

Briefing note for Forward Plan Select Committee, 3 March 2010

Public Realm Design Guide & shared spaces.

1. Background to the shared space issue.

There is currently a great deal of professional debate and research relating to the issue of 'shared space' (which may also be referred to as shared streets or shared surfaces). It was the subject of two conferences in December 2009 and the Department for Transport is due shortly to publish the findings of new research. There are also numerous references to shared surface streets and shared space in Department for Transport's publication Manual for Street and the recently published draft of the Mayor's Transport Strategy.

However, there remains at present no generally accepted definition of exactly what a shared space design is; for example is a junction incorporating a speed table a shared space? In this respect, recent and much publicised 'shared space' schemes in Kensington High Street, Ashford and Brighton vary considerably in design terms, specifically in relation to the use of kerbs, kerb heights and contrasting materials. However, they do all, to some extent, reduce the level of physical and visual segregation between vehicles and pedestrians. The definition being used in current work for the DfT is: 'A street or place accessible to both pedestrians and vehicles that is designed to enable pedestrians to move more freely by reducing traffic management features that tend to encourage users of vehicles to assume priority.'

The "NO to Shared Streets" Campaign

Opposition to the shared space approach has been voiced by the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association's via its "NO to Shared Streets" campaign. This campaign focuses on the difficulty shared spaces present for the visually impaired.

The issue was highlighted recently when Lord Carlisle of Berriew QC refused to grant the GDforB Association permission to proceed with its judicial review against the £25 million redesign of London's Exhibition Road which involves removing traditional kerbs.

Responding to the Guide Dogs Associations' concerns the Mayor for London has stated that:

"I have every confidence that the Exhibition Road scheme will be well designed and will show this to be the case, although the details of the design are for the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster to decide upon.

I strongly support the Exhibition Road project and believe it is an innovative way to improve conditions along this important street. I see the Exhibition Road scheme as very important in demonstrating how to introduce a new type of street design that encourages drivers to be more aware of pedestrians whilst also improving urban realm. One of the key concepts behind shared space is to enable drivers to take the

entire street environment into consideration and modify their driving accordingly, creating safer and more pleasant streets.

As you are aware, the Department for Transport (DfT) wrote to all Highway Authorities on 22 April, and noted that shared surfaces present difficulties for some disabled people. The DfT asked highway authorities planning to introduce shared space or surfaces to please ensure that they take particular care to consider the needs of visually impaired people and continue to follow good practice when designing streetscape schemes by taking account of all road user needs and consulting with relevant user groups as necessary. As a funding contributor, it is important to me that the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster follow such advice. I have every confidence that they are doing so.

I am acutely aware that The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association has concerns about changing to these new shared space designs. I understand these concerns, and am keen to support research and demonstration projects to help ensure that blind and partially sighted people navigate easily and safely. Therefore, Transport for London is sponsoring innovative research into this field with blind and partially sighted people, and TfL works closely with the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, the City of Westminster, and The Guide Dogs for the Blind Association.”

Debate in the House of Lords

The