

PE1595/G

National Federation of the Blind of the UK Email of 31 December 2015

To: The Petitions Committee, Reference PE1595.

I wish to add my support to the above petition about the proposed streetscape changes in Kirkintilloch, and give permission for this submission to be circulated electronically or via any other required method or format.

Shared Streets equals equality, but are pedestrians as equal as motorists?

The removal of red lights and pedestrian crossings at which traffic has to stop is a popular way of improving traffic flow and speeding it on its way to other destinations, by giving it priority over local people who are walking to nearby shops and businesses, who are unable to stop the traffic in order to cross the road.

Crossing a shared space or a courtesy crossing where the kerbs and legal crossings have been removed provides a challenge for mothers with small children, the old and infirm and requires considerable courage from both blind and visually impaired people. Every day town streets are walked by thousands of blind people who cannot see where they are walking, who navigate their way using a guide dog or a long cane to identify kerbs and other features on the ground. This is the procedure which, as a blind person, I have used to cross streets where kerbs and crossings have been removed.

Where there is no curb from which to establish a precise direction of travel, this is obtained by starting with one's back touching the wall of a building, and then walking forward, scanning one's cane in the usual way to detect any obstacles, whilst walking slowly into the path of approaching traffic. Some drivers can get very annoyed at pedestrians, who step out in front of them without looking, but it is important for a blind person not to look to the left or right, as an approaching driver may think he has been seen and that the pedestrian will therefore automatically stop for him. It is also essential to walk slowly, to give drivers time to see the pedestrian and to stop or swerve to avoid hitting him.

Whilst walking in an area where all surface features have been carefully removed, blind pedestrians will be walking without any guidance and will inevitably drift to left or right on their way across the street, and on reaching the other side will need to establish their exact location, which may take several minutes.

The whole shared space theory ignores blind people, and rests on the premise that if a blind pedestrian or a running child appears in front of a vehicle, it will be moving slowly enough to stop almost instantly, but as this is seldom the case, the safety of

every vulnerable pedestrian depends entirely on the alertness and ability of every individual driver to react and stop quickly. While a sighted pedestrian can see the speed of an approaching vehicle and step back if it appears to be moving too fast, the blind pedestrian does not have this ability and is therefore very vulnerable.

With justifiable reason therefore virtually every blind person is afraid to step into the road in front of approaching vehicles which they cannot see, and which may have no legal obligation to stop. If it is a long walk to a safe controlled crossing then the blind pedestrian may decide to avoid visiting this part of town in the future. At a later date when road users are questioned, some are likely to confirm their approval of the new road layout, but the vulnerable people who have safety problems will not be questioned, having stopped visiting this street long before.

Streets which are not accessible to all members of the public contravene the Public Sector Equality Duty, and legal action is now under way against the first of a number of offending Local Authorities. Do you intend your town streets to remain accessible in accordance with the Public Sector Equality Duty?

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The National Federation of the Blind of the UK