Additional guidance note to Local Authorities to assist the creation of streetscapes which are fully accessible to blind people as required by the Public Sector Equality Duty. (Produced by The National Federation of the Blind of the UK).

ACCESS FOR BLIND PEOPLE IN TOWNS. SS1401.

OVERVIEW

This short document provides the information referred to in Department for Transport (DfT) Local Transport Note 1/11 Shared Space and Manual for Streets which says:

MFS 7.2.10 However, shared surfaces can cause problems for some disabled people. People with cognitive difficulties may find the environment difficult to interpret. In addition, the absence of a conventional kerb poses problems for blind or partially-sighted people, who often rely on this feature to find their way around. It is therefore important that shared surface schemes include an alternative means for visually-impaired people to navigate by.

No DfT guidance is given on this matter, so in many Shared Spaces this instruction has not been implemented, resulting in people with little or no sight being frightened to use these areas, even though they may have walked these same streets for many years before they were rebuilt.

This document sets out the general abilities and limitations of blind people and of trained guide dogs, in order to provide assistance to planners and designers who are responsible for ensuring that streetscape layouts are fully inclusive and meet the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

This short document was prepared by engineers and blind people from the National Federation of the Blind of the UK (NFBUK) and edited by technical staff from The Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) and the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, and should be read in conjunction with DfT guidance documents Manual for Streets and LTN 1/11 Shared Space.

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1.0 ACCESS FOR BLIND PEOPLE IN TOWNS

1.1 The UK Department for Transport (DfT) has long advocated inclusive design in the public realm and this is reflected in the various guidance documents published in relation to street design. Local Transport Note 1/11 Shared Space was published in October 2011 and stresses the importance of designing shared space schemes for disabled people, and there is a particular emphasis on accommodating the needs of people with visual impairment.

1.2 In accordance with the Equality Act 2010, all UK Local Authorities have an obligation to ensure that all streets and public areas are accessible to everyone, including people who have physical or sensory disabilities. As part of this Act, the Public Sector Equality Duty requires local authorities to assess the impact of planning decisions and take action to mitigate against any adverse implications for people with protected characteristics, such as disabled people.

1.3 It has been pointed out that some local authorities have made streetscape changes which are unsafe for blind people to use, and that this error has occurred when the designers concerned were unaware of the abilities and limitations of people with no sight. In order to design fully accessible streetscape layouts it is therefore important that relevant professionals understand how blind pedestrians orientate and navigate their way along urban streets, and this information document has been prepared and checked by various professionals, some of whom are now blind, in order to give guidance to today's streetscape designers.

1.4 Blind people fall into two categories; a small number who will use a guide dog, and the majority who use a long white cane to scan the ground in front of their feet to detect and identify the memorised features and hazards along their journey.

1.5 People who are registered blind may have a small amount of residual vision, but many have no sight at all, so that their sensory ability is equal to that of a sighted person wearing a blindfold. Despite this serious disability many blind people will have been walking through their town streets successfully for many years without being able to see where they are going, having memorised the layout and positions of the standard street infrastructure items which are detectable at ground level. The identification of such items as kerbs, tactile paving, controlled crossings, lamp standards, bus stops and much more will tell them their position along their memorised route.

1.6 In a traditional street a blind person will walk confidently and safely along the footway between building frontages on one side and a kerb on the other, either of which will be detected with their long cane should they drift to either side. When stepping onto a crossing with the aid of tactile paving the blind person needs to be sure that the traffic has been signalled to stop, this being confirmed by the audible beeping, or the rotating of the knurled knob under the control box after the crossing button has been pressed. The blind pedestrian must then decide when it is safe to step out in front of any approaching vehicles which they cannot see.

1.7 At such Puffin crossings the audible beeping from the opposite side of the road then guides the blind pedestrian safely across, preventing them from drifting off the side of the crossing before they reach the other side of the road. This audible guidance is of great value because there is usually no detectable edge on either side of the crossing itself, and without any such guidance a blind white cane user may unknowingly cross the road diagonally, arriving at the other side at an unexpected location.

