



AVZ Blog (July 2021) 2010-2020: A lost decade in reducing casualties on UK roads

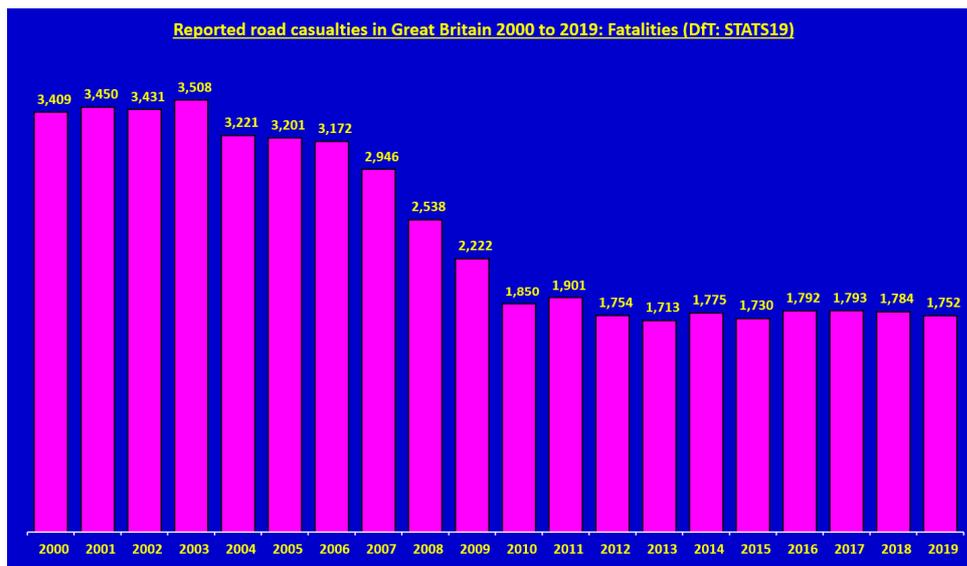
The lack of progress in reducing road casualties on Britain’s roads over the past decade is now all too clear. With the publication of the latest European Transport Safety Council (ETSC) report on road casualties across 32 countries¹, we now have a sense of just how little has been achieved and why that is. This blog brings some of the data together and looks at the findings from the ETSC report; we also set out how we can reverse this trend and once again start to reduce the numbers of casualties on our roads.

Over the past year it appears that the Department for Transport (DfT) is once again starting to engage with this issue and may be proposing to take steps to introduce more effective policies. For far too long the ministry and its ministers have been content to enable the growth of the car economy in the UK with little or no concern about the huge negative impacts that driving has in terms of road casualties, air pollution, CO2 emissions, public health (through lack of physical activity) and its impact through car-dominated communities.

This needs to change quickly before the UK slips further down in comparison with neighbouring countries and more people continue to be killed and seriously injured in the absence of policies to reduce road danger.

