

## RNIB Scotland response to Transport Scotland's consultation on draft Guidance on Inclusive Design for Town Centres and Busy Streets.

### Introduction

Across the UK one in five people will start to live with sight loss in their lifetime. The 2023 version of the RNIB Sight Loss Data Tool states that the number of people estimated to be living with sight loss in Scotland is 183,000 and reports the number of registered blind or partially sighted people to be 34,492, as stated in the last Scottish Government returns for 2010, published in 2011. The 2032 projection for sight loss population in Scotland is 214,000.

RNIB Scotland is the country’s leading charity working with blind and partially sighted people. We support visually impaired children and adults and help them to live full and independent lives, campaigning for their rights. Our response to this consultation has been informed by our membership of the Transport Scotland Inclusive Design Working Group since 2016; other consultation response and RNIB Scotland research and publications, including "Street Credibility" (2023).

## Part One - Inclusive Engagement for Street Design

There are five high level principles on engagement for street design.

Also provided in our [Guidance on Inclusive Design for Town Centres and Busy Streets](https://www.transport.gov.scot/consultation/guidance-on-inclusive-design-for-town-centres-and-busy-streets/) are guidance notes for engagement on street design, based on the National Standards for Community Engagement.

Additional guidance can be found within the [Scottish Government Participation Framework](http://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/advice-and-guidance/2023/02/participation-framework/documents/participation-framework/participation-framework/govscot%3Adocument/participation-framework.pdf) which provides advice on participation including the spectrum of participation; inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and delegate.

We want your views on the following 6 principles for inclusive engagement for street design.

### 1. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 1 and what it is trying to achieve

#### [Principle 1 - Why?](https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/inclusive-design-town-centres-busy-streets/#question-2024-01-10-1549648730-factbanksubquestion-1704905210-54) – the need for engagement

Please give us your views

It is a legal requirement that public consultations and engagement methods used for street development or public realm proposals are accessible.

The Equality Act (2010) and the Public Sector Equality Duty sets out public bodies duties within a statutory framework. However, this does not equate to inclusive engagement. A range of methods and resources are required to support the inclusion of those most at risk of becoming disadvantaged by plans or proposals in the public realm, including people with sight loss. Every effort should be made by those responsible for the street environment, including local authorities, to actively engage and involve disabled people not just during the consultation phase but throughout the development and delivery of projects.

An informed understanding of the range of access needs of those with protected characteristics, including the distinctive needs of blind and partially sighted people, will improve design at the development stage and help avoid lengthy public consultations and expensive retrofitting at later stages.

Although it's helpful to mention the need to make reasonable adjustments in the context of streets and engagement processes, within the consultation document, the URL link which is provided is not relevant for this purpose as it relates to health. Links or sources must relate to the content of the guidance or could cause confusion.

### 2. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 2 and what it is trying to achieve

#### [Principle 2 – When?](https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/inclusive-design-town-centres-busy-streets/#question-2024-01-11-7174277374-factbanksubquestion-1704973774-56) – Early and ongoing engagement is required

We agree there must be early engagement before plans and proposals are finalised. Too often blind and partially sighted people are consulted when plans or proposals have already been drawn up and in some cases work has already started.

We experienced radical changes to public spaces during the coronavirus pandemic as Spaces for People initiatives were introduced during a time when walking and cycling was on the rise. Some Spaces for People changes have since been removed but others have become permanent. At the same time, the pressure to push on with street developments delayed during the pandemic, coupled with a desire to address the demands of climate change, mean that significant changes to the streetscape are now being rolled out across the country.

As a result, plans and proposals are often agreed without adequate consultation, with blind and partially sighted people unaware of what changes are being implemented and where.

We agree there must be clear accountability and routes of engagement throughout a project from initiation to completion. Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) may require updating as plans develop, and those involved should be kept informed of when changes and improvements are made throughout the duration of the project and thereafter.

### 3. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 3 and what it is trying to achieve

#### Principle 3 – What? All engagement materials and language used should be accessible to the audience.

The provision of accessible information is crucial to enable blind and partially sighted people to participate. For most people this is achieved through printed information, but for a person with sight loss, printed information is often inaccessible, particularly if it uses small typeface or cannot be enlarged.

