

Covid-19 street design guidance: keeping high streets accessible for people with sight loss

We welcome plans to make streets more inclusive for pedestrians in response to Covid-19. Street design plays a key role in enabling blind and partially sighted people to get around with confidence. We have prepared this guidance for local authorities, planners and designers to help you make changes while ensuring streets remain accessible for people with sight loss.

During the Covid-19 outbreak, increasing the space available for walking is particularly important for people with sight loss, who may struggle to maintain social distancing from other pedestrians who they cannot see. It is important that changes, including those intended to encourage cycling, maintain or improve accessibility of our streets for everyone. Changes to high streets or areas where pedestrians access amenities or public transport are likely to have the biggest impact on people with sight loss.

It is crucial that any changes made are clearly communicated to people with sight loss. Under the Public Sector Equality Duty, local authorities and planners must ensure that the needs of people with disabilities have been considered and equality legislation requires that projects include reasonable adjustments for people with disabilities.

The need to act rapidly must not mean that these duties are overlooked; accessibility requirements apply to temporary measures just as they do to permanent ones. We appreciate that many local authorities will have moved quickly to make changes, but these duties do not end once a scheme has been installed. Where temporary schemes do not meet the needs of people with sight loss, these should be reviewed in line with our recommendations below.

Consultation and engagement

Although the pace of change means that consultation may be less formalised, it remains important to seek input on how schemes will affect blind and partially sighted people. Local sight loss organisations will often be best placed to provide this input.

- Seek input from local sight loss organisations and blind and partially sighted road users on proposed changes to road layouts at the design stage
- Consultation and engagement must be carried out in an accessible way, for example all websites used should meet the web accessibility directive

Communication

People with sight loss will only be able to take full advantage of additional space for walking if they are aware it has been made available. Purely visual cues on the street, such as signs indicating changed layouts, are unlikely to achieve this.

- Changes to street layouts must be communicated in an accessible format: for instance, online maps which meet web accessibility standards should be made available to show changes across a neighbourhood, and updated regularly
- Local sight loss organisations and blind and partially sighted road users should be consulted on how to communicate changes effectively
- As far as possible, pre-change street layouts should remain legible so they can be used by people with sight loss even if they are not aware what changes have been made

Review

While changes to street design may have already taken place, temporary schemes are easier to amend when they do not meet the needs of disabled road users. Many of our recommendations below on street design can be applied to existing measures without changing the nature of the scheme.

- Evaluate whether disabled people, including people with sight loss, can use temporary measures effectively
- Prioritise changes to existing schemes where people with sight loss cannot navigate them independently

Changes to walking infrastructure

People with sight loss rely on physical cues such as kerbs, tactile paving and controlled crossings to navigate safely. Tactile paving and height changes given by kerbs provide important navigational information to cane users, and guide dogs are trained to stop at these

features, so if they are missing, navigation becomes difficult or impossible.

- Existing kerbs, tactile paving and controlled crossings should be maintained to ensure that blind and partially sighted people know where the pavement ends and the road begins
- Consider whether additional temporary tactile paving will be needed to enable people with sight loss to use reallocated space safely. This is particularly important where pedestrian areas are only separated from the road by permeable barriers and there is therefore a risk of people with sight loss inadvertently walking into the road.
- For longer-term interventions, consider creating a temporary kerb to assist people with sight loss
- Temporary features, such as planters or barriers, used to reallocate space must feature colour contrast, avoid any trip hazards and be easy for people with sight loss to detect with a long cane - cones are not appropriate markers for pedestrian areas
- One-way systems for pedestrians should be avoided, as blind and partially sighted people may be unable to follow them without additional support. This may result in conflict with other pedestrians. If a one-way system is to be used, the layout must be communicated effectively to people with sight loss and each direction must be separated from the other with physical features, such as an accessible barrier.
- New signage indicating changed layouts should be kept to a minimum to avoid additional street clutter, with signs positioned so that they do not present a potentially dangerous obstacle for blind and partially sighted pedestrians
- All signage should be in clear, large print with strong contrast
- Remove non-essential street furniture such as A-boards to increase space on the pavement and reduce obstructions
- Any new queuing areas or outside seating for cafes or restaurants should be located away from pedestrian desire lines; these areas should be marked out with accessible barriers with tap rails to make them easy to detect
- Restrict pavement parking wherever possible, as it reduces space available for pedestrians; with a temporary TRO in place, it may be possible to co-locate the signage needed for pavement parking restrictions with signs indicating new layouts

Changes to cycling infrastructure

People with sight loss often rely on hearing to navigate safely and find it difficult to detect and avoid quiet cycle traffic. This has the largest impact where pedestrians and cyclists share space.

- The default position of any proposed changes should be that space is reallocated to cycling on the carriageway
- Shared use areas where pedestrians and cyclists use the same space are inaccessible for people with sight loss even with low levels of cycle traffic - segregated provision for cycling and walking is essential
- There should be a physical demarcation between pedestrian areas and cycle tracks, such as a kerb, barrier or, where these are not possible, a raised tactile strip. A change in colour is also desirable, but a sign or a purely visual cue such as a white line alone will not be effective
- Where pedestrians would need to cross a new cycle lane, there must be adequate controlled crossings for people with sight loss to do this safely, particularly where cycle lanes affect access to bus stops or other public transport
- Where significant increases in cycle traffic are anticipated, existing crossing provision should be upgraded to allow pedestrians to cross safely

For more information, please contact

Guide Dogs - anne-marie.barry@guidedogs.org.uk

End of document