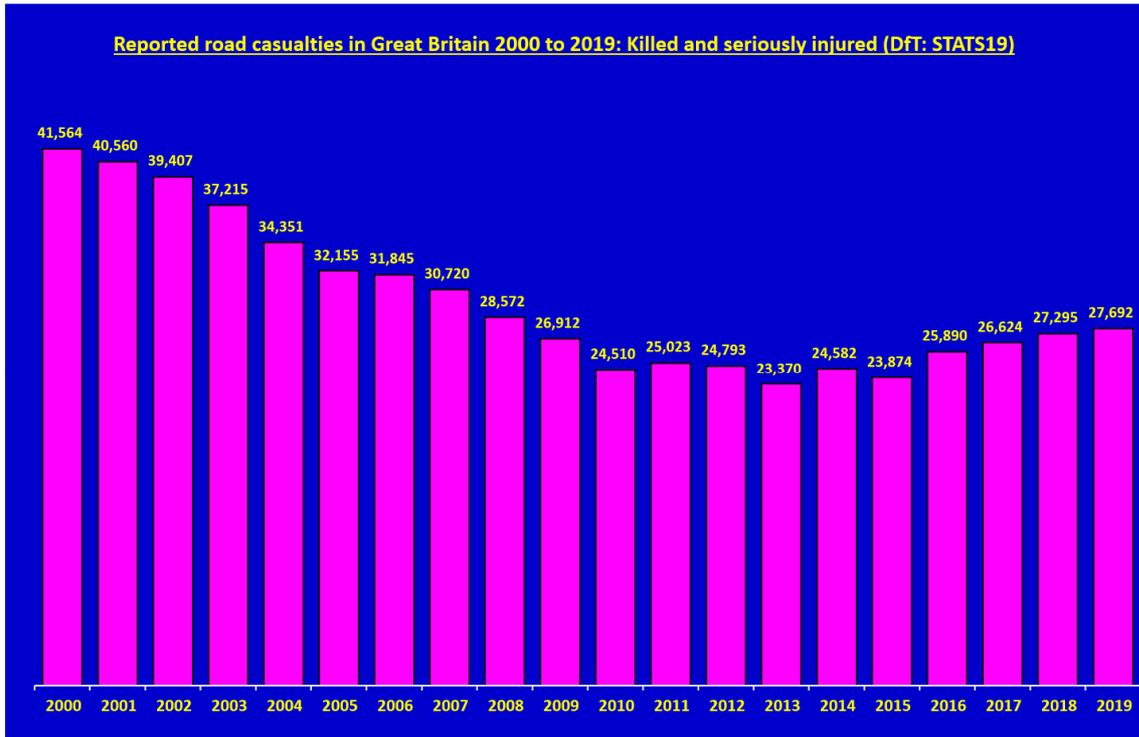
Road casualties are largely unchanged in the Great Britain

The declines in deaths on Great Britain’s roads that were seen from 2003 have almost completely halted since 2010.

