Andrew Forster, editor of the UK's Local Transport Today magazine, interviewed 20's Plenty for Us founder, Rod King MBE. We reprint their article in its entirety.

## King anticipates the day when 20mph limits rule Britain's streets

Many of Britain's towns and cities are implementing area-wide 20mph limits in an effort to cut road accidents and make streets more pleasant for walking and cycling. Rod King, campaign director of pressure group 20's Plenty for Us, tells Andrew Forster about the new push to make 20mph the default speed limit on urban roads by 2020.

**B**righton, Bristol, Cambridge, the City of London, Coventry, Edinburgh, Lancashire, Liverpool, Newcastle, Nottingham, Oxford, Portsmouth, Warrington, York... they are just some of the places listed on the back of Rod King's business card – towns and cities where area-wide 20mph speed limits are being implemented. And the founder of pressure group 20's Plenty for Us will soon need a bigger set of cards as the number of places adopting area-wide 20mph limits grows ever longer. "Thirteen-and-a-half million people live in local authorities where they either have rolled out 20mph for all residential streets or they are part the way through," says King.

At the group's conference in Cambridge last month, King announced a new campaign objective: to make 20mph the default speed limit for restricted roads – streetlit roads on which the default is currently 30mph – across the UK by 2020. Choosing 2020 as the target date is a smart bit of thinking, and, given the campaign's success so far, who's to say the group won't actually pull it off?

20's Plenty is not having everything its own way, however. A number of authorities have ruled out area-wide signed-only 20mph limits, the low cost method that other authorities are typically using to expand coverage (20mph zones have traditionally required physical traffic calming, though this has now been relaxed). Wiltshire says trials in the county showed no evidence that signed-only 20mph limits reduced collisions or casualties and it suggests the lower limits could "lead to a general disregard for speed limits". Leicestershire says the evidence that signed-only 20mph limits deliver benefits is "mixed". In Bristol, the city's Labour and Tory groups have criticised the mayor's roll-out of signed-only 20mph limits, Labour saying the lower limits are ineffectual and don't have community backing. Meanwhile, in London there's a bit of a split emerging between inner London boroughs who are generally (but not universally) in favour of area-wide 20mph

limits, and outer London boroughs, who seem less enthusiastic.

### *From nought to plenty*

20's Plenty is approaching its eighth birthday, having been set up in 2007. 20mph speed limits, however, date back much further. Britain's first schemes were 20mph zones and the very first was installed in Sheffield in the early 1990s.

King grew up in Bath, graduated with a degree in automotive engineering, and spent seven years designing trucks for the Ford Motor Company, before moving into IT. Nowadays he lives in Lymm, Warrington, and it was there that he became involved in cycle campaigning. The origins of 20's Plenty come from a cycling trip he made to Warrington's twin town of Hilden, in Germany, in 2004.

"I knew about 23% of in-town trips were by bicycle in Hilden so I thought it would be interesting to see what sort of cycle facilities they had. At the time Warrington was starting to put some cyclist facilities in that were proving very expensive. I was expecting very good facilities but what really shocked me when I got there was they had virtually no facilities for cyclists – a few lines painted on the odd bit of pavement but that was it. They proudly said that in the early 1990s they decided that the best way to encourage cycling was to reduce the differential speed between motor vehicles and cyclists, and that's why they put in a 30km/h [18.5mph] speed limit through almost all of the town.

"It suddenly made sense to me that, rather than trying to build very expensive schemes that protect cyclists and pedestrians within a 30mph environment, we should change to a 20mph environment. Then we would need much less provision [for cyclists], and it would be much more cost-effective."

King quickly immersed himself in the legislation and policy for 20mph zones and 20mph limits. A crucial change occurred in

## 20's Plenty for Us

...making your place a better place to be



**Look, no horns: Rod King says critics of 20's Plenty make a mistake by portraying the group as anti-driver**

2006, he says, when the DfT's revised speed limit circular, Setting local speed limits, advised councils to set speed limits on the basis of mean speeds, rather than 85th percentile speeds (the speed at or below which 85% of traffic is travelling). In addition, it said a 20mph limit was appropriate if a road's mean speed was 24mph or below. "Suddenly, many more streets that may have been outside the guidance to have 20mph without physical calming, became within guidance," says King.

*"This isn't Rod King hypnotising local authorities to implement 20mph limits, this is local authorities looking at the evidence, looking at what they want for their communities and making those decisions"*

People were increasingly turning to him for advice on the rules. "Although many organisations were interested in 20mph limits, such as the CTC and Living Streets, none really focused on it, none were providing hard

information about what the guidance was, what it meant, how it could be done, and so I set up 20's Plenty for Us in November 2007, to assist communities who wanted to find out more."

