Developing and implementing 20-mph speed limits in Edinburgh and Belfast: mixed-methods study

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.

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Plain English summary

Edinburgh and Belfast 20-mph speed limits

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Plain English summary

Background

Speed restrictions of 20 mph aim to decrease traffic speed and lower rates of collisions and casualties. They may also lead to wider benefits such as more pleasant communities and more people choosing to walk or cycle. This study evaluated the implementation of 20-mph speed limits in Edinburgh and Belfast.

Methods

We made use of routinely collected data and collected our own data via surveys and through speaking to people. We were interested in four key issues: (1) the political decision-making that led to the schemes; (2) how the schemes were delivered; (3) the impact of the schemes on perceptions, speed, collisions and casualties; and (4) whether or not the schemes were a sensible financial investment.

Findings

The topic of 20-mph speed limits had been talked about for many years before the schemes were implemented. Small steps were taken, including the introduction of schemes near schools and engaging the general public to try to build support. The large-scale schemes were broadly implemented as intended in terms of signage, education and enforcement. In Edinburgh, the overall percentage reduction in collision rates was 40%, and the reduction in casualty rates was 39%. Average speed was reduced by 1.34 mph at 12 months. At 12 months following implementation, the number of people who were supportive of the speed limits increased, as did their willingness to obey the limits. In Belfast only minor changes were seen for all outcomes. This may be because speeds were already low in the city centre, or could be a result of other factors.

Conclusions

The citywide approach in Edinburgh was effective at reducing speed, leading to reductions in collisions and casualties. Public perceptions and compliance with the speed limits also increased. These findings suggest that 20-mph limits can be implemented at scale, lead to positive public health benefits and are likely to be a sensible financial investment.

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