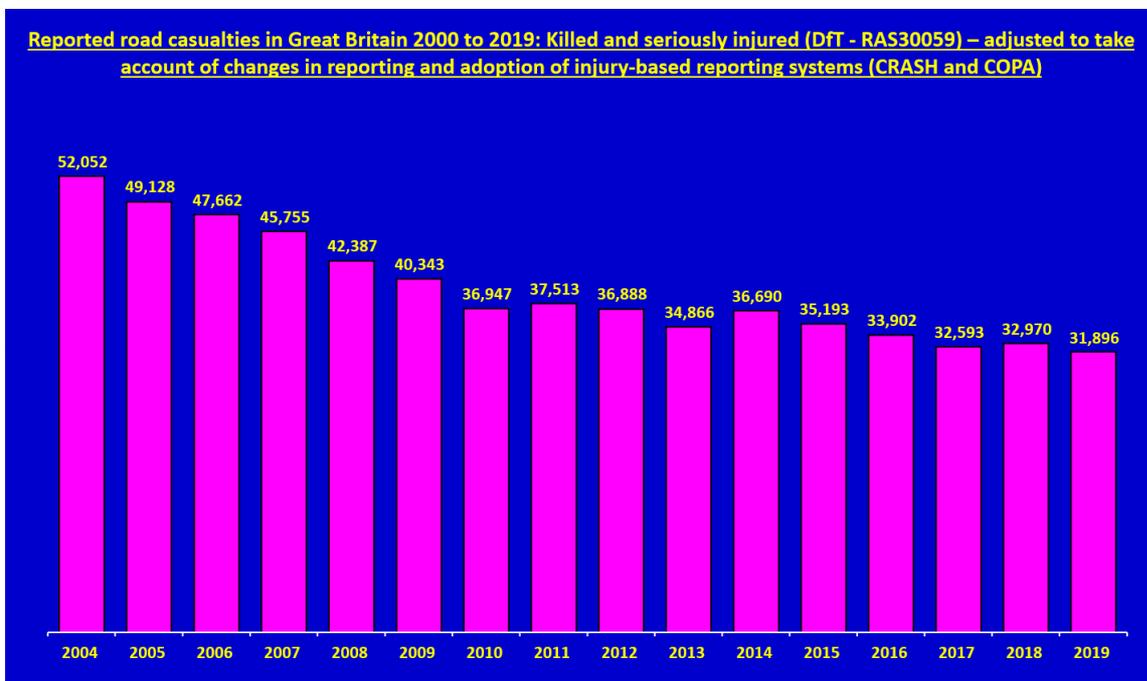


¹ <https://etsc.eu/15th-annual-road-safety-performance-index-pin-report/>

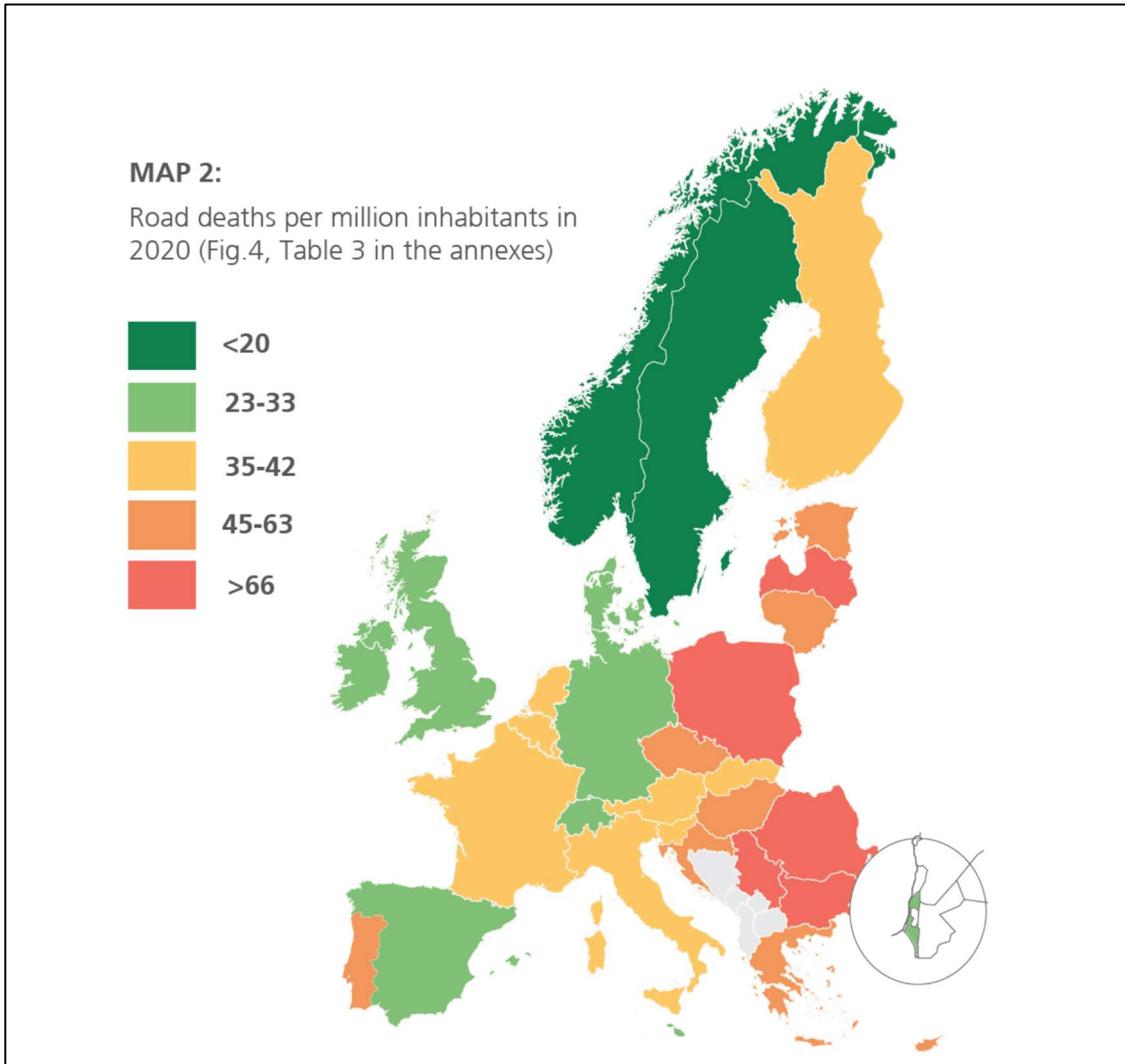
The pattern is similar when the numbers of reported serious injuries is also included.



