

Briefing for the Petitions Committee discussion on shared space
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From: The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs)

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Introduction

Guide Dogs' vision is for a society in which blind and partially sighted people enjoy the same freedom of movement as everyone else. Our purpose is to deliver the guide dog service and other mobility services, as well as breaking down barriers - both physical and legal - to enable blind and partially sighted people to get around on their own terms.

Shared surface streets are where the road and pavement are built at the same level, removing the kerb, and with cars, buses, cyclists and pedestrians sharing the same surface; sometimes controlled crossings (such as pelican crossings) are also removed. The scheme is said to work through reliance on eye contact to negotiate priority.

Guide Dogs believes shared surface streets create issues for many groups of people including -

- Guide dog owners and long cane users, who use the kerb as navigation clue to know where they are in a street, and who are unable to make eye contact with drivers of vehicles or cyclists.
- Disabled and elderly people, who have to share the same space with noisy and intimidating vehicles and bicycles,.
- Young children who no longer know where they can safely cross the road. I.e. without a kerb, how do they know where to stop?

Update on shared surface streets in Wales

Guide Dogs and our partners have had some success in raising awareness of our concerns around shared surface streets in Wales: In Cardiff, for example, we work closely with the council through its Access Officer, and the Cardiff Access Focus Group (CAFG). The CAFG is made up of local disabled people with a shared interest in the city, and in particular issues that affect their access to public facilities such as transport, shopping, libraries, and the many new developments in the city. This positive dialogue has resulted in some exemplars of inclusive environments such as the new layout in High Street, where tactile and colour contrasted paving has been used to separate areas where vehicles can go from those where they cannot, so pedestrians feel safe.

Sadly, however, this good practice is not common place, and in our recent submission to the Enterprise Committee, (below), we give examples of what happens when, in spite of excellent high level commitment to equality of opportunity and engagement, (and the new equality legislation), disabled people, and, in particular, blind and partially sighted pedestrians, are excluded from consultation processes and ultimately put in danger by changes to the public realm.

We wish to make the Committee aware that our work on shared surfaces continues, and that even in time of such financial constraint, retro fitting of measures to protect vulnerable pedestrians cannot be ruled out. We would, of course, recommend that this is avoided by a commitment from local authorities to early and inclusive engagement, and the development of streets that are safe and accessible to all pedestrians.

Extract from our submission to the Enterprise and Business Committee begins here:

Enterprise and Business Committee enquiry into the regeneration of Town Centres

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the inquiry are:

- What approaches have been followed to successfully deliver and finance the regeneration of town centres in Wales? Are there lessons to be learned from elsewhere?

- How does the Welsh Government use the levers at its disposal to assist in the regeneration of town centres in Wales?
- How are the interests and activities of communities, businesses, local authorities and Welsh Ministers identified and coordinated when developing and implementing town centre regeneration projects?

Response to point 1 from Guide Dogs

1. The roles the Welsh Government and local authorities play in the regeneration of town centres.

In this regard, we would draw the Committee's attention to the Heads of the Valleys Regeneration Strategy, "Turning Heads". This is an example of an over-arching strategy which should inform regeneration projects and so it is interesting to note what the Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) has to say about how this should happen.

"Turning Heads: A Strategy for the Heads of the Valleys 2020' outlines the vision for the Heads of the Valleys regeneration work, in the context of the Wales Spatial Plan. It defines Equal Opportunities as a core element of the work and makes a firm commitment to dealing '...proactively with barriers to participation and success' and to not discriminate against any individual or group."

The EIA goes on to say,

"All activities involve partnerships with different organisations. For example, town centre funding is directed through local authorities. Regeneration activity also takes place in partnership with the third sector and through consultants. Ultimately the stakeholders are the residents, potential residents and visitors to the area."

Unfortunately, we have examples of where consultation and engagement, within the Heads of the Valleys area, is not taking place. A public consultation on plans to regenerate the centre of Aberdare was undertaken by Rhondda Cynon Taff Council in June 2011. A month before, a meeting was held with a group of blind and partially sighted people where specific issues of concern were identified and minuted. The consultants engaged by the Council, Capita Symonds, were represented, and the minutes record heated debate about proposed shared surface areas for pedestrians and vehicles and unsegregated pedestrian and cycling routes through the town.

The proposal to reduce some kerbs to 25mm upstands met with strong opposition from the group. Blind and partially sighted people rely on kerbs to tell them where the footway ends and the road begins, so when kerbs are reduced to this extent, or taken away completely, as in shared surface streets, blind and partially sighted pedestrians can wander into the path of vehicles without being aware of the danger. The Capita Symonds consultant did agree to report back, but when the public exhibition was held the 25mm kerbs were still there on the plans.

To date, no specific feedback has been given to the group, and the engagement process, such as it was, is clearly flawed: The meeting referred to here was held far too late in the planning process; the plans presented were all in print with no accessible alternative versions even discussed; the public exhibition, which a local Guide Dog Owner went to on behalf of the group, was entirely inaccessible and based on complex plans displayed on boards attached to the wall of the church where the exhibition was held. This made explaining the proposed new development even harder: The detailed explanation required to describe the plans was hampered by the physical inaccessibility of the diagrams and pictures set up, as they were, for maximum visual impact.

We would therefore have no hesitation in stating that the consultation process was tokenistic and fruitless, and that engagement, as required under the Council's equality duties, failed. It is significant that no EIA had been considered, so it is hard to see what influence the "Turning Heads" strategy had on the process.

Sadly, there is a similar situation taking place in Abertillery, where changes to the town centre mean that local blind and partially sighted people are afraid to walk their usual routes unaccompanied.

“It’s a regular walk for me and my dog, and since they started working there the contractors have been very helpful, taking me around all the obstructions and lorries. Now they’ve moved to another spot, I can’t manage it on my own, and I have to get my wife to come with me. That’s ridiculous, I’ve got a dog to be independent, and I didn’t know they were turning it into a no-go area for me!”
Mr N, Guide Dog Owner, Abertillery.

We close this point with another extract from the “Turning Heads” EIA:

Consultation with Equalities Groups

“It is our responsibility to ensure that the views of men and women, disabled people, people from different ethnic backgrounds, with different religious beliefs (including non-belief) and different sexual orientation are taken on board and responded and used to influence our decision making. We recognise that there is a need to identify gaps in our activity where consultation or involvement with equalities groups is not currently taking place.

Those gaps may be filled by undertaking our own consultation activity or by involving disabled people as part of our work directly. However they may also be filled by working with Local Authorities or other partners to ensure that they are able to provide us with information about how they have sought the views of different equalities groups and responded to the different needs identified.

The evidence suggests that input from consultation activity with excluded groups should inform the development of,
Master Plans, Equality Statements (see SP1) and HARPS.

In addition to this all documentation including for example grant offer letters, project proposal forms should be reviewed for inclusion of productive equality and diversity actions. This would ensure not only that the issue of consultation and involvement is addressed but that the process is used to develop productive outcomes and that commitment to doing so becomes contractual.”