King wanted a catchy name that reflected the group's community-based roots. "One of the things I wanted when I set it up was something that implies community and ownership – it's not about 20's Plenty for me, it's about 20's Plenty for us and we translate that into local campaigns – 20's Plenty for Bristol, 20's Plenty for Aylesbury, or wherever."

Today there are more than 250 local groups and the campaign even has the royal seal of approval – King was awarded an MBE for services to road safety in 2013.

King runs the campaign on a voluntary basis – alongside managing a small IT firm, and running three children's nurseries with his wife. He reckons he puts in about 1,000 hours a year into 20's Plenty activities. The group employs two part-time staff: campaigns manager Anna Semlyen, who is a Labour councillor in York and author of *Cutting your car use: save money, be healthy, be green*; and Jeremy Leach, the group's London campaign co-ordinator.

20's Plenty is a 'not for profit' organisation (an application for charity status was rebuffed a few years ago, though King plans to apply again). The group runs on a small budget. "If you were to offer me £100,000 to run the campaign I'd be absolutely delighted," he says. "That's probably about double what we're operating on." Much of its income comes from voluntary individual contributions – people donating perhaps £10 a month. "We've had a couple of grants recently of £5,000," he adds. Its only corporate funder is the Environmental Transport Association.

The campaign's success isn't down to the "few tens of thousands we get in funding each year", he says, but, rather, the "hours and the dedication of volunteers around the country in 250 campaigns". "If you want the community to change its behaviour what better place to start than within the community? That's what those opposing us find so difficult – they expect campaigns to be doing it for their own ends. We're not like that at all – we're actually saying do this because we're a community. That's why councillors take this on board."

King is unfazed by the occasional setback when a council rules out area-wide 20mph limits; he believes the momentum is firmly with those campaigning for lower limits. "The country is in transition, it's in transition from 30mph everywhere and 20mph in just a few places the reverse of that."

There is, he says, a big constituency of support for lower speed limits. "This is something that is great for children; it's something great for keeping independent mobility of the elderly, so they are active and fitter and not prematurely going into hospital or needing care; it's great for mothers who don't want to drive their children to school; it's something

that's going to help active travel."

The transfer of public health responsibilities from the NHS to local government in England in 2013 has been a "game changer" in advancing the 20mph argument, he believes. "Directors of public health have seen that bigger picture."

He rejects the anti-car tag that is often given to the campaign by critics such as the Alliance of British Drivers. "We're certainly not that at all – I drive, I'm happy to drive, and I have to say most of our campaigners just want a better place to be able to walk and cycle and drive. I think people make a big mistake when they label us as anti-motorist and so on because when people like yourself get in contact, or that councillor does have a meeting with us and so on, they say 'Well, there aren't any horns'. I'm not a rabid anti-driver. We're quite reasonable, we're just ordinary people."

### *A social programme*

For King, 20mph limits are about something more than just managing traffic. This becomes clear as I discuss the suitability of my own neighbourhood – a typical 1990s suburban housing estate – for 20mph limits. My own street is a winding cul-de-sac with poor forward visibility, so 20mph would feel right. But, although the local distributor road has residential frontages, it also has good forward visibility, few parked cars, and few pedestrians or cyclists, so it feels like a 30mph street; 20mph would be a crawl. Shouldn't the speed limit of a road reflect its appearance to the driver?

"Well no, no," King responds. "This is a social thing. Because what are you looking at, are you looking at the concrete? Are you looking at people? Are you looking at the fact that they are residential houses?"

I'm looking at the design of the road. "And is that the right thing to determine our speed? Or should we take into account that there's a school there, or that it's a residential street, should we take into account beyond what is the concrete? What the guidance says is you should take into account the perspective of all road users, not just motorists."

The campaign isn't dogmatic when it comes to 20mph limit coverage, he emphasises. "We don't advocate blanket 20mph speed limits. We have always said have a default 20 and then make considered decisions about the exceptions. They're for local people knowing local characteristics to identify. When people say, 'Oh, blanket 20mph limits' – nobody is putting in blanket 20mph limits, except for the City of London."

Critics of 20mph limits often take a narrow drivers' point of view, he says. "It's a mistake to think about this whole movement as traffic management, it's really about acting as a catalyst for a change in social consensus about how we share the roads. Those local authorities who are implementing 20mph limits are really saying, 'how do we put together our responsibilities towards both



**20mph limits are a "catalyst for changing the way we share the roads", says King**

movement of vehicles with our responsibilities for encouraging active travel, reducing emissions, making our city centres great places to walk, sit or cycle? How do we get rid of the situation whereby parents decide there's too much traffic on the road for their children to walk to school, so they have to drive them to school?"

