

Road Danger Reduction Forum Position Paper



Child Safety Audits

Introduction

Child Safety Audits are a prominent and important new feature in the DETR's road safety strategy "Tomorrow's Roads - Safer For Everyone". Although the DETR has not yet offered advice on how they are to be carried out, the Road Danger Reduction Forum welcomes the introduction of Child Safety Audits. We see them as a real opportunity to make quality of life and experience of danger the key factors in measuring the safety of children in the road environment.

Beyond Casualties

Auditing the safety of children must of necessity take us beyond merely looking at reported child road accident casualties. Casualties for younger children have fallen because children have increasingly been excluded from experiencing the road environment at first hand. Where children of primary school age do still walk and cycle, they are more than ever likely to be accompanied by responsible adults. A range of factors have contributed to this change with probably the key one being parental fear of road danger. Whether this danger is real or imagined, the result is a serious and damaging curtailment of children's independent mobility. The growth in road traffic has fuelled these fears, creating a vicious circle which must be broken if child safety is to be improved.

Whilst the reduced exposure of children to the road environment has brought a reduction in casualty numbers the longer term effects are wholly negative in road safety terms. Children need to gain experience of coping with the road environment from an early age. If they do not have this experience then they will be even more vulnerable when they are eventually allowed the freedom to travel on their own in an increasingly more traffic filled environment. The high proportion of UK teenagers injured as pedestrians and cyclists is evidence of this. The Forum is rightly wary of drawing conclusions from casualty figures. However, the UK has a relatively poor child pedestrian casualty record in comparison with our European neighbours, whose children are allowed much greater independent mobility. The conclusion we can draw from this is that traffic danger for children, both real and perceived, is significantly greater in the UK.

Traffic danger is contributing to much more than child road accident casualties. The loss of independent mobility for children which it has contributed to has much broader health and social consequences. In terms of physical health, children are being denied the levels of exercise necessary for their healthy development. With regard to their social development they are also being denied the opportunity to

socialise and explore independently. Both these aspects pose the prospect of costs to society far worse than any which could result from road accidents.

In auditing the safety of children within the road environment we must take note of all the factors mentioned above. They are all inter-related and thus a package of measures and targets is needed to provide a reliable picture of progress and areas where intervention is needed. We would suggest that whilst monitoring of reported child accident casualties should inform our judgements, the other measures set out in this paper should have at least equal bearing in any serious child safety audit.

Scope of Child Safety Audits

The government is right to place specific emphasis on the road safety of children. The Forum has always maintained that it is the experience of the most vulnerable road users which is most important in assessing the safety of the road environment. Unfortunately highway engineering has until the last decade focused almost exclusively on the needs of adult, primarily motor vehicle borne, road users. Child safety audit is a means to reverse this and create a climate of engineering which considers the needs of the most vulnerable road users first.

Child safety audits should be carried out by local authorities on two levels, scheme by scheme and as a global overview of the authority's performance.

Scheme by Scheme

Local Authorities operating best practice will already have a system for safety audit on all highway engineering schemes. For very minor schemes a risk assessment may be used rather than a full safety audit. Child safety audit should be incorporated into these as safety audits are particularly expected to consider the needs of vulnerable road users.

Global

A global child safety audit should inform all aspects of a Local Authority's transport policy and be acknowledged as a key aspect within it. The factors which should be included are:

Modal

- traffic reduction targets. *The growth in motor traffic is a key factor in parents increased perception of road danger, leading to their curtailment of children's' independent mobility. Traffic reduction is thus imperative if we are to see a long term increase in children walking and cycling. There are also easily targetable areas, like the school journey, where reductions in motor traffic could quickly be achieved.*
- measurement of how children get to school and other facilities and setting targets to increase the proportion walking and cycling. These should be authority wide and also linked to specific safe routes schemes. *This is of*

course the flip side of the first factor. Data collection needs to be introduced as soon as possible so that progress can be measured.

Training and Education

- *measurement of the proportion of children having access to pedestrian and cyclist training which conforms to best practice guidelines or any other higher standards at both primary and secondary school. Training has a crucial role not only in producing safer pedestrians and cyclists but in giving parents the confidence to allow their children to walk and cycle. High quality pedestrian and cyclist training should also be viewed as invaluable pre-driver training. It should be an objective for authorities to make training universally available and to ensure that this conforms to the highest possible standard. A timetable for this should be included as a target.*

Infrastructure

- *audit of the proportion of residential areas which are traffic calmed 20 mph zones or Home Zones, with targets set to increase these. This is both a confidence building factor and one which delivers real reductions in reported casualties for all ages and types of road user.*
- *audit of safe routes to schools setting targets for compliance with speed limits in and around these. Much has been said about the fact that comparatively few children are injured on their journey to school. This may indicate that conditions are not as bad as parents imagine them to be. However, in terms of encouraging parents to allow children independent mobility, the perceived safety of school journeys is a crucial factor.*
- *audit of safe crossing, cycling and other related facilities to and at places which children would want to visit, i.e. shops, leisure centres, parks. This should be an integral part of the authority's local pedestrian strategy. It should identify a network of pedestrian routes and set targets for providing safe crossing and other improvements along these.*

Speed

- *overall compliance with speed limits within urban areas and reclassification of the road hierarchy to take fully into account the mobility needs of children. Compliance with speed limits will play a crucial role in increasing both real and perceived safety on the road network. It also has an important role in re-educating drivers to accept and respond properly to the presence of vulnerable road users. Re-classifying the road hierarchy both reinforces and will be re-enforced by speed limit compliance, giving a clear message that residential and semi-residential roads in particular are community space.*

Consultation

- consultation with children to discover where they feel particularly at risk, what services they would like and monitoring and responding to their experience of existing services. *The road environment has been designed almost exclusively by adults for adults. Children have become victims of this. Their views are as important as those of adults. By including children in the process of making our roads safer we will ensure that they grow up to become responsible road users.*
- the needs of socially deprived areas should be given particular attention. *The dominance of motor vehicle transport impacts most severely on the poorest sections of society who have become ever more excluded economically, socially and in terms of travel choice and safety. They stand to gain most by child safety audits which promote real change as envisaged by the Forum. However, this is a change which will also benefit the whole of society.*

Conclusion

If child safety audit is introduced according to the principles set out in this position paper, the Forum believes it will play an invaluable role in creating the safer road environment which we desire. By linking child safety audit with safety, pedestrian and cyclist audits its benefits can be maximised. We also believe that the overall benefits of this will be felt far beyond road safety and in greater measure.