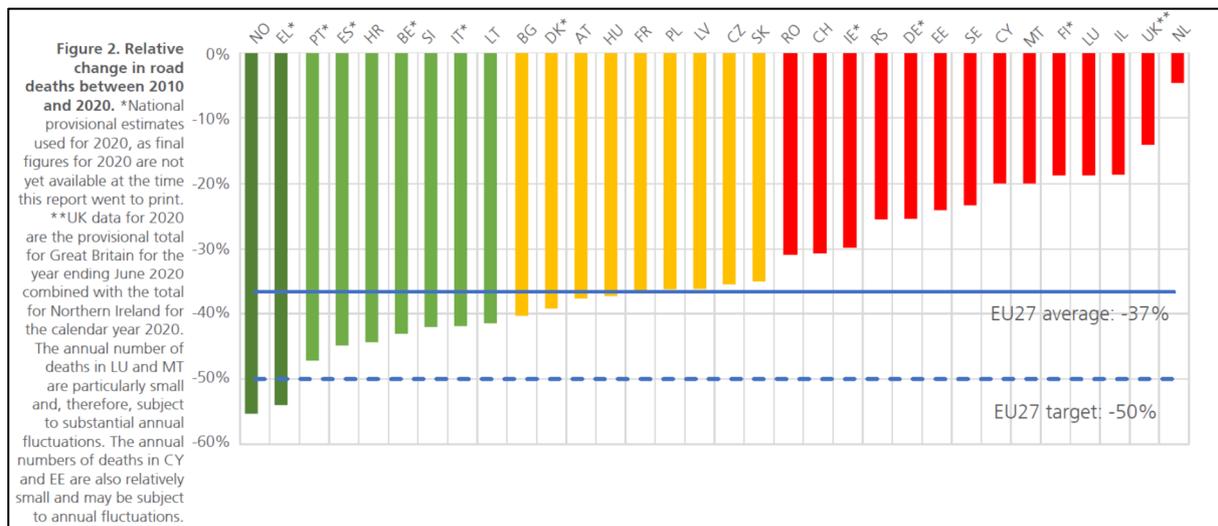
The picture changes slightly when the numbers of fatal and serious casualties are adjusted to take into account new injury-based reporting systems.



The ETSC report points out that UK has historically had one of the lowest rates of road deaths per million inhabitants; even in 2020 it had the fourth lowest level of the 32 countries with a mortality level of 24.4 deaths per million inhabitants compared to the EU27 average of 42.3.



In the past decade, however, the UK saw a decline of just 14% in the number of road deaths compared to an average fall of 37% across the EU27. The chart below shows the relative change in road deaths between 2010 and 2020 (across the 32 countries studied)



Reasons for the lack of progress

The commentary in the report is written by David Davies, Chief Executive of the Parliamentary Advisory Council on Transport Safety (PACTS) and pulls no punches as to the lack of engagement of the UK Government with this issue. Where progress has been seen, it has been largely down to the ambition of the nations of the UK and some Local Authorities. The decade got off to an inauspicious start with the removal of casualty reduction targets almost immediately the coalition government took office in 2010.

