Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

First, the good news: if people start cycling in middle age, they will have a fitness level that makes them effectively 10 years younger. Hon. Members should think what that would achieve for everybody in the Chamber. Not only that, but the life expectancy of those people will increase by two years, so the benefits-to-risk ratio is around 20:1. Therefore, whatever else happens in this debate and our discussions about reducing the risks and improving the safety of cyclists, let us not forget the benefit and the joy of cycling, and persuade as many people as possible to get cycling.

If we are to get Britain cycling, we have to consider the persuasive arguments and the benefits. For instance, problems with obesity are currently costing the NHS around £5 billion a year. Even if cycling does not necessarily make people skinny—I am speaking from personal experience—it is better to be fit and a little bit flabby than not fit and a little bit flabby. However, this is not just about the physical health benefits; it is also about mental health benefits and the effects that have been shown on brain ageing among people who manage to keep fit. The health economic assessment tool, or HEAT, which is adopted by the World Health Organisation, shows a £4 benefit for every £1 spent. Will the Minister say in his response whether such an assessment has been made for, say, High Speed 2? I cannot help thinking that we would leave a far happier, more lasting and healthier legacy for Britain if we spent just a fraction of what we are spending on HS2 on this issue or possibly even on both.

Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk, Conservative)

I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying. What she said about the miracle improvements to one’s health is fascinating. A lot of money will be spent in the conurbations and in London, but does she agree that it is important that rural areas are not neglected in the great drive to get more people cycling? Does she also agree that cyclists are obviously at a big disadvantage on small rural lanes? We need more rural speed limits and more investment in safer highways in rural areas.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I thank my hon. Friend. Rural speed limits are important. In fact, the introduction of networks of 40 mph speed limits on rural roads had a great benefit in Holland. There is a lot of evidence to support their use, but this is about money. I welcome the £10 a head in the eight cities that will benefit and the spending in, for example, the Dartmoor national park in my part of the world, but that is not what the report called for. Our report called for £10 a head nationally and for us to think of the benefits that that could achieve.

However, this is also about speed, as my hon. Friend pointed out. Let us look at the benefits we would see if we had 20 mph speed limits in urban areas. Too often, highways departments look at accident data before making decisions about speed limits. However, we all know that parents will not let their children cycle in the first place if they do not feel they are safe, and the perception of safety is strongly linked to the speed at which the traffic
is travelling. We should look at speed limits across the board. I recently visited Falcon Park in Torbay, which is a park home development with many elderly residents who cannot walk down the road, let alone cross it, because of high-speed traffic. In any other residential area, the speed limit would have been reduced to 30 mph.

This is not only about 20 mph limits in towns and cities on a network of roads; it is about reducing speed across the board and assessing our priorities. Whom do we prioritise? Are we prioritising vulnerable road users like pedestrians and cyclists, or are we prioritising the motorist and speed? We need to change our priorities completely to achieve that. It does not take a great deal of money to reduce speed limits—everyone recognises that there is a financial imperative—but the issue is not just reducing the speed limit, but enforcing it. We heard shocking evidence in our inquiry about a level of complacency towards enforcement. What discussions have taken place across Departments to ensure that welcome changes in the issuing of fixed penalty notices for careless driving will be extended to penalising people who breach speed limits directly? It is immediate consequences that will drive change.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire, Conservative)

I am sure that, like me, my hon. Friend is delighted to see the Government Chief Whip in his place. He must be the grandfather of parliamentary cycling. On enforcement, does she agree that although motorists should absolutely do the right thing and obey the rules, it is also incumbent on cyclists to obey rules, and that a small minority of cyclists give most cyclists a bad name on occasion by not obeying The Highway Code?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I certainly agree with that. Indeed, if hon. Members want to see evidence of how cycling makes people look 10 years younger, they only have to look at the Chief Whip. [Laughter.] [Hon. Members: "He's only 80!] He does not look a day over 80.

Of course segregated cycling routes are the best option, and of course they are expensive, but sometimes they are not as expensive as they look. In many areas we see examples of small groups of individuals being allowed to stand in the way of low-cost options to create off-road routes. We need to get to grips with that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire, Conservative)

Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I am sorry, but if my hon. Friend will forgive me, I have taken two interventions.

In my area, the South Devon Railway, which was given a bridge that was built half with public money, has treated the River Dart as though it were some kind of moat and has prevented the sharing of that bridge. Such situations are simply unacceptable. That bridge must be the only one in Devon that keeps communities apart rather than brings them together. I call on the South Devon Railway and those involved in all such examples around the country to recognise that they have an opportunity to increase the sum of human happiness. In Totnes, the South Devon Railway has an opportunity to create a link that would join up the national cycle network and, in so doing, increase the footfall for its business. I think we all recognise that cycling has enormous benefits beyond health, with economic benefits for communities. I hope that the South Devon Railway will listen to this
debate and take a generous step forward by helping us to create that link.

I would like to deal briefly with the issue of cycle helmets, which has been brought up today. I agree with Mr Bradshaw that the trouble with making them compulsory would be a net reduction in cycling. Of course, it is sensible for anyone who has a helmet to wear it, but what would happen to the wonderful Boris bikes scheme in London if we made the wearing of them compulsory? No one would use it. Yes, if people have a helmet, they should wear it, but they should not be put off if they do not. Most important, they should not feel that they need special kit. Cycling is for everyone. The statistics show that it will make us live longer and be happier, so let us remember the joys of cycling. Let us get Britain cycling and find the money to make that happen.

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