The harmful impact of not receiving information in a preferred and accessible reading format should not be underestimated. Plans and proposals that rely on visual graphs and diagrams without adequate explanation or description are effectively meaningless to people with sight loss.

There must be adequate provision made to ensure that all plans and proposals are available via a range of mediums, including site visits and tactile models, so people with sight loss can comment on how changes will impact on them.

When images, graphics or diagrams appear in documents, alternative text must be provided, including a full and accurate description of what is presented. This is crucial for those who use assistive technology such as screen reading software. Without this blind and partially sighted people cannot be said to be fully engaged or included.

There are different forms of participation, ranging from consultation, through to engagement, and into co-production and co-design. However, to be effective the methods used must be accessible. Taking an inclusive communications approach and ensuring there is access to information in a range of formats can help. Where barriers or issues are highlighted, these must be addressed within a reasonable timeframe, particularly when consultations are time limited.

### 4. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 4 and what it is trying to achieve

#### [Principle 4 – How?](https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/inclusive-design-town-centres-busy-streets/#question-2024-01-11-9731998743-factbanksubquestion-1704974092-84) - there is a need to engage with individuals, local communities and groups who use, or may use a place.

RNIB Scotland does not offer specialist expertise on street design or have the capacity to respond to the proliferation of street developments underway across Scotland. However, there are some key principles which blind and partially sighted people have consistently highlighted when it comes to planning inclusive streets and public spaces. These were highlighted in RNIB Scotland's 2023 publication "Street Credibility: making Scotland's streets accessible for people with sight loss".

Whilst there must be a genuine commitment to involve and collaborate, prospective participants need to know how their involvement will impact on plans and proposals from the outset. There must be resources to support the inclusion of people with sight loss.

Access Panels are valuable sources of information for local authorities seeking advice on the impact of plans and proposals on disabled people.

However, it must be noted that repeated requests for involvement can also increase the burden of responsibility on a particular group. Many stakeholder and community representative groups can experience "consultation fatigue" when they receive a high number of participation requests. Therefore, it is important that consultation requests are clearly explained and target people who are directly affected by proposals.

There must be honest and open routes of communication between planners and designers and those they engage throughout the planning and delivery of public realm developments. Finally, there must be recognition that involvement in consultations does not equate to endorsement of street designs and proposals.

### 5. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 5 – Where? The engagement should take place at convenient locations for all parts of the community to attend.

A range of locations may be required for meetings especially as town centres serve those living in outlying areas. This may involve several considerations such as public transport links, meeting times,

school holidays, weather conditions and meeting support. Meeting support may include sighted assistance or guiding, reimbursement of reasonable travel costs, interpreters (including electronic notetakers), and British Sign Language interpreters.

Whilst face to face meetings give the opportunity for people to gather in person at community venues, other engagement methods such as online meetings, drop-in sessions, or roadshows, may be more appropriate in some circumstances.

Contact should be made with organisations representing disabled people and impairment specific groups to ensure engagement is accessible from the outset. Public meetings and consultation dates must also be publicised as early as possible. Contact details of organisers must be given so participants can request assistance or accessible formats.

Online methods of engagement can be useful for those with access to technology, although it cannot be assumed this will suit everyone. While many blind and partially sighted people do engage in the digital society, statistics indicate people with sight loss are still twice as likely to be digitally excluded when compared to the general population.

Within the consultation document there is a hyperlink to a 2015 source - [National Standards for Community Engagement | What Works Scotland](https://whatworksscotland.ac.uk/publications/national-standards-for-community-engagement/).

It would be preferable to have a more up to date reference.

## Part Two - Physical Design Measures for Inclusive Design

As with all street design, a place and person-led approach should be used which considers the individual aspects of the street and the needs of all of its users. Design measures which separate pedestrian routes from cycle and motor vehicle routes can provide benefit for all users. However, what enables one group may potentially disable another, for example, kerbs can allow blind and visually impaired people to navigate but can also be a barrier to wheelchair users. The design process needs to take potential conflicting issues such as this into account, for example by use of dropped kerbs with appropriate tactile paving.

