

THE GOVERNMENT'S SPEED REVIEW:

AA VIEWS

The wrong speed on the wrong road kills around 1000 people a year. We need to manage speed better. The key lies in defining the right speed limit for each stretch of road. There must be a system that people understand and “buy into” because they know it reduces death and injury. The clear safety message with universal appeal must not be diluted, particularly by introducing arguments about emissions that are not well understood and accepted.

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Summary of AA Views

- * Road hierarchies should be more clearly defined, and linked to how a road is used – as a through route, a local distributor, a residential road, and so on.
- * All speed limits should be reviewed in a formal programme with a timetable and budget. Getting the right speed on the right road is the single most pressing road safety issue – the benefits of a review are more than proportionate to the costs.
- * Speed limits should be reconciled to the character of the road (and vice versa).
- * Where the character of the road and the limits must be at odds, there must be an explanation of why the limit is what it is (eg “deceptive bends”).
- * The link between the 30mph limit and streetlights should end - it is not understood.
- * Repeater signs should always be permitted.
- * The “derestricted” sign should go and be replaced with the speed limit in force.
- * The national maximum speed limits should be retained at their present levels.
- * The enforcement practice on motorways must not change without a further review of the speed limit.
- * Cameras must not be deployed so that the enforcement of speed limits is perceived to be for revenue raising rather than casualty reduction.
- * Where the hierarchy permits, lower speed limits can reduce casualties and improve the quality of life – but 20mph limits must be self-enforcing through investment in the streetscape.
- * Authorities must implement speed limits that respect the integrity required of a national system. If they set speed limits too low and ignore police objections, they undermine motorists' acceptance.
- * Formal quality assurance processes, including audit, should be applied to all speed limits.
- * Innovative approaches to speed limit signing, variable speed limits, and helping the driver adopt the right speed for the road should be researched and developed.

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Introduction

The AA represents people who are responsible motorists and for more than 90 years road safety has been at the heart of AA policy.

Few people in the UK do not have a view about speed. Many feel that vehicles travel too fast, particularly past their homes and the places they use for their leisure. Others feel that many of the speed restrictions applied to our roads are unrealistic and unnecessary. Some quite openly fall into both camps.

AA views are based on extensive research, most particularly the AA Foundation for Road Safety Research report *What limits speed? Factors that affect how fast we drive*. Publication of an interim report was brought forward to July 1999 to assist the government's speed review. In its research the AA looks at the views of people who drive, not people as drivers. In addition, the views of people who write, e-mail or telephone us are taken into account.

The single most important point the AA makes is that any changes to the way speed is handled have to win the support of the driver. There is every likelihood that measures that drivers can understand, and that they consider are reasonable, will be respected. Changes must be communicated carefully: many people still need to be convinced that the present arrangements are reasonable.

THE AA VIEWS

The key to improving compliance with speed limits, and in making drivers travel at appropriate speeds, lies in defining the right speed limit for each stretch of road. There must be a system that people understand and "buy into" because they know it reduces death and injury.

The public considers breaking the speed limit to be an offence of equal severity to failure to pay the TV licence. There are strong suggestions that much of this is because of the inconsistencies in the speed limit system and the fact that the reason behind it, and sometimes the limit itself, is little understood by the average driver.

The main outcome from the speed review should be to raise drivers' understanding and respect for the system. This is much better done by changing and clarifying the system than by bludgeoning the driver into compliance through heavy enforcement efforts that may not meet with public approval or improve safety.

There is every likelihood that a driver will comply with a system he or she understands. There is also every chance that social norms will change when this is the case. Employers, friends and acquaintances will not consider drivers with convictions to be unlucky, and societal pressure will bear on drivers to conform.

There is a real risk, however, that there may be substantial opposition to the blanket application of measures that do not seem reasonable to sections of the general public.

Highway authorities should define road hierarchies linked to the use to which a road is put. The speed limit should be appropriate to its purpose.

Different roads have different uses. Some are used solely for access to and from houses. Some carry these residents towards major roads in and out of town. Some link towns or are trade routes. Authorities should define a speed limit on every road, taking full account of the role each plays in this hierarchy.

All speed limits should be reviewed in a formal programme with a timetable and budget. Getting the right speed on the right road is the single most pressing road safety issue – the benefits of a review are more than proportionate to the costs.

Formal quality assurance processes, including audit, should be applied to all speed limits. This will ensure that the right limit is applied to the right road, is appropriately signed, and is placed on a database.

The AA Foundation for Road Safety Research report *What limits speed? Factors that affect how fast we drive* clearly shows that drivers do not understand current speed limits, and often cannot see their purpose. This can only be resolved by reviewing the level and extent of all the UK's speed limits to introduce greater uniformity in the relationship between speed limits and the character of the road. This review should cover **all** roads and incorporate the use of formal quality assurance procedures.

Central government must set a timetable for such a review, and be prepared to make a substantial budget available for signing the new limit. All the indications are that the casualty savings that will accrue from this investment will be significant.

Speed limits should be reconciled to the character of the road (and vice versa).

At sites where the character of the road and the speed limit are at odds, there must be explanation as to why the limit is there.

In the AA Foundation study, drivers made particular mention of the fact that many roads with apparently identical characteristics have different speed limits. This leads to drivers setting their own “realistic” limits. Countering the impression that speed limits are not set on a consistent basis is crucial to improving compliance. Speed limits must match the character of the road to which they are applied, and every attempt should be made to match the limit to the character of the road or vice versa.

That said, it has to be accepted that it will be impossible to achieve a match everywhere between the character of the road and the limit. Where this cannot be

achieved, signing should be introduced to explain why the speed limit has been imposed. Messages like “School”, “Village Centre”, “Deceptive Bends” or “High Accident Risk” will help drivers to understand why the limit is there and make them much more likely to comply with the limit.

