



Public health specialist Lucy Saunders says a healthy street entices people to walk, cycle or use public transport instead of drive. PHOTO: LAND TRANSPORT AUTHORITY

Reduce speed limits for healthier streets, says British expert

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Motor vehicles travel too fast on the streets of Singapore, said a British expert as she called for speed limits on all non-expressways to be slowed to 30kmh.

A 10kmh reduction makes “the difference between life and death”, public health specialist Lucy Saunders, 39, told *The Straits Times*.

Most speed limits here are capped at 50kmh, with those at elder-friendly Silver Zones and some school zones reduced to 40kmh.

The slower speed limit is part of Ms Saunders’ mission to improve health by creating healthier streets.

“A street that works for people is a street that is good for health,” she told *The Straits Times* last Monday.

This Healthy Streets approach has been adopted by her home capital, London, and she was in Singapore last week to share it with government officials and urban planners.

There are 10 indicators of a street that is appealing, inclusive and promotes better health.

It needs to have clean air, shade and shelter, places to stop and rest, and things to see and do. Pedestrians from all walks of life should find it accessible, easy to cross and not too noisy. They should also feel safe and relaxed while using the street.

A healthy street also needs to entice people to walk, cycle or use public transport instead of drive.

“Walking hasn’t been given the status it deserves,” said Ms Saunders, noting that four in 10 adults in Singapore are not getting the weekly minimum of 150 minutes’ exercise.

“That can be fixed with two 10-minute walks a day,” she added.

While Singapore has relatively low car ownership – there are more than 615,000 cars for a city of 5.6 million – many people still drive or take taxis for short journeys, when they could walk or cycle.

She disagrees that the heat in Singapore puts a damper on the desire to walk, saying the climate is a huge asset, given its relative certainty.

“I don’t see strong winds that could blow you off a bike,” she said, adding that South Korea’s capital Seoul has a culture of people walking and cycling even during the hot summer.

So, how would she grade the

streets of Singapore after her five-day visit here?

She gives them a B grade, adding jokingly: “The challenge is that everyone expects Singapore to get an A.”

The city has many pluses, she said, including the availability of public toilets at MRT stations and an abundance of trees and plants to provide shade and visual interest.

Meanwhile, Singapore’s national agencies have major plans in their drive to turn the island into a car-lite nation.

The goal of the latest Land Transport Master Plan is that by 2040, all journeys to the nearest town can be completed in less than 20 minutes, while nine in 10 peak-period trips are to take less than 45 minutes.

Another is to make the transport system here safer and more welcoming. Some of the planned projects to get Singapore there include an additional 100km of sheltered walkways.

Ms Saunders has more ideas on how to make the streets more people-focused, not car-centric. She suggested reducing the width of traffic lanes to no more than 3.2m. Some lanes here are 3.4m to 3.5m wide.

“The narrower the lanes are, the more drivers concentrate,” she said, adding that the accident rate is likely to drop in turn.

Ms Saunders also recommended levelling the roads on which people walk, so their journeys are not interrupted by having to step up and down pavements whenever they cross a street. She added that more road humps can then be installed to slow cars down at junctions.

In London, “nobody drives, because there’s not enough parking, it’s too expensive and everyone’s friends take public transport,” she said. The sharp drop in car ownership and use was the result of a concerted effort over 20 years.

She is confident Singapore can get there too, as it provides dedicated public transport lanes on the roads and limits the number of parking spaces in specified areas.

As Ms Saunders puts it: “Cars are space-inefficient and driving is useless time. We should get to the point where we use vehicles for when we absolutely need to, like getting a piano from one end of Singapore to the other.”

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