

P-04-144 - Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Deputy Clerk, 05.02.13



Guide Dogs Cymru
Building 3
Eastern Business Park
Waun Fawr Lane
St Mellons
Cardiff
CF3 5EA

Date 5 February 2013

Kayleigh Driscoll
Petitions Committee Deputy Clerk
National Assembly For Wales
Cardiff Bay,
Cardiff,
CF99 1NA

Dear Kayleigh

Petition about the Use of Shared Space

Many thanks for sending me copies of the responses from the Minister and the WLGA.

I am very grateful for the opportunity to comment further:-

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Access Groups, where they exist, are made up of volunteers. They are generally well informed and have a lot of experience of examining plans but cannot be expected to understand the concerns of all disabled people. This is the responsibility of planners and equality officers within the local authority.

Typically plans are presented in print so it is difficult for blind and partially sighted people to understand the full implications of a proposal. Shared surfaces, where kerbs are removed to facilitate free movement of vehicles and people, can appear to be helpful by creating a level surface without physical barriers. Unless the Access Group understands and conveys the importance of building in the appropriate tactile warning surface on dropped kerbs, the result could inadvertently put blind and partially sighted people in danger.

We campaign for inclusive environments which encourage safe independent mobility for all pedestrians. This can be done by ensuring that where kerbs are dropped to facilitate easy movement for wheelchair users, parents with pushchairs, and so on, they are replaced with a colour contrasted tactile surface to warn blind and partially sighted pedestrians that they are about to step into an area where vehicles are moving around.

There is nothing complex about this concept but in our experience design consultants value the aesthetic appearance of a scheme beyond its usefulness to all members of the community. This can lead to the creation of a frighteningly featureless landscape which has no clues for a cane user, and lacks the vital orientation points which a guide dog will look for to orientate its owner.

When people lose their sight they have to learn techniques to get about safely. This mobility training is provided by Rehabilitation Officers in Social Services on a one to one basis. When local authorities consult on regeneration schemes, they use conventional methods such as public meetings and exhibitions to tell the community what they are proposing.

Blind and partially sighted people will often struggle to interpret plans and may not even know about public notices or newspaper articles. We are therefore pleased to note mention of involving social services by some local authorities, but this is not consistent.

In our experience, local authorities find it hard to engage with blind and partially sighted people so they assume that the advice they get from the local Access Group will cover all issues. The first indication of a problem is when the Rehabilitation Officers or professionals working with blind and partially sighted people get requests for help from an individual who has, until the new shared surface was developed, been getting around independently.

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This takes us to the issue of Equality Impact Assessment, EIA: Sadly, we can give examples of schemes where an EIA has not been conducted. We wholeheartedly agree that engagement should identify the risks to blind and partially sighted people as a protected group from the start, but if the local authority does not consult them the specific issues affecting them are not taken into account.

We believe that understanding of the EIA process is variable and that apart from a few pockets of good practice, (Swansea, Cardiff, and Merthyr), application of the engagement duty when it comes to regeneration and planning is not at the level which the WLGA suggests.

Guide Dogs Cymru has provided several “walk a mile in my shoes” events across Wales involving local councillors, assembly members and organisations working with and for blind and partially sighted people. We would argue from this experience that understanding of how blind and partially sighted people get about independently is poor. Without exception planning and highways officers have found the events enlightening and educational. We suggest that the reason for this is that understanding barriers for physical mobility is easier, installation of ramps, dropping kerbs and so on.

The current trend towards shared surfaces has created the biggest barrier to safe independent mobility for blind and partially sighted people in recent years. The paper we presented to the Petitions Committee sets out the serious consequences of such schemes. We would ask that, in line with its commitment to the Social Model of Disability, the Welsh Government does all it can to prevent shared surface schemes creating an unnecessary barrier to the safety and wellbeing of people with sight loss. We would welcome the support of the WLGA to do this and in particular to challenge the introduction of any shared surface schemes in the current financial climate. Blind and partially sighted people are likely to lose benefits under the UK government’s welfare reform and potential reductions in social services’ budgets mean that access to help with mobility is even harder to get. Why would we not do all we can to prevent the creation of another obstacle to their independence?

We are very happy for this letter to be placed in the public domain. It might be helpful if the Petitions Committee asks the Minister for a progress report on this matter at the end of the year. We will write to the Petitions Committee Chairman at that time to inform him if difficulties for blind and partially sighted people in Wales, with shared surfaces, are continuing.

Yours sincerely,

Andrea Gordon

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