

PE1595/H

Elizabeth Anne Frith Email of 1 January 2016

I write in support of the petition lodged with the Scottish Parliament by Alexander Taylor in Dec 2015. This urges that there should be a moratorium, immediately enforced, on all local authority planning schemes which involve so-called, 'shared spaces, shared surfaces, community areas, etc.' In essence these schemes involve the removal of pavements, kerbs, controlled crossings, and other safety features. The resulting space may be used by vehicles, pedestrians, cyclists with little or no legal regulation. Action being taken by the police only if physical injury is involved and the perpetrator can be identified.

I am totally blind, and I now use a guide-dog. I am a member of the Royal National Institute of Blind People and the National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom. For some years I lived in Glasgow. At that time shared spaces were not a favoured concept by planners and new traffic schemes included pavements, kerbs, and controlled crossings. I presently live in Suffolk where at least four shared space schemes have been introduced with no consultation taking place in order to establish the needs of blind people, and other vulnerable groups, or to register and accommodate any proposals. After this fourth one had been introduced I have been assured by the then leader of the County Council that in future blind people would be consulted about their needs. The guide-lines to planning departments state that the needs of the blind must be accommodated in new schemes but there is no necessity for councils to follow the guide-lines, and no authority is named to ensure that this is done. So they are ignored, I suggest because all the planners know that the guide-lines have not been followed and the needs of blind people and other vulnerable groups have intentionally not been considered or met.

As Alexander Taylor wrote, these schemes have been promoted in many places without adequate consultation, and now they are being questioned as to their non-compliance with anti-discrimination legislation, and on equality of access, and most importantly, safety grounds. The fashion spread from the Continent. There now such schemes have been declared illegal in Germany. Even in Holland, where it is cited, without evidence, that these schemes are a success and reduce accidents, there is now pressure to halt them. In both Germany and Holland pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists, are already more strictly segregated than in this Country

Blind people, and other vulnerable groups, need a safe passage through a shared space. This needs to have a recognizable physical barrier between the vehicles and the pedestrians, preferably a pavement with a sizeable kerb which will not be worn down the next time the road is re-surfaced. A painted line is not enough, nor a corrugated strip. These are difficult to find and interpret by blind people and are usually ignored by motorists and cyclists.

Legal crossing points, with audible and visual controls, are needed by blind people, the frail, the elderly, small children, indeed most of the people likely to be walking in these areas. Courtesy crossings have no basis in law. It was said by the promoters of these schemes in the early days that priority would be established by eye-contact. Ignoring the fact that blind people cannot make eye-contact, my husband tells me that even for fully sighted people it is often difficult or impossible to make eye-contact with drivers on account of the shape of most modern windscreens. Add to this the introduction of often silent electric cars and a blind person is left with no useful senses so a physical and safe pavement, with no possibility of meeting a moving vehicle, is vital.

I understand that there is a new cycleway along the middle of a busy road along part of the Thames in London. This has cyclists going in both directions as though it were a conventional road. On either side there is traffic going in one direction. This cycleway does not rely on a painted line although presumably all using it will have full sight, but it is raised above road level and has a substantial kerb on both sides. Why then is this feature not felt necessary to protect pedestrians in so-called shared spaces?

This whole question needs much careful research and scrutiny and justification for all plans proposed. Someone, or the Council, should be made personally responsible for ensuring that all groups with an interest should be effectively contacted and any comments be formally considered. That person, or Council, should be liable to explain what efforts have been made to contact groups, how the suggestions have been incorporated, and if challenged, how the plans comply with the rights of equal access for all and particularly the safety issues, and the anti-discrimination legislation.

Until an individual is made responsible for the above, the needs of the blind and other disabled people, which could so easily be accommodated and included at the earliest planning stage, go unrecorded and ignored. A director of one of the companies mainly pushing for these schemes is on record of advising councils considering such schemes that blind people will oppose them but once the scheme is up and running, they will go away. He is quite right.

Another idea put forward by the proponents of the schemes is that people, including motorists, must be educated to use such spaces properly. If I could have been educated to see, then this would have happened fifty years ago.

Since the merger of legislation concerning the rights and protection of disabled people with those of other much more vocal and visible groups identified by race or religion, the needs of disabled people have been largely ignored with national government saying that local government is responsible, and local government

having no-one to audit their compliance.

So, please listen sympathetically to Alexander Taylor's petition and declare a moratorium on all shared space schemes until such time as all interested parties can be consulted and either the schemes be wholly abandoned, or such alterations are made that they will be accessible to unaccompanied blind, elderly, and disabled people.

Elizabeth Anne Frith