He notes that

“Overall, however, it was a decade of missed opportunities. The UK government did not make road safety a priority, **refused to set national casualty reduction targets and failed to provide the comprehensive framework to deliver real change.**”

“Throughout this period levels of **road policing declined which significantly undermined road safety enforcement.**”

“Local authorities in England, where most of the road deaths occur, were left to set their own agendas in a **context of budget cuts and competing priorities.**”

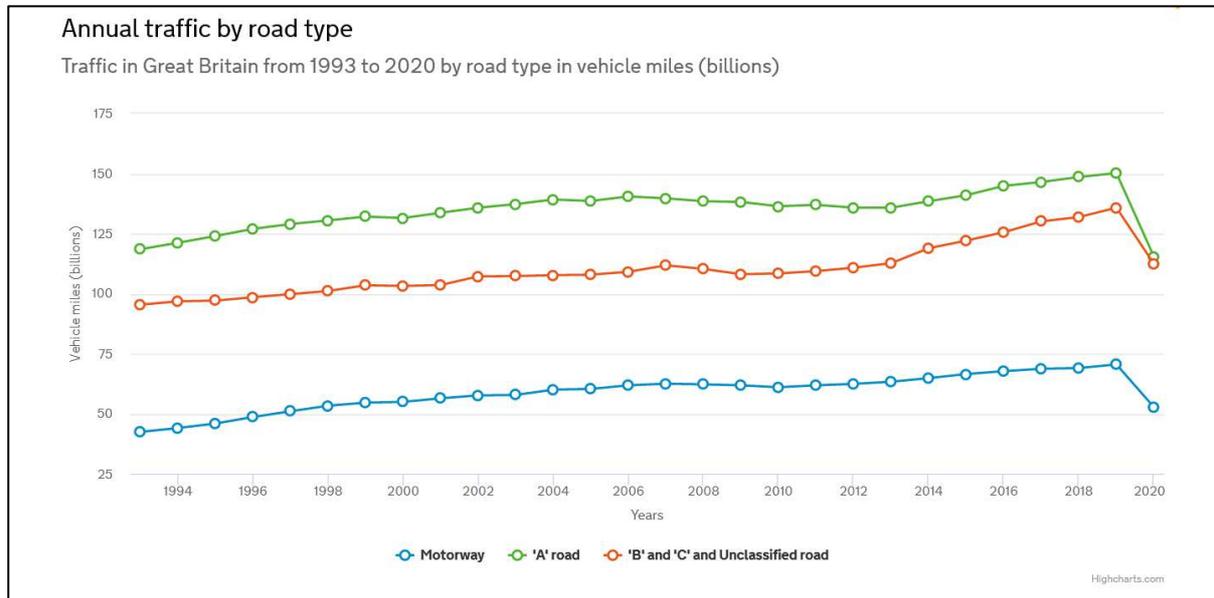
He states that responsibilities for road safety were increasingly handed over to the separate nations of the United Kingdom. In amongst this there was some positive initiatives by these devolved authorities and at a more local level.

“Scotland cut the drink-drive limit and introduced a comprehensive road safety framework with ambitious targets.”

“Wales is introducing national mandatory 20mph (30km/h) speed limits.”

“In England, Transport for London and Highways England have adopted Vision Zero and a range of ambitious measures to deliver it.”

As we mentioned earlier, as well as not making road safety a priority, the UK Government adopted an approach of all out growth for motor travel as away of boosting economic growth following the financial crash of 2008. The result of this has been a rapid increase in vehicle miles² from 2010 right up to the start of the pandemic on 2020 with a particular focus on 'B', 'C' and Unclassified roads (enabled in part in urban areas in particular by the wide adoption of Sat-Nav technology).



The UK Government has further boosted this trend with pro-motoring policies including:

- Removing the fuel-duty escalator whilst increasing public transport costs at above inflation rates.
- Investing £27 billion in road building.

The result of this has also been a huge increase in the number of cars on the road in Great Britain with the number of registered vehicles jumping from 28.6 million in 2000, to 34.0m in 2010 and 38.3m in 2020 with many of the new vehicles being SUVs whose extra weight and height pose greater dangers to those walking and cycling.