When designing or adapting busy streets and town centres, the sustainable transport hierarchy should be referred to in determining how the travel priorities of different modes of transport should be considered.

The hierarchy puts the consideration of walking and wheeling at the top followed in descending order by cycling, public transport, taxis, and shared transport with private cars at the bottom. In addition to supporting sustainable travel, the hierarchy can help in the design of inclusive street environments with the consideration of walking and wheeling prioritised. In using the hierarchy, any particular requirements for disabled people should be taken into account, such as the need for disabled access and accessible parking at key locations.

During the design process, projects should adopt a holistic and integrated approach to design that reviews and takes into consideration the surrounding streets and any impacts this may have on the design. In doing so the design can more successfully create an environment where traffic volumes and speeds are kept at a level that suits the environment and users.

We want your views on the principles and key considerations to support physical design measures for inclusive design.

### 6. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 6 and what it is trying to achieve

#### Principle 6 – Effective Separation Between Different User Zones: "Appropriate demarcation between pedestrian, cycle and motor vehicle zones significantly increases user confidence and enhances safety."

Blind and partially sighted people rely on detectable kerbs to navigate safely and to avoid moving vehicles including cars and cycles. Research undertaken for Guide Dogs recommended a minimum upstand of 60mm. Guide dogs can also orientate their owner by using the upstand of a kerb.

RNIB Scotland and other sight loss organisations in Scotland have urged caution on the exclusive use of tactile paving to distinguish between the pavement and cycle-lanes or carriageway. If tactile paving is used without accompanying features or out of context, it may only serve to cause further confusion.

We have concerns about the consultation document's references to level surfaces and general statements which may qualify their use. For example:

Level surfaces "should not be considered unless traffic speed and volume is low and consultation with the local community has taken place. … Strong justification will be required if a street is to be categorised as low flow and low speed."

Although the guidance states strong justification will be required, there is less detail on what definition or criteria is used to determine low flow and low speed including volume. This could be open to interpretation by those responsible for the street environment.

The consultation document later states that "this type of arrangement is likely to be appropriate only on historical streets". However, the document does not clarify what may constitute a historical street. For instance, is "a historical street" an old street such as the Royal Mile in Edinburgh or a street which has been levelled off?

We are concerned that components of shared space or level surface designs are apparent in many new plans and designs for city centres and busy street areas.

### 7. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 7 and what it is trying to achieve

#### [Principle 7 – Clear, Unobstructed Pedestrian Corridors and Footways](https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/inclusive-design-town-centres-busy-streets/#question-2024-01-11-4473931531-factbanksubquestion-1704974526-92): "Pedestrian corridors and footways should be free from obstruction and of the requisite width to support safe, unhindered, confident access for all street users."

The proliferation of street furniture on pavements causes severe safety risks for blind and partially sighted people. This includes obstructions at eye-level, or head-height which are difficult for people with sight loss to detect.

The consultation draft urges caution on the overuse of street furniture on pavements and stipulates two metres as the minimum width for a clear pedestrian corridor. We agree and welcome inclusion of this, including the requirement for EQiAs where this minimum width is not met.

Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Points, and space for cycle parking and cycle hire schemes are likely to increase demands for space in town centres. Where possible, space for this infrastructure should be taken from the existing carriageway as opposed to the pavement. This would be in line with the transport hierarchy gives priority to pedestrians on foot or wheeling.

In Scotland the recent pavement parking ban makes it illegal for anyone to park a vehicle on a pavement. However, it is necessary for local authorities to actively enforce the ban.

The consultation document lists many potential street obstacles including street café furniture. Permitted Development Rights (PDR) now reduce the need for cafes/restaurants to obtain permission to situate café style furniture on the pavement. This makes it highly likely that complaints will be made after the event while it is likely to be contended that the changes are permissible under permitted development.

The ban on A-boards (Advertising boards) introduced by City of Edinburgh Council coupled with enforcement and guidance on alternative advertising for local businesses has been a success to ensure pavements remain a safe space for pedestrians. More could be done to encourage other local authorities to implement a similar ban.

