20’s plenty where people live

How does 30mph feel? Fairly comfortable, safe even, if you are behind the wheel of a car. Fast enough, but not too fast. But how does it feel to other people? What is the experience of 30mph for instance, from the perspective of a seven year old child walking on the pavement as a car goes past? Bend down to their height and imagine - and then imagine how 20mph might feel instead. Better? Safer?

This was one of many thought provoking questions raised by Rod King, founder of the '20s Plenty for Us' campaign during his presentation at GPG's meeting on Thursday the 21st February. Gathered to discuss the potential benefits that a 20mph speed limit might bring to Penarth's streets,
GPG and friends were delighted to welcome Rod King in his thorough, informed and challenging analysis of the case for '20's Plenty'.

Established by King in 2007, the '20's plenty' campaign has gone on to support over 180 communities across the UK in implementing a 20mph speed limit for motor vehicles in residential streets. With the slogan '20s plenty where people live', the campaign utilises a community-led approach, engaging local residents, schools, health services and other organisations to demonstrate support for and then implement a 'total 20' area across the community. The ethos of the campaign is that it is desired by, campaigned for and adhered to by the community itself. A groundswell of public opinion and desire for change - to a safer more welcoming street environment, enables the 20mph limit to be self-policing. With individual buy-in to the change, i.e. to make streets safer for everyone (sometimes a local campaign is 'triggered' by a fatality or other incident that mobilises people to take action) there is very little need for speed limit enforcement or traffic calming measures such as 'sleeping policemen'. In King's own words, the success of the 20's plenty approach is that it communicates with drivers 'via their brains rather than through the seat of their pants'.

King's use of statistical evidence to support his argument was exemplary. In short - an overview of road casualties suggests that the UK has over the last few decades succeeded in making it's roads much safer. Closer analysis however shows that the benefit has been disproportionally skewed towards those travelling in cars. The UK is ranked second in Europe for overall safety in terms of the number of fatalities on the roads per capita (behind Denmark) but falls to the unenviable position of 16th in terms of child pedestrian fatalities. The proportion of total road fatalities represented by pedestrian deaths in northern Europe as a whole is 11%. In the UK however, pedestrians represent 24% of all those killed on the roads. If King hadn't already convinced at least all the parents in the room at this point, he certainly had us with his next damning statistic, which was that in the UK, the biggest cause of death for children between the ages of 5 and 14 years of age is being hit by a car as a pedestrian. 20 was certainly starting to sound like plenty...

King peppered his presentation with useful facts and figures, too numerous to include in their entirety here. Of particular interest in considering the timeliness of calling for 'total 20' was the fact that when the 30mph speed limit was first introduced for all UK residential streets (in 1974) there were only 2 million cars on the road. Today there are 33 million. Times have changed, and, King argued convincingly, it's time for us as communities to change too and to demand a safer, slower traffic environment where people live.

In what was astutely described afterwards in open session as 'a masterclass in community-led engagement' King talked his audience through the process by which communities can achieve 'total 20'. In its simplest form, this process can be summarised as - establish a desire for change (the 'trigger'); gather support; launch a local, personalised '20's plenty for our community' campaign; engage local groups and stakeholders such as schools and police; work with the Local Authority to identify funding and then implement the 'total 20' area; continue community engagement to ensure endorsement and compliance.

Amongst King's many insights, a few were of particular note and relevance for Penarth. As a community lucky enough to still have a thriving, vibrant town centre, it is worth considering King's observation that 20mph as opposed to 30, means that people 'linger longer, talk more, window shop and generally bring life to the town centre'. This is added to the health benefits of increased walking and cycling, and the social benefits of streets where the advantage of the car over other road users is diminished (as King pointed out 'not everyone is actually trying to get somewhere as fast as possible - some people just want to cross the road to talk to someone').

In summarising the cost-benefit of 'total 20' King referred to evidence that in terms of total speed reduction, implementing community-wide 20mph zones with minimal physical enforcement (i.e. simply with 20mph 'repeater signs' and road markings) is 50 times cheaper mile for mile than localised 20mph zones with traffic calming (e.g. outside schools). In referring to the financing of such schemes he also recommended that 10-20% of the budget be set aside for community engagement, adding with a wry smile - 'actually, I'd strongly recommend that you do make it 20%'.

All in all, the evening felt like one of GPGs most decisive meetings yet. There was a strong sense of consensus in the room, and an agreement that this is an issue very much worth taking action on. Reflecting afterwards as to whether the idea would attract much opposition locally, it seemed already to have been summed up. How could there be any strong, heartfelt opposition to '20's plenty for Penarth' when '30mph just doesn't give you any benefits, but 20mph gives you so many'....?