

## **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Transport and Communications. 1<sup>st</sup> March 2022**

### **Opening statement from Dr Lorraine D'Arcy, Senior Lecturer in Transport Engineering, Environment and Planning TU Dublin**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute here today A Chathaoirligh and members of the Committee.

Individual human behavioural decisions are influenced by the physical and social environments around people, and also their own habits, norms and perspectives. Today, drawing on my professional experience as a civil engineer, transportation planner and behaviour scientist I would like to discuss the importance of good street design practices on safe driving behaviour and how we can balance perspectives on what constitutes a safe street or road.

Substantial work has been done by the transportation agencies over the past three decades to make driving safer in Ireland. However, practices such as overdesigning roads to increase driver comfort and NCAP ratings for cars which place an emphasis on the safety on those inside the vehicle have left communities dealing with an increased threat of larger and faster vehicles on their streets.

This focus on driver safety has had unintended consequences. Residential streets used to be places to congregate and play. Main Streets used to be meeting places and commercial hubs. Both are now becoming devoid of human interactions because of the dominance of the private vehicle. This not only has implications for local commerce, but also the health and wellbeing of our population.

Posted speed limits are just one tool in a suite of measures that can be used to make our streets safer. However, without enforcement and changes to the physical infrastructure to bring the road or streets design speeds closer to the posted speed limit, little is going to change in relation to driver behaviour. Life and time pressures, and a sense that you can and could move faster since your 21<sup>st</sup> century vehicle needs little encouragement to move considerably faster than those driven in the 1970's and 80's increases the temptation to break a speed limit. Each individual will make their own decision, but if others around you are going faster than you the temptation to press the pedal can be worth the personal risk. A favourite phrase of one of my school teachers comes to mind, 'you are only sorry 'cause you were caught'.

Our metric for safe streets should not be how many people are killed and injured but a multi criteria assessment that includes the number of people walking and cycling in an area. Reported traffic speeds measured against the context of the street considering, for example, time of day metrics. Are more people speeding in low traffic and how can this behaviour be designed out? Conduct walk in time or drive in time interviews or other ethnographic type data collections to understand what informs in-travel decision making. Listen to school children but not exclusively. They are not the decision makers when it comes to household travel. But alongside our elderly, they are the most vulnerable on our roads and they deserve our attention. Look at social exclusion and loneliness and other population health indicators such as the work done by Donald Appleyard in the US.

The 2020 Stockholm Declaration of the Third Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety recognises the importance of this multi-perspective approach and (quote) '... our shared responsibility between system designers and road users to move towards a world free from road traffic fatalities and serious injuries and that addressing road safety demands multi-stakeholder collaboration among the public and private sectors, academia, professional organizations,

nongovernmental organizations and the media.' The taskforce outlined in the RSA's Our Journey Towards Vision Zero Phase 1 Action Plan is a welcome start.

The media have an important role to play in delivering clear and balanced messaging around road safety. Highlighting the impacts of individual and collective decision making on population health and wellbeing and the prevention of premature death from road traffic collisions, non-communicable/ 'lifestyle' diseases or from mental ill-health compounded by social isolation and sedentary behaviours.

So, why a default 30kph for built up areas is a good idea?

A blanket change facilitates a clear communication to the population which in turn give a greater population awareness of the changes.

Default 30kph speeds will facilitate the roll out and a quick delivery of active travel infrastructure and the Town's First strategy as street design standards at this speed will facilitate safer design for a greater balance of movement and place. This in turn helps us meet our climate targets.

There is information available and learnings from other jurisdictions on policies to reduce traffic speeds that we can learn from. We won't be reinventing the wheel.

At present digital mapping and route-finding apps are directing drivers into residential areas for trip-time savings based on current speed limits. Lower speed limits will discourage algorithms from directing traffic into these areas.

To conclude,

Research and Evaluation is important, most especially so that we have an Irish evidence base to learn from and build upon. Multidisciplinary perspectives are important.

This September TU Dublin will be hosting the Walk21 International Conference on Walking and Liveable Communities where a special session will be held to address Safety where we can learn from local players and international experts.

**Dr Lorraine D'Arcy** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Transport Engineering, Environment and Planning at TU Dublin. A Civil Engineer with a PhD in exercise and environmental psychology, her research explores neighbourhood features that deter people from walking, cycling or using public transport which result in higher car dependency, social isolation and a more sedentary population, all which impact on population health and carbon emissions. In TU Dublin she has been instrumental in setting up a new part-time MSc in Sustainable Transport and Mobility aimed at upskilling practitioners and those interested in a career in sustainable mobility. She is conference lead for the Walk21 Ireland conference, an International conference on walking and liveable communities being hosted by TU Dublin in September 2022 funded by the Departments of Transport, Health and Sport (DTCAGSM).