Is change on the way?

There are signs that this lack of progress is finally being noted within government. If people are to be persuaded to walk and cycle more and not take the car for short journeys our roads need to feel and be safe.

In 2020, there were two major initiatives from the UK Government to enable higher levels of walking and cycling. In May 2020, the government issued guidance in the light of the pandemic to reallocate road space to people walking and cycling³ including “the development of safe cycling infrastructure for people of all abilities, including disabled cyclists” (LTN 1/20)⁴ as well as the funding for Low Traffic Neighbourhoods. This was followed in July 2020 by the confirmation of the first tranche of funding of the Active Travel Fund⁵ and a second tranche in November 2020.

² <https://roadtraffic.dft.gov.uk/summary>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to-covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cycle-infrastructure-design-ltn-120>

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emergency-active-travel-fund-local-transport-authority-allocations>

In July 2020, the UK Government also announced consultation proposals for revisions to the Highway Code⁶ which sought to improve safety for pedestrians, particularly children, older adults and disabled people, cyclists and horse riders. The results of this consultation are due to be brought into effect later in 2021.

More recently in a PACTS Safe and Healthy Travel Conference on 29th June 2021, Baroness Vere the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, noted the need to develop a strategy that has a more robust approach to road safety and with a focus on speed; this had been almost entirely absent from the most recent road safety statement in 2019⁷.

The Minister refused to confirm whether targets would be included in the strategy but noted other important matters for consideration included the issue of pavement parking and the roads policing review.

So, at the end of this decade there is some light at the end of the tunnel and potentially a government that is at last giving some attention to reducing danger on our roads especially for those who are not protected in a motor vehicle.

We believe that the steps that are needed to make our roads safe are already well known; these need to be introduced immediately. Almost all of the measures that Action Vision Zero proposes are based on research that illustrates their effectiveness and not on behaviour change campaigns whose effectiveness is largely unproven. We have set out the steps that should be taken at <https://actionvisionzero.org/what-to-campaign-for/>

They focus on:

- Safe speeds
- Safe junctions and crossings
- Safe space for cycling
- Less traffic
- Safe vehicles
- Safe behaviours and enforcement.

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/review-of-the-highway-code-to-improve-road-safety-for-cyclists-pedestrians-and-horse-riders/summary-of-the-consultation-proposals-on-a-review-of-the-highway-code>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/road-safety-statement-2019-a-lifetime-of-road-safety>

The specific policies that should be introduced are summarised below:

Safe speeds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Default 20mph limit in built up areas. • Increase compliance through engineering and design enforcement and new technology.
Safe junctions & crossings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing wait times (max 30 seconds) and more realistic walking speeds. • Single stage, direct crossings; signalised junctions should have a pedestrian phase on all arms of the junction; closure of side roads; crossings by bus stops.
Safe space for cycling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protected lanes on main roads (48% fatal/serious cycling casualties on A roads). • Low traffic neighbourhoods. • 20mph default speed limit.
Less traffic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research has found a link of increasing/decreasing traffic levels and linked changes to casualty numbers. • Road pricing, Workplace Parking Levy, ULEZ, increased parking costs.
Safe vehicles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligent Speed Assistance (ISA) – authorities can mandate safer vehicles. • Bus safety standard. • Working vehicle standard.
Safe behaviours and enforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key is “high harm” offences - speeding, drink/drug driving, careless/dangerous driving, mobile phone use and uninsured vehicles. • Greater police focus; more cameras; potential role for LA civil enforcement.

It is time for the UK Government to support those Local Authorities that have taken action in recent years and now to take a lead in bringing down the large number of casualties on our roads. As well as reducing casualties, Vision Zero is so much more. Adopting a road danger reduction approach of this sort will also have many other benefits that are linked to other key agendas at this time including improving poor air quality, reducing CO2 emissions, allowing more people to walk and cycle and to be active and improving communities through less car dominated streets.