

My mother's death taught me the danger of our roads

We need 20mph limits everywhere people live, work or shop

Natalie Bennett, Published at 12:01AM, September 27 2012

Twenty three years ago I was in a car crash in which my mother was killed. It was one of the defining events of my life but I thought very hard before referring to it in my first speech as Green Party leader.

This was because I think politics should be about policies, not personal experiences, but also because I had to be sure I could remain in control of my emotions as I spoke. Such grief, I think, is for most people a weight in the pit of the stomach that never goes away.

Many people said to me afterwards that they were glad I had spoken about my mother's death — often they had suffered a similar loss too. Yet what surprised me is that, even with people I knew quite well, I hadn't known about their personal losses to the roads. It is something we seldom talk about. With road deaths there is a grim sense of inevitability and fear. We all know that we are vulnerable on the road. And unless we stay prisoners in our own homes, we feel there's little we can do about it. But we shouldn't accept road deaths as inevitable — they aren't.

I will keep on talking about my personal experience, because there's a huge road safety issue that's still little discussed, despite *The Times's* excellent cycling safety campaign. Britain has had 27,000 road deaths in the past decade, and the vulnerable — older people and children — are most at risk. That's equal to the population of Dover being wiped out.

There is a simple place to start: 20mph speed limits everywhere that people live, work or shop.

The odds are that if as a pedestrian or cyclist you are hit by a vehicle at 20mph you live. At 30mph you die. In Portsmouth a 20mph limit has cut the number of road casualties by 22 per cent. The price for motorists? Forty seconds on the average journey.

And drivers would see benefits. It would cut fuel costs and cut pollution through smoother traffic flow — a huge issue in cities and for drivers and passengers, as in-car pollution is three times as bad as on the pavement.

A 20mph limit is a simple measure to make our neighbourhoods more pleasant and give us communities where adults and children can walk and cycle in safety, with all the health benefits that those activities bring.

Already 7.5 million Britons live in places where 20mph has been agreed or implemented as the default speed in built-up areas. It's time we all benefited and fewer families would have to suffer that hideous sudden loss or make those dreadful phone calls that can only start: "I've got something terrible to tell you."

And tens of thousands of people wouldn't have that awful, painful weight in the pit of their stomach that never quite goes away.

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