The 73-year-old who started Britain’s 20mph revolution

A grassroots campaign that started in a terrace in Cheshire has achieved a big milestone with Wales’s new limit. It’s only a matter of time before the whole UK follows suit, says its founder

Nicholas Hellen and Isambard Wilkinson Saturday September 23 2023, 6.00pm, The Sunday Times

Rod King has never flung a pot of orange paint in protest, nor run for political office. But the retired IT consultant turned campaigner, who lives at the end of a quiet terrace in Warrington, Cheshire, is personally responsible for a revolution in British transport policy.

King, 73, is the founder of 20’s Plenty for Us, a grassroots campaign group working to bring the speed limit in built-up areas down to 20mph. There are 692 branches of the group around the UK, and they celebrated last week when Wales announced its national 20mph default.

The arc of history appears to be bending King’s way. After recent victories, he is convinced he will be able to “pack up” 20’s Plenty within his lifetime, having achieved its ultimate aim. “By 2025 you are going to look at the British Isles and you are going to say: Wales is 20mph, Scotland is 20mph, half of England is 20mph, all of Ireland is 20mph. This is a matter of time. It is inevitability.”
He has a point. Almost half — 61 out of 133 — highway authorities in England have adopted the limit in built-up areas, and more than half of London’s roads are 20mph. Scotland has committed to the same on “all appropriate roads” by 2025, while Ireland has declared its intention to follow with 30km/h (19mph) restrictions.

It is a profound change in a country where, since 1935, 30mph has been embedded in every streetscape and in the mind of every driver. The case for slower traffic rests on a simple argument: at 20mph, a vehicle’s stopping distance is half that at 30mph, and according to the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, the risk of a pedestrian being killed is five times lower.
A town near Düsseldorf

For King, it all began in 2004 when, at the age of 54, he decided to cycle from Warrington to its twin town, Hilden, in Germany. Located to the southeast of Düsseldorf, it had little to recommend it other than its reputation as a haven for cyclists.

When he arrived, he was fascinated to discover that it did not have a dense network of cycle lanes — but rather had, since 1991, enforced a 30km/h limit on the whole town. From that simple premise, the residents found benefits flowed: the roads were safer, more people cycled and walked and, as the proportion of motor vehicles reduced, air quality improved.

On his return to Britain, rather than channel his energies into campaigning for more cycle lanes in Warrington, King decided that a reduced speed limit would have a bigger impact. The cost would be minimal, because it involved setting up signs rather than building speed bumps and other expensive traffic-calming measures.
“I could really help people,” he says. “If a new campaign wanted a public meeting I’d go along, as far as Bodmin in Cornwall, and Kent, and I had room after room of people who were desperate to reduce the speed of cars and make their communities better places.”

First Portsmouth, then Oxford, the London borough of Islington and Warrington adopted the 20mph limit. King said he was never tempted to broaden the campaign’s goals beyond that one simple message. He has had minimal dealings with the Department for Transport, because local authorities can implement the limits themselves.

“[King’s] little group has achieved more than any other pressure group I can think of right now in Britain,” says Danny Dorling, Halford Mackinder professor of geography at Oxford. “He has done so with the reasonableness of his argument.”

Clearly, not everyone agrees. “People are getting frustrated because if you slow down to 20mph that is hardly moving in a modern day car,” says Paul Jackson, founder of the Miles Consultancy, which handles speeding fines on behalf of car fleet operators. “We are getting more and more restrictive even though cars are getting [safer].”

So far, none of the speed limits King has helped to introduce have been reversed, although opposition to the lower limit in Wales is staunch. By Friday, more than 373,000 people, greater than the population of Cardiff and about 15 per cent of the country’s adult population, had signed a petition against the policy. Lee Waters, the deputy climate change minister who has fronted it, is facing a vote of no confidence in the Senedd on Wednesday.

**Spanish spark**

The Welsh government has cited Spain as a key inspiration for its change. In May 2021, it became the first European country to introduce a default speed limit of 30km/h on single-lane streets in all cities. The Welsh even published a message of reassurance from Álvaro Gomez, the head of Spain’s National Road Safety Observatory and one of the key officials behind the change, in an effort to calm the debate.

Gomez recalls the same problems being raised in Spain before the policy came into force.

“They are in this phase of concern but they will see good results,” he said. “There are some fears beforehand about people taking longer to get to jobs or deliveries being slowed down. There are no big delays, there is no congestion. There is no increase of pollution. Everything becomes normal, and everything gets better.

Last year the number of pedestrians killed in Spanish cities was 14 per cent less than in pre-pandemic levels, with even fewer deaths among the elderly.

There was enthusiasm for the policy in Spain and, such was the keenness to embrace the new change, two cities claim the honour of having been the first to impose it — Zaragoza, where officials say they have had such measures since 2010, and Bilbao, which has had the limit in all of its central streets since 2018.

Sweden can boast a much earlier commitment: its parliament established a “vision zero” strategy in 1996 to eliminating road traffic deaths, that has led to thousands of kilometres of roads around the country, including much of Stockholm, implementing 30km/h.
Quiet consensus

The disputes that have flared up in Wales are mild compared with the febrile atmosphere that surrounded the introduction of the 30mph limit at the dawn of the era of mass car ownership.

A short-lived experiment to scrap speed limits in 1930 was abandoned when the inevitable happened and, in 1934, 7,343 road deaths and 261,603 injuries were recorded, with pedestrians accounting for half of the casualties. That year, Ramsay MacDonald’s government faced opposition for “pampering pedestrians” with a package of road safety measures which included the 30mph limit, the driving test, the Belisha beacon and a rewritten Highway Code.

Slow down

Road casualties resulting from exceeding speed limit or travelling too fast for conditions

Killed or seriously injured  Other casualties

Last year, there were 1,695 fatalities on the roads in Great Britain and 136,002 casualties.
How, then, has King steadily dismantled this consensus without, until now at least, provoking mass uproar? Patience is key. “You have to enable [volunteers] to have the will to keep on going and reach their objective which may take many years,” he says. Local volunteer groups are generally left to get on with their own campaigns, and King runs his operation on a shoestring budget of less than £40,000 a year.

There isn’t much indication that Whitehall is interested in implementing a national 20mph policy, but King has been undeterred. “It’s not vital. If there is no aspiration from the government, then you keep plugging away at local level.”

Police enforcement has been patchy. The level of enforcement at 20mph is less than a fifth of the rate on 50mph and 70mph roads.

In 2015, the national police chiefs issued a document which suggested they lacked the resources or will to enforce their way to compliance against public opinion. But enforcement is becoming much stricter in places: London is to increase its capacity to issue a million penalty notices for all categories of speeding next year.

Really, though, compliance has mostly depended on motorists changing their behaviour.

King says this works: “When you get to a threshold of 20mph adoption, then most people have visited their cousin or parents or brother or sister in another part of the country [in areas with the 20mph limit]. It changes the view of what is possible.”