1.8 Most blind people will avoid streets without safe footways and crossings, and will be frightened to step out in front of approaching vehicles which they cannot see, and which may have no obligation to stop.

1.9 Where kerbs and crossings have been removed the more adventurous blind pedestrian will need to keep in close contact with the building frontages in order to avoid getting disorientated or lost on the flat surface where all detectable ground level features have been carefully removed. Following along building frontages can prove impossible for a blind person if the footway is obstructed with shop displays, cafe furniture, parked vehicles or other obstacles, when rescue by a passer-by may be needed.

1.10 It is not possible for a person with no sight (or a sighted person who is blindfolded to walk for more than a few steps in a straight line without any guidance, so in Shared Spaces or other areas where all surface features have been removed, it is easy to get disorientated, and is particularly frightening for blind people to find themselves walking among moving vehicles without even being sure of the direction in which they are facing.

1.11 Walking along a busy street between the kerb and the buildings without being able to see anything is stressful enough, so most blind people will regard places where kerbs and crossings have been removed as being hazardous, No Go areas from which they are excluded, even though they may have previously walked this route for many years.

2.0 HIGH KERBS, LOW KERBS OR NO KERBS?

2.1 Some designers like to lower kerbs or to remove them entirely, although there appears to be no practical or financial reason for doing so. Standard height kerbs (100 – 150mm high) will provide the following significant advantages:

2.2 All motorists recognise that kerbs indicate pedestrian areas onto which they must not drive.

2.3 Bumping up over a standard height kerb without first stopping, is normally avoided by drivers because the impact can cause damage to the suspension and alloy wheels of some vehicles.

2.4 Lowered or removed kerbs will encourage some motorists to swerve onto the footway to park or to pass on the nearside of other vehicles waiting at road junctions, so bollards, planters or handrails may need to be added later to protect vulnerable pedestrians on such footways.

2.5 Where vehicles are allowed to drive onto footways, it may be necessary to reinforce the footway foundations to protect the underlying electricity, gas, telephone and water services from damage by subsidence caused by the wheels of heavy vehicles.

2.6 Standard height kerbs are convenient for boarding and alighting from buses and taxis, and much less hazardous than raised footway platforms which cannot be moved.

2.7 Guide dogs may not recognise lowered or removed kerbs, and walk across them instead of stopping as they are taught, thereby endangering their owners.

2.8 When a guide dog steps over a kerb, the vertical movement of his harness handle tells the owner that their next step will be up or down a kerb. With a low kerb this vertical handle movement is imperceptible and the guide dog owner may then be presented with an unexpected tripping hazard.

2.9 Guide dogs, white cane users and also many motorists will not recognise a coloured or textured line across a flat surface as indicating the edge of a footway.

3.0 SHARED SPACES FOR EVERYONE

3.1 An ideal Shared Space accessible to everyone can often be provided by a perimeter footway along the building frontages, protected by a standard height kerb and linked across the access streets buy Puffin or Pelican crossings. Blind pedestrians can then circulate safely around the perimeter of the Shared Space alongside the building frontages, whilst non-disabled and sighted people can walk across the central Shared Space area at any point.

3.2 Pedestrian controlled crossings with suitable signage at the road entrances to this Shared Space will mark the start of the 20 mph speed limit, the change in road surface colour, and the removal of the normal driver priority over pedestrians. Such a design may not need a raised road surface, re-aligned gullies and drains or reinforced footways to support vehicles, all of which create the major part of the usual cost of a normal Shared Space design.

4.0 CONSULTATION AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT

4.1 Regulations require that user groups are consulted when new plans are drawn up, and it is particularly important to consult with appropriate disability groups, especially those concerned with Sensory Impairment, the need for which should be understood by all professionals. The Impact Assessment is also very valuable because it can highlight weaknesses in the plan, and also provide evidence that a full evaluation was undertaken before commencement, which can be valuable in the event of a future demand to inspect this important document.

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