The link between the 30mph limit and street lighting should end.

Repeater signs should always be permitted.

Drivers are puzzled by the link between street lighting and the 30mph limit, which is based on a pattern of development and street lighting that is more than 50 years old. The time has come to abandon the link, and to make the use of repeater signs in lit 30mph limits permissible. In many areas the character of the road will mean that there is no need for additional signing, but highway authorities should be free to use repeaters where compliance levels are low, or accident risks are high.

It is absurd that highway authorities use advertising hoardings and posters at the roadside to draw drivers’ attention to speed limits. There are also occasions where the siting of lamp standards well away from the road, and attempts to make the standards unobtrusive by day, combine to make it hard to discern the speed limit.

Increasing the density of repeater signing should be an automatic remedy applied to lengths of road where speed related accident rates are high or where speed limit compliance is low. This remedy should usually be applied before major enforcement initiatives like speed cameras are introduced.

The national speed limit sign should go and be replaced with the sign for the speed limit in force.

As part of the review of speed limits, signs showing the speed limit that applies to the road should replace the national speed limit sign.

The national maximum speed limits should be retained at their present levels.

The maximum limits permitted on motorways, dual carriageways and single carriageways should not be changed. The AA Foundation study shows that the majority of people feel that the current maximum limits are about right. That said, 36% feel that the motorway limit is too low.

The enforcement practice on motorways must not change without a further review of the speed limit.

The AA has considered the case for raising the speed limit to 75 mph on full motorways; there are real arguments for this. There should certainly be no change in the pattern of enforcement on motorways without a further review of the limit.

More than one-third of the driving public (36%) believes that the motorway speed limit is too low. This fact, coupled with the need to gain the motorist’s acceptance of the need for lower speeds elsewhere, leads the AA to believe that any moves to

tighten the motorway speed limit or to strengthen its enforcement will be counter productive. The AA Foundation report shows that many who believe the limit is too low do not want it raised for fear of disturbing custom and practice.

Changes to speed policies for environmental reasons should not be introduced.

Acceptance of speed limits will be won only by raising public understanding of the consequences of speed in terms of death and injury. Most drivers do not understand the environmental arguments, and making changes will only dilute the road safety message.

Where the hierarchy permits, lower speed limits can reduce casualties and improve the quality of life – but 20mph limits must be self-enforcing through investment in the streetscape.

63 per cent of people who drive believe that 20mph zones have the potential to be effective in increasing road safety. Research shows that 20mph limits are only marginally effective when not accompanied by engineering schemes that make it difficult, if not impossible, to exceed the speed limit. Accordingly the main aim should be to introduce self-enforcing 20mph limits in high-risk areas where this can be done.

There are many residential roads around the country, especially in post 1980 housing estates, where road design precludes speeds of over 20mph. These should be allowed to have 20mph limits. It seems likely that most drivers would respect such a limit in the 300 to 400 yards from their home to a through route. There may be scope for “pump priming” this concept by applying 20mph limits on such a basis in modern housing areas.

Some authorities fail to implement speed limits which respect the integrity required of a national system. They set speed limits too low, ignore police objections, and undermine motorists’ acceptance of all limits.

This submission has stressed the need for the speed limit system to be understood and found reasonable by drivers, and the need for there to be uniformity in application. If this uniformity is not applied across the country it can diminish respect for all speed limits. Some local authorities do choose to set speed limits too low, ignoring guidelines, and police objections. There is a need for a process to exist, which can be used against authorities that undermine the integrity of the national system, placing their own interests above those of the whole.

Cameras must not be deployed so that the enforcement of speed limits is perceived to be for revenue raising rather than casualty reduction.

An AA survey suggests that 90 per cent of drivers find speed cameras an acceptable way of enforcing the law. This figure falls to 50 per cent at the suggestion that the police could be allowed to keep the revenue. Insensitive handling of this issue could seriously damage public support for speed initiatives.

Increasing fines significantly could reinforce the perception by many that speed enforcement is already influenced more by the desire to raise revenue than the need to promote safety, and could be counter-productive.

Innovative approaches to speed limit signing, variable speed limits, and helping the driver adopt the right speed for the road should be researched and developed.

Among areas that should be considered are:

Road user activated signs

There is scope for technological approaches including vehicle activated signs and, possibly, warning signs activated by vulnerable road users: signs along these lines are already used by school crossing patrols and farmers. Pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders could activate similar signs warning drivers of their presence and suggesting an appropriate speed.

Speed signing for safety

A balance has to be struck between the need for rural speed limits and the need to keep visually intrusive signs to a minimum. Zonal limits may be an answer to this problem, and experience with existing speed limit zones should be thoroughly researched.

There may also be scope for devising a series of symbols that can be painted on roads as an additional form of repeater sign, and that could be used on other pieces of street furniture – street name plates, bollards and other road signs.

Changes to the way speed limits are signed should be a priority area for government action.

Speed limiters and external speed control

Drivers like to remain in control. The AA finds it hard to support the introduction of limiters geared to the national maximum speed, particularly when accidents on the roads where this limit applies are not a major accident problem.

External speed control needs to be looked at in a pan-European context. The UK cannot act alone. The AA is involved in research in this area with its European sister organisations, and will be pleased to discuss the progress of this work.

Advisory systems, particularly those that tell drivers that they are exceeding the limit, must not be disregarded. If they stop speeding only by a significant minority of drivers, many others will be slowed by the presence of this minority. This approach will also allow drivers to remain in control, and ease the legal questions posed by external control. The government should continue to fund research in this technological arena.