Presented at Best in Europe 2002 – Safer Cities, Brussels, June 2002

SAFER CITIES: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Most citizens of the European Union (EU) live in towns or cities and most of those who live elsewhere visit them from time to time. Good towns and cities have always been concerned for the safety of their citizens and visitors. In the 21st century, the greatest everyday threat to their safety comes from the use of motor vehicles, yet road traffic is also the lifeblood of the same towns and cities. The heart of the resulting range of challenges to towns and cities in Europe today is how to continue to enjoy the benefits that the motor vehicle can bring, whilst massively reducing the currently totally disproportionate amounts of death and disabling injury that it brings with it. The message of *Best in Europe 2002* is that there are known ways of achieving this by better adapting road and traffic systems to the needs, capabilities, limitations and vulnerability of their users – including enabling healthier and more environmentally friendly travel on foot and by bicycle to grow while still reducing death and injury on the roads. A number of Member States have adopted policies to take up these opportunities and their towns and cities have begun to implement them, and some towns and cities in other Member States are also showing the way. It remains to bring home to opinion formers and decision makers in towns and cities throughout Europe the urgency of these challenges and the scope of the opportunities open to them.

1 Introduction

Cities have been focal points in the economic, social and cultural life of Europe throughout its history, from Athens through ancient Rome, l'Aix la Chapelle de Charlemagne – die Aachen von Karl dem Großen, the zeniths of influence of Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austro-Hungary, France and Britain, and the evolutions of Germany, Italy and Scandinavia. The industrial era brought with it a process of urbanisation that has led to a 21st century Europe in which the great majority of its citizens live in towns or cities, and most of those who live elsewhere visit them regularly.

Good cities have always been concerned for the safety of their citizens and visitors. In earlier times their main concerns were for safety from marauders and from enemy attack – threats from without. More recently, these were replaced by concerns for safety from crime and from risks to public health – threats from within. These threats have in common that they come from sources that most people are ready to unite against because people readily recognise that they are bad things. But in the towns and cities of 21st century Europe the greatest everyday threat to safety comes from a

source that most people rightly regard as one of the very good features of modern life – the availability and use of motor vehicles.

Danger from aspects of life that are good in other respects is not confined to the motor vehicle: it has always been true that some kinds of economic and social activity are accompanied by risks to their participants, and sometimes also to others. But it is only with the advent of widespread use of motor vehicles that a good thing in life has become the dominant threat to life and limb for people living in or visiting towns and cities.

Road traffic – people and goods in vehicles and people on foot – has been described as the lifeblood of towns and cities, and rightly so in the sense that economic, social and cultural activities, in the forms in which they make up modern urban life, would be impracticable without the kinds of access and mobility that the road system, including the use of motor vehicles, affords. Herein lies the heart of the consequent range of challenges to towns and cities in Europe today: how to continue to enjoy the benefits that the motor vehicle can bring to urban life, whilst massively reducing the currently totally disproportionate amounts of death and disabling injury that it brings with it? Massive reduction is called for because even in EU Member States where the risk involved in using the roads is lowest, it still needs to be reduced by a factor of seven to bring it into line with the risks in a typical mix of other everyday activities.

2 Making cities safer from motor traffic: the challenges

Making people in towns and cities safer from motor traffic presents challenges of several kinds. Since the risk to life and limb in the road system stems very largely from the use of motor vehicles, the most fundamental challenge is to enable towns and cities to enjoy at least as high a level of prosperity, and their people to enjoy at least as high a quality of life, with fewer vehicle-km driven per year, for example by:

- promoting localisation of some activities so that they can be reached on foot or by bicycle, or at least by shorter car journeys than before;
- centralising other activities so that they can be served better by public transport;
- improving the quality of public transport to extend the range of circumstances in which it is chosen in preference to the car; and
- discouraging access by car where there are reasonable alternatives.

A second and related challenge is that if people are going to walk, cycle and use public transport more as a result of using cars more selectively (and there are environmental and public health reasons for encouraging this) then towns and cities have to reduce the risks of death and injury while walking or cycling (whether for whole journeys or to and from public transport stops), for example by:

- creating attractive and convenient routes for the journeys on foot or by bicycle that people would actually like to make – routes with less proximity to motor traffic and safer provision for crossing roads when this is necessary; and

- moderating the speeds of motor vehicles where these still travel in proximity to people walking and cycling.