### *Above party politics*

King rejects suggestions that the campaign is party-political. "People tell me this is a left wing thing, isn't it? I say no, it's not about the colour of democracy, it's about the quality of democracy and it's how much empathy you have with the eight-year-old standing at the edge of the pavement, wanting to walk to school when there are 30-tonne trucks going past.

"It's been done by the Lib Dems in Portsmouth; it was being done by the Conservatives in Lancashire; in Warrington it was done by a Lib Dem/Conservative coalition with the support of Labour when they took over. It's been done by the City of London; it's been done by Brighton & Hove with its Green administration.

"We're confident that the more we talk about this rationally with local authorities, then the more they are actually deciding that 20 is plenty for most of their roads. This isn't Rod King hypnotising local authorities to implement 20mph limits, this is local authorities looking at the evidence, looking at what they want for their communities, and making those decisions. When local authorities have done pilots of 20mph, every one has actually come back with a decision of yes, this should be approved, this should go wider."

The campaign has gained particular traction in urban authorities. "The councils who are taking this up the most tend to be the unitary authorities [and metropolitan districts], the ones where there are a high number of councillors living within the urban environment. They get the issues; we have a little bit of a difference in places like Wiltshire or [other] shire counties where perhaps there isn't that same empathy with the urbanite." Last year there was a backlash against

proposals for 20mph limits in Worthing, West Sussex. A rival local campaign group, 20's Pointless, was set up, and the proposals were ultimately abandoned (LTT 28 Nov 14). King doesn't think this episode has any wider relevance. "Worthing was a very particular set of circumstances, which was highly political, which was quite abnormal and had some particular commercial interests involved as well, which was completely atypical."

Putting to one side the ideological objections, more practical questions have been raised about 20mph limits, such as do they deliver tangible benefits? The DfT has appointed consultants Atkins, AECOM and professor Mike Maher to examine the evidence, but they are not due to report until 2017 (LTT 13 Jun 14). King welcomes the study. "The DfT, every year, has made [implementation of] 20mph limits easier – 2006, 2009 revised guidance, 2011 they changed the signage requirements, 2013 they changed the guidance. They believe in it; what was missing was that national analysis."

It is often said that signed-only 20mph limits have only a limited impact on traffic speeds – reductions of 1 or 2mph in mean speeds being cited. King says the reality is a bit more complex: where 20mph limits are implemented on an area-wide basis, many of those streets already have low speeds. "Many of the roads where you get a minor change dilute the effects on the faster routes. So you include many roads where the speed is already low and there won't be a change. And then what happens is on the roads where you have a higher prevailing speed then you get a bigger change in speed." He says reductions of 6 or 7mph are sometimes found on these faster roads.

It will be interesting to see what the DfT research concludes on this point: at last month's conference in Cambridge, Calderdale cited a maximum reduction of 6mph, but Cambridge City Council says the biggest reduction it has found is 3mph. The City of Edinburgh Council's 20mph pilot recorded an average drop of 3.3mph at the 12 locations where the mean speed prior to introduction of the lower limit was above 24mph (85th percentile speeds fell 3.9 mph to 26mph).

What about the accident and casualty impacts of signed-only 20mph limits? "We have got good examples of where there have been reductions in casualties – in Brighton, in Lancashire, in Warrington," says King. "There was a reduction from nine to six in deaths from 2012 to 2013 on 20mph roads," he adds, pointing out that the coverage of 20mph limits increased at the same time.

"One of the key arguments that is laid against 20mph is that it's only 5% or 10% of crashes that are caused by speeding. But speeding is defined as exceeding the speed limit; speed is almost universally implicated as to why participants [in an accident] haven't been able to avoid turning an incident into a crash. That's where lower speed limits have the effect, in terms of giving everybody that time to take

avoiding action."

Promoters of 20mph limits also say the lower limits should make it more attractive to walk and cycle. "Edinburgh found there was a tripling of teenagers cycling to school in its south Edinburgh pilot – look it up on our press releases," says King. Overall, however, the evidence to support this view seems limited. The DfT said in January 2013 there was "no conclusive evidence that speed limit changes in isolation from other measures have an impact on walking and cycling". The oft-cited evidence of increased walking and cycling following Bristol's introduction of 20mph limits was criticised for basic arithmetical errors, amongst other things, in a report by Malcolm Heymer, the Alliance of British Drivers' traffic management adviser, last February (LTT 21 Feb 14).