It would be helpful if local authorities made it easy for members of the public to report obstructions on the pavement.

### 8. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 8 and what it is trying to achieve

#### [Principle 8 – Crossings](https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/inclusive-design-town-centres-busy-streets/#question-2024-01-11-5502352475-factbanksubquestion-1704974677-2): Signal-controlled crossings are preferred by many street users and provide the highest degree of control and therefore confidence for disabled street users.

We welcome the emphasis on signalised controlled crossing points as the safest way for blind and partially sighted people (and others) to cross a road with confidence. Controlled crossings include features such as tactile paving, rotating tactile cones and sometimes audible cues which let blind and partially sighted people know when it's safe to cross.

However, too often, rotating cones are either missing or broken. Outwith major trunk roads in Scotland, local authorities are responsible for fixing faults on pedestrian crossings and traffic signals on streets and roads.

Having accessible and well-advertised fault reporting systems so that problems can be reported easily by phone or online is essential. This also ensures that repairs are done promptly.

Some emerging pedestrian crossing designs including continuous crossings or footways are causing concern for blind and partially sighted people. These effectively extend the look and feel of a pavement over a road or junction, creating a level surface. Blind and partially sighted people have consistently said such designs, exclude them from being able to undertake journeys with confidence, as they have no way of knowing whether they could be walking into the path of an oncoming vehicle.

There is a danger more crossings like this will be installed across more junctions where traffic is already busy, particularly on streets which serve as diversions to other parts of cities and towns. In this section it would be helpful to reference recent research on the use of continuous footways/cross overs.

### 9. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 9 and what it is trying to achieve

#### Principle 9 – Materials: The design of pavements and other street features should consider colour and tonal contrast in all weather and light conditions to support access for all street users.

The RNIB document "Building Sight Design: principles and practical recommendations for accessible buildings and environments" explores what constitutes good tonal and colour contrast. It would also be useful to include reference to the Department for Transport "Inclusive Mobility Guidelines" in this guidance.

The consultation document states that social spaces should be visibly identifiable and separated from areas required for movement. Pavements, cycle lanes and the carriageway all facilitate the movement of people. However, there is no distinction of each of them in this section of the guidance. For blind and partially sighted people, particularly those with some remaining vision, colour contrast is a useful indication to tell when a surface changes in its use, for example, being able to tell a cycle lane from a pavement.

The guidance on maintenance and reinstatement of surfaces is welcome. Uneven surfaces present real challenges for blind and partially sighted people, particularly amongst those who use long canes to detect obstacles to prevent trips and stumbles. Whilst rolling tip canes are best for smooth pavements and offer the largest amount of protection as they never leave the ground, they can also get trapped by uneven ground, potholes, and cracks, which over time can jar the arm of the user.

Tactile paving guidance should be referenced in this section of the document.

It would be helpful to emphasise that consistency is essential for inclusive design, and that the materials used for surfaces must be used correctly.

### 10. Please give us any comments relating to Principle 10 and what it is trying to achieve

#### Principle 10 – Consistency in Design: Consistency of approach in the design of street features in town centres and busy street areas supports access for all street users, increases confidence and minimises feelings of anxiety or of feeling unsafe.

RNIB Scotland agrees that consistency of approach in the design of street features increases confidence and minimises feelings of anxiety or of feeling unsafe.

So, we are concerned that the consultation document also states that "each project has to be design-led, and appropriate for the context and environment rather than using a standardised approach".

Consistency in street design is essential for people with sight loss. It helps them to navigate independently. When the streetscape is changed, visually impaired people may require further visual rehabilitation guidance. They are likely to memorise routes to get to key places within their community. Significant changes can severely compromise the safety and confidence of blind and partially sighted people.

The consultation document proposes a range of methods to record and assess the impact of changes but most of these are already legal requirements.

We agree with the Mobility Access Committee for Scotland (MACS) that it would be useful to reference the ongoing research and concluded guidance in various areas affecting the built environment including but not limited to Floating Bus Stops, Continuous Footways, and EV Charging.