However successfully alternatives to car use are encouraged, the amount of motor vehicle use in European towns and cities is still likely to increase a good deal as incomes rise further, before it levels off as time that people have available becomes the main constraint on car use. A third challenge to towns and cities is therefore to reduce the risks of death and injury for the users of motor vehicles themselves, for example by:

- matching the use of each road to the functions that the road serves in terms of living space, access and through movement;
- separating faster vehicles from slower ones and lighter vehicles from heavier ones, and separating vehicles that are making conflicting movements;
- making the road system self-explaining to its users; and
- achieving high levels of use of protective devices and understanding of how to drive to reduce risk.

And perhaps the greatest challenge is to overcome the scandal of tolerance of current levels of death and injury – tolerance by decision makers and professionals who could act to reduce it, tolerance by the media and other opinion formers who could open hearts and minds to decisive action, and tolerance by road users in general, from whom relatively little need be asked in order to make a big difference if the right decisive action is taken.

The towns and cities cannot address all these challenges by themselves. They need the right planning, traffic management and fiscal powers from central and regional government, they need traffic law that is clearly enacted by central government and enforced with conviction by the police and the courts, and they need the motor vehicle industry and commercial operators to design injury reduction into the vehicles themselves and into operating practices. But for all that, the challenges to act locally on the road system and its use in each town or city, and to put concern for traffic safety at least on a par with concerns for access, mobility and the environment – those challenges lie with the towns and cities themselves.

3 Making cities safer from motor traffic: the opportunities

To challenge towns and cities to embrace radical change in order to make their citizens and visitors safer from motor traffic would be meaningless in the absence of known ways of achieving this. But the message of *Best in Europe 2002* is that there are known ways. Towns and cities that want to radically reduce death and injury on their roads can look to the experience of others across the EU who have already done so or are already doing so, and to the thinking behind the approaches they have adopted. A range of examples from towns and cities in different Member States are described at *Best in Europe 2002*, and the wider implications of their achievements are discussed.

Inspired by the *Vision Zero* adopted by its parliament, Sweden took the lead in recognising that the road and traffic system can and should be adapted in many ways to the needs, capabilities, limitations and physical vulnerability of its users. It has given new powers to its towns and cities to impose a whole range of speed limits on roads and streets that are performing different traffic and living space functions. The towns and cities are gaining and sharing experience in using these powers. Sweden is also developing acceptable methods of physical separation of traffic travelling in opposite directions on undivided two-way roads.

The Netherlands, in developing its *Sustainable Safety* programme has shown the way to systematic reduction of risk by adapting the road system to be:

- *functional* – in that the use of each road or path is consistent with the functions for which it is designed;
- *homogeneous* – in that large differences in speed, mass or direction of travel among vehicles sharing the same roadspace are minimised; and
- *predictable* – in that road users are only rarely confronted with the unexpected in terms of road layout or other people's behaviour,

and working to achieve a population of road users who are:

- *educated* in the use of the roads and the risks involved in doing so;
- *informed* about how they can and should act to reduce these risks to themselves and others; and
- *deterred* by appropriate enforcement from breaking traffic laws.

These principles are already being applied extensively in practice by towns and cities in The Netherlands.

With particular reference to roads and their use in towns and cities, Britain has drawn upon a range of its own and other European countries' experience in formulating principles of *Urban Safety Management*:

- consider all kinds of road user, especially the most vulnerable;
- consider the functions and use of different kinds of road;
- formulate a safety strategy for each town or city as a whole;
- integrate existing road safety work into the strategy;
- relate road safety objectives to other policy objectives for the town or city;
- encourage all professional groups to help to achieve road safety objectives;
- guard against adverse effects of other policies upon road safety;
- use the experience of road safety specialists effectively;
- translate strategy and objectives into actual local area safety schemes; and
- monitor and evaluate progress in order to learn from experience and keep the strategy up to date.

Application of these principles is helping decision makers, professionals and local people to work together for safer road systems for citizens and visitors in towns and cities to use safely. There is a lot more to do, but the effects are already visible on the streets of many British towns and cities, and in the casualty figures.

Several other Member States and Accession Countries also have or are formulating systematic approaches to making people in their towns and cities safer from motor traffic – and in still other Member States, towns and cities are making progress on the ground without necessarily formulating so explicitly their approaches to the task – as shown by presentations at *Best in Europe 2002*.

4 The way forward

Initiatives like these are making clear the way forward for towns and cities to make safe use of the roads a part of the quality of life they offer to their citizens and visitors, and one of the foundations for their economic, social and cultural development – and in the process to improve the appearance of their roads and streets. It remains to bring home to opinion formers and decision makers in towns and cities throughout Europe the urgency of these challenges and the scope of the opportunities open to them. *Best in Europe 2002* is meant to help to do this.