### **Compliance, and enforcement**

Conversations about 20mph limits often quickly get round to whether the police will enforce the limits. King, however, thinks enforcement needs to be seen within a bigger picture. "I like to talk about compliance, not enforcement. We say to our local groups, 'don't become bothered about enforcement, focus on compliance'. Within a local authority many people will be involved in compliance – the traffic people will want compliance, public health will want compliance, the schools will want it; doctors will want it; the ambulance service will want it because it can reduce casualties."

*"The police have probably been slow to adopt every social innovation there has been. You expect the police to be behind the social curve, they catch up eventually and I don't think it's any different with 20mph limits, it's something new."*

He says best practice is to spend at least 10-20% of the budget for signed-only 20mph limits on community engagement, to increase compliance.

"You go right the way round the room and say [to each stakeholder] what can you do to aid compliance? 'Well, we'll put some notices up in our [doctors'] surgery, we'll do some community involvement campaigns, we'll get talking in schools about it'. And when you get round to the police they say, 'Well, we can do a bit of enforcement'."

"What the police don't want is a situation where a local authority says 'blanket 20mph speed limits everywhere, we've put them all in, what are you going to do about it police force?' Nobody's doing that."

If an authority did just put up 20mph signs and said, 'that's our job done, it's now for the police to enforce the limit,' would that be wrong? "We say that's an approach, but that may not be the best way to gain compliance. Again, however, we don't tend to be

dogmatic. Our role isn't to say 'you've got to do this, this, this and this'. Our role is to say 'you can do this, this and this'."

King thinks the widespread perception that the police take a different attitude to enforcing 20mph from other speed limits is a little unfair. "I have people saying 'the police don't enforce 20mph limits in my town' – but they don't enforce 30mph either. That's not an issue about 20mph limits, that's an issue about police enforcement."

The police have, however, been slow to embrace 20mph enforcement, he says, though he sees this as typical of new laws generally. "It wouldn't necessarily be a good thing for the police to respond immediately to every change in social consensus. If you look back at history, the police have probably been slow to adopt every social innovation there has been. You expect the police to be behind the social curve, they catch up eventually and I don't think it's any different with 20mph limits, it's something new."

Enforcement is already happening in some places. "In the City of London they're doing it full-blown because the City of London has its own police force," says King. The London Borough of Islington expects the Metropolitan Police to enforce the borough's 20mph limits twice a month (LTT 06 Feb). Merseyside Police recently tweeted that they had stopped 111 drivers in a recent 20mph enforcement operation and issued 28 speeding tickets. King says Merseyside Police has also taken a more non-conventional approach to promoting the 20mph message: "In some places [on Merseyside] if you're found speeding in front of a school, you're taken into the school and you sit in front of a jury of children and they interrogate you as to why you were driving in excess of the 20mph limit outside their school."

So far, the enforcement is being conducted with hand-held radar guns. Speed camera manufacturers are promoting average speed camera systems but use of the technology has yet to take off (LTT is aware of only two such systems: on Southend's seafront and on Tower Bridge in London).

Does King worry that increased enforcement could create a backlash against 20mph limits? "I must admit I haven't seen that as a danger. If you ask me, is there a danger with your campaign Rod that suddenly you'll have a policeman on every corner and people being put off by this, that's not a risk which I'm worried about. I don't think I need to worry about the backlash of having cameras on every corner."

