

To: Transport & Health Policy Makers, & Practitioners
From: Prof Adrian Davis, TRI, Edinburgh Napier University
Date: 10th May 2023
Subject: Essential Evidence 4 Scotland No. 68 The politics of speed and traffic injuries

Top line: If lower speed limits are to be applied in a more ambitious way to reach national and regional road safety goals, both legislation and decision-making at local and regional levels should be designed to ensure that safety considerations are strengthened at the expense of mobility considerations.

It is widely recognised by policy makers, civil servants and traffic safety researchers that one of the most effective measures for reducing deaths in traffic crashes would be to lower speed limits on specific roads, combined with an effective surveillance of such speed limits. While national governments are often responsible for setting policy goals that can provide a general framework for setting speed limits, the task of setting and implementing such limits on specific roads is, however, delegated to regional and local authorities in most European countries. This means that local and regional authorities have significant degrees of freedom to decide what speed limits will be applied—decisions that can often be situated in political frameworks in which high speed transport is viewed as a prerequisite for reaching political aspirations of high mobility, accessibility and economic growth.¹ This appears to be the case even in Sweden which is the founding country of the concept of Vision Zero, the quest to end road deaths and life-changing injuries.²

A study by Svensson and colleagues concluded that in Sweden it is clear that in the regional arena formed by actors “active in” setting speed limits is characterised by conflict and lack of consensus. This is with regards to the approaches, priorities and objectives that should guide public actors when making decisions concerning speed limits within the regional road network. Actors representing a mobility perspective have developed a strong policy discourse in decision and policy processes that centres around the idea that higher speeds and fast movement of goods and people is a fundamental condition for regional and local economic development and competitiveness. Actors who instead support a road safety perspective argue that national and local goals of promoting road safety, as particularly expressed in the national policy, Vision Zero, should be given highest priority.

Svensson and colleagues note that lines of argumentation do not follow organisational boundaries, but rather coincide with specific responsibilities and mandates. For example, general traffic planners in the respective organisations tend to prioritize mobility. It is, however, somewhat remarkable, say the researchers, that public actors who have a mandate to monitor both regional and local development and road safety—i.e. leading municipal politicians, officials in the regional development council, and planners—share the strongest commitment to regional development and economic growth, even though these goals might be attained at the expense of a higher rate of traffic injuries and deaths.

The researchers conclude that speed is political and that it raises the question about the relationships between speed, control and power. Actors representing the mobility perspective constitute an informal alliance that have more decision-making power than those actors representing the traffic safety perspective in setting speed limits within infrastructural decision making and planning, and that this needs to change. A coda is that Welsh politicians have decided that 20mph should be the default speed limit for settlements where people live. It will be implemented in September 2023. This political support for safety over mobility appears to be an ‘exception to a rule’. The practical implications of Vision Zero are still highly contested and lives continues to be sacrificed as a consequence of a speed and mobility discourse.

¹ Svensson, T., Summerton, J., Hrelja, R. 2014 The politics of speed – local and regional actors’ views on speed limits, traffic safety and mobility in Sweden, *European Transport Research Review*, 6: 43-50.

² [15: Vision Zero - Travelwest](#) accessed 19/05/2023