

ROAD TESTING THE SAFETY STRATEGY

Road safety expert, Richard Speller of Watermen Aspen, has been involved in the investigations of over 400 fatal incidents. He tells *Highways* about where we go next after the launch of the national road safety strategy early this year



The UK's new Road Safety Strategy sets an ambitious target: cut deaths and serious injuries by 65% by 2035, and 70% for children.

It's not short of policy ideas, but as anyone working in a local authority will tell you, strategies need to be backed up by actions. So how do local authorities translate a national strategy into action, and what should they prioritise first?

What problem are we solving?

The strategy leans into Safe System thinking; designing roads, vehicles, rules and response so the network can better tolerate human error. Making these changes in infrastructure often means balancing residents' wishes with solutions that can make a difference. A common example is speed humps. Mr Speller says: 'I have lost count of the number of times residents call for speed humps to slow down drivers, and then within six months ask to have them taken out because they make too much noise late at night.'

'The lesson isn't never consider traffic calming; it's diagnose properly, design carefully and anticipate the unintended consequences.'

Key points:

- Make your first question 'what problem are we solving?' not 'what intervention are we buying?'
- Use collision patterns, speeds, near-miss intelligence and local insight to agree on the problem statement before you touch design.



(Above) 'Realistic' speed limits for rural roads; (Below) Speed bumps aren't always smooth delivery

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Treat speed limits as a strategic programme

When thinking about turning this new strategy into actions, a key focus for Mr Speller is the rural network. The national speed limit sign is 'hugely misunderstood' and many drivers interpret it as a 60mph road on narrow, winding single carriageways; rather than taking it slow and driving in line with the conditions and hazards.

'It's really important that local authorities look at their rural road network and start imposing realistic speed limits on these roads, because most of them haven't been designed for high speed and meander all over the place with hidden bends and risks that most drivers aren't aware of,' Mr Speller says.

'Carry out a systematic review of rural roads and with consistency, so drivers aren't constantly processing changing speed limits on top of everything else.'

Key points:

- Identify high-severity routes and the 'hidden risk' sections (bends, crests, pinch points, equestrian/cycle activity).
- Build a consistent speed-limit policy aligned with national guidance and communicate it clearly to members, parish councils and the public.
- Avoid limits that change too frequently; use longer, intelligible sections wherever possible.

Don't lose the communication battle, explain to people the why, not just the what

People need to understand why you're asking for change, and what the real-world impact is.

'In urban areas, the difference between 20mph and 30mph doesn't actually impact your journey time significantly because driving is already stop-start, but the advantages in terms of the survivability of crashes is a huge benefit,' Mr Speller says.

If authorities don't explain that simply and repeatedly, the debate gets captured by emotion and misinformation. The national strategy recognises this too, including commitments to publishing guidance for road safety education and to continue behaviour-change campaigns.

Key point: Treat communications as part of the intervention rather than an afterthought and resource it properly.



Move faster against drink and drug driving and distractions

'We've made tremendous progress in making drink driving socially unacceptable. Mobile technology has given us so many advantages in terms of the sat nav being so easy to use now – people don't get lost or confused by trying to read maps. But really, the only safe place for your phone is in the glove box,' Mr Speller says.

Distractions from mobile phone use and infotainment systems need to be more recognised as a growing safety threat.

Key points:

- Track leading indicators like speed compliance and mobile phone use rather than just casualty figures to get a better handle on distractions.
- Use local collision narratives and lived experience to support police-led enforcement campaigns

Engineering for the long-term

Mr Speller gives a simple example of a scheme that looked good on day one and then quietly stopped working. An offset crossroads in the centre of a village was treated to improve conspicuity, but without a long-term maintenance plan, the colour faded and the effect wore off.

'You often see it, where you put this high friction surfacing down and it was great when it was new, but we hadn't introduced any means of maintaining it over a long period of time. So over time, that buff colour faded and the impact of it soon wore away after four or five years.'

Key point:

A scheme isn't finished at opening. Build whole-life maintenance, monitoring and 'what happens next?' into business.

Time to reset

Bringing road safety engineering together with other skillsets is needed to change behaviour, including a proper communications strategy to get community buy-in. Evidence-led engineering, behavioural insight, and clear communication form a thread running through the strategy.

If the new strategy is a 'reset moment', local authorities can turn it into a disciplined delivery programme: fewer assumptions, better evidence, clearer communications and a relentless focus on what reduces harm on the roads. ●



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