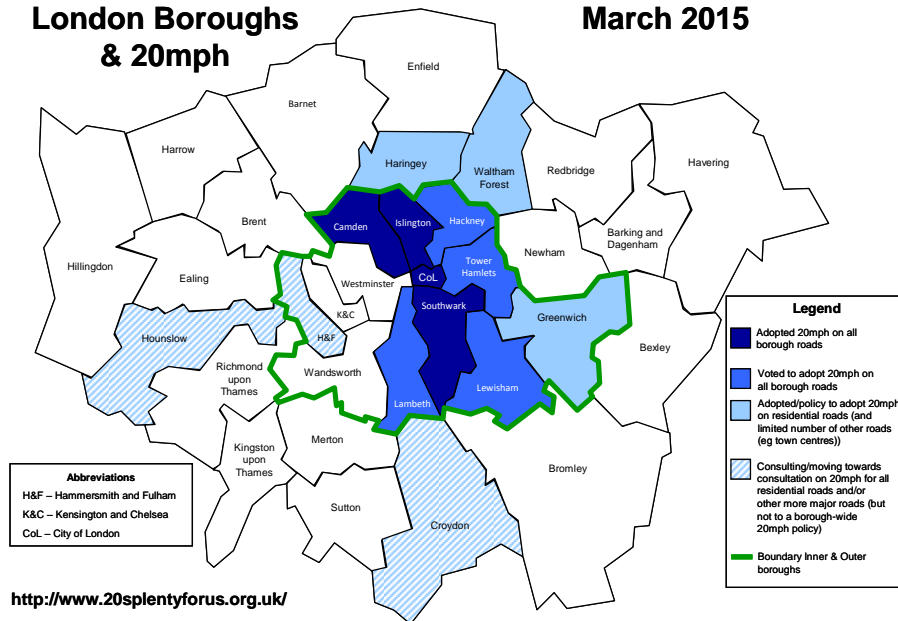
### **Towards journey's end**

A recent briefing paper produced by 20's Plenty includes a map of London's boroughs: those that have delivered or plan to implement area-wide 20mph limits are shaded blue, the others white (see above). Currently, the blue is concentrated more in central and inner London; does King envisage



## London Boroughs & 20mph

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### King predicts that all London boroughs will implement area-wide 20mph limits within the next five years

this inner/outer split enduring, or does he think the whole of London will eventually turn blue? “I think you’ll find over the next five years they’ll all be the same colour,” he says confidently.

He sees three phases to the expansion of 20mph limits. In phase one, which is what we’re currently in, local authorities roll-out further area-wide 20mph limits. As more and more do so, the pressure will grow on the Government to instigate the next phase.

“We cannot continue on the basis that for every additional town that’s putting in 20mph limits for most of its streets, we put in 20mph signs everywhere. Somewhere along the line the Government will actually have to say: ‘No, we’ve got to have an alternative arrangement that says we don’t need a 20mph repeater sign every 100 metres to remind people that within an urban environment the normal speed limit is 20mph.’”

King explained what he wanted the Government to do in an upbeat closing speech to last month’s 20’s Plenty conference. “In 2015/16 we want the DfT [and devolved administrations] to allow traffic authorities,

on application, to vary local signage requirements so that the only signage required are 20mph signs on entering the authority or community; boundary signs where limit changes from 30 to 20; and repeater signs only on 30mph roads and above.”

“That would make a huge difference to the cost of rolling out 20mph limits,” he tells me. “If you’re a 20mph city you can actually inform people, on the entry to that city, that it’s 20mph unless there’s a repeater sign saying otherwise.” The change wouldn’t require legislation, he adds.

King told the conference that the DfT and devolved administrations should also, later this year, signal the third and final phase to the 20mph programme: that the national restricted road speed limit will become 20mph on 1 January 2020. He said a final decision to proceed should be made after the Atkins/AECOM/Maher research reports in 2017.

King’s proposals place a renewed focus on ministers, and not just councils, to act on 20mph limits. “It’s like anything associated

with social change – you will get some leaders in terms of local authorities who decide to move first – Oxford, Cambridge, Portsmouth, Warrington – and you will get those who come on board later once they can see it’s working – Manchester, Birmingham, Edinburgh. And I’m sure we will have some who won’t do it until someone in central government says you’ve got to do it. That’s how change happens.”

Significantly, with the power for setting speed limits already devolved to Scotland and Northern Ireland, and promised to Wales, 20’s Plenty has four opportunities to secure the change it seeks. It’s easy to envisage a domino effect if one government takes the lead. “Scotland has the ability to set its own speed limits, so if it wants to say the national speed limit for restricted roads is 20mph then it can do so,” says King. “I have to say, if that is wanted by Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee, it will happen.” In Northern Ireland, an assembly member has introduced a Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill to the Assembly, advocating making 20mph the default limit on restricted unclassified roads. The Bill has passed its second reading and is moving into committee stage.

King accepts that the campaign will continue to attract criticism, but he doesn’t think opponents have an attractive message – or the necessary connections to policy-makers. “Of course there will be those who ‘say no,’” he says. “Indeed, the more libertarian lobbyists on transport seem to say ‘no’ to everything. But these do not represent some ‘tip of the iceberg’ motoring consensus, merely the ideological focus of groups who would rather ‘shout no’ from the sidelines than engage with those who are in a position of responsibility for the way we manage and use our streets and who represent their communities.”

If King can persuade governments to change the default limit to 20mph, then it will be job done. “We’re working on our own demise,” he says. “What would please me most of all is if you visit our website in a year or two years time and there is a message saying: ‘20’s Plenty was here, thank you for all your support.’” **LTI**

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20’s Plenty For Us campaigns for a 20mph default speed limit in built up areas without physical calming.

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