

Unchain the Brighton motorist: where are the facts?

By Stephen Young, Chair, Living Streets Brighton and Hove Group

Ever since this protest group, with its mysterious membership, started its well-funded campaign, "Unchain the Brighton motorist" has been long on assertion and short on evidence. The adverts and articles placed by Unchain have been a fact-free zone - until the appearance of the latest advert which concentrates on Brighton and Hove City Council's consultation on extending the 20mph speed limit. It's unfortunate that Unchain have decided that their first foray into the world of facts should focus on this consultation, for two reasons: first, the 2011 British Attitudes Survey has already demonstrated that well over two-thirds of us, including motorists, would like a 20 mph speed limit in the streets where we live (a much more reliable figure than those in the BHCC consultation, especially when Unchain has mobilised its supporters to vote against the Council's 20mph proposals); secondly, a consultation is not a referendum. Whilst UK democracy may not be perfect, policy is made by those whom we have elected. Whether we like it or not, we have yet to adopt the Swiss system where issues are generally decided by public vote.

There is no doubting that Unchain is consistent: it opposes the 20mph proposals, appears to reject the idea of 'transport policy', and generally objects to measures aimed at reducing the domination of speeding traffic in our towns and cities. But so far, Unchain has not revealed the evidence base for its position. Oddly, the information that supports the opposing case includes, among others, the following organisations: the Association Of Directors of Public Health; the National Audit Office, the Department for Transport, The Parliamentary Select Committee on Transport, the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence....etc

As a contribution to the debate, here are some facts that Unchain might like to consider:

- The 30 mph speed limit was introduced in 1934 when there were 2 million cars in the UK: today the figure is over 30 million. When it comes to sharing our roads, for vulnerable road users, we have not engineered our roads for cyclists or pedestrians; we maintain speed limits in residential and urban roads 60% higher than our neighbours in Northern Europe; vehicle speeds and volume are cited by parents for not allowing children to walk or cycle.
- Cities that have already made the decision to roll out 20mph limits to most residential roads include Portsmouth, Oxford, Cambridge, Brighton, Warrington, Liverpool, Bristol, Bath, Manchester, Birmingham, Lancashire, York, Newcastle, St Helens, Sefton, Oldham, Wigan, Rochdale, Middlesbrough, Edinburgh, Chichester, Bolton, Nottingham, as well as the London Boroughs of Camden, Islington, Waltham Forest, Haringey, Lambeth, Greenwich and the City of London. The total population covered here is over 12m.

- The accepted research-based “rule of thumb” regarding the influence of speed on collisions in urban areas is that for every 1mph reduction in average speed there is a resultant decrease in collision frequency of 6%.
- Road traffic crashes cost the UK £18 billion a year. According to the Department for Transport, each death on the roads costs £1.7m and each serious injury costs £190,000. The 20 mph zones in London are estimate to be saving more than £20 million a year in crash prevention.
- The cost of road signs is remarkably low: Portsmouth converted 1,200 streets to 20mph for just over £500,000. It’s approximately seven times more cost effective, in terms of speed reduction achieved, to introduce a 20 mph limit across a wide area, than to spend the same sum on isolated, physically calmed zones.
- In a survey in Portsmouth, over 40% of respondents stated that since the introduction of 20 mph, there has been a safer environment for walking and cycling. Around a third of respondents noticed an increase in pedestrian and cyclist activities in the local area.
- A study in San Francisco study in the 1960s carried out by Berkeley professor Donald Appleyard found that the busier a street, the fewer community activities take place. This was repeated more recently by Joshua Hart in Bristol, who asked local residents in different types of streets about how many people they knew locally. The results were the same: there were far more connections in those streets with fewer cars running down them. Traffic destroys communities.
- What about the economic benefits brought by people in cars? A recent report by Living Streets highlighted that making places better for walking can boost footfall and trading by up to 40% and in London town centres in 2011, walkers spent £147 more per month than those travelling by car.

Instead of their well-funded but evidence-free assertions, it would be better if Unchain were to celebrate those aspects of Brighton and Hove which other UK cities are keen to emulate. These features mean that our city is a better place for the people who live here, work here, or visit the city:

- Car/van ownership in Brighton & Hove is now the lowest in the South East outside London, and has remained more or less constant over the past ten years (0.86 cars per household in 2011 compared to 0.87 in 2001). Over a third of households don't own a car in Brighton & Hove and the city now has the 7th lowest levels of car ownership in England and Wales.
- Brighton & Hove has decreasing car ownership levels compared to increases in the South East (1.30 per household in 2001 to 1.35 in

2011) and also in England and Wales (1.11 per household in 2001 to 1.17 in 2011).

- Brighton & Hove shows the highest proportion of walking to work in the South East, 5th across England & Wales. The percentage of people walking to work has risen from 17% to 21% in Brighton & Hove, compared to a 10% to 11% rise across England and Wales.
- Brighton & Hove shows the second to lowest growth rate in car use in England and Wales. This is reflected in the proportion of workers using a car to get to work, which has fallen from 56% to 41% between 2001 and 2011, compared to an increase from 61% to 63% across England and Wales. In the South East, only Oxford showed a lower proportion of people using a car to get to work.
- Official statistics from the Department for Transport show that Brighton & Hove has the highest bus use per head of population in England (excluding London). During 2012/13, over 45 million journeys were made by people boarding buses in the Brighton & Hove City Council area. This is around 5% higher than the previous year.
- For many years, under successive administrations of all political persuasions, Brighton and Hove City Council has been very successful in obtaining government funding for a variety of transport-related schemes to improve the city (contrary to popular belief, these schemes are mostly not financed by council tax payers)

Space does not permit me to include other factual information, whether it's the role of motor traffic in producing life-threatening emissions (for which Brighton and Hove faces enormous fines from the European Union), the relationship between car dependency on obesity, the impact of traffic noise on health, or many more: it's a very long list.

Finally, I am curious about what happens to Unchainers when they travel around the UK or overseas, and visit areas with the types of schemes which are being implemented in Brighton and Hove. These schemes are common in most of the rest of Europe, making for towns and cities with living streets rather than surrendering to the dominance of motor traffic. Do the visiting Unchainers pine for more cars, going faster? Do they think "this would be a great place, if only it had more traffic?" If not, why do they think that's what needed for Brighton and Hove? It isn't what the rest of us want.

Stephen Young is Chair of the Brighton and Hove Group of Living Streets, www.livingstreets.org the national charity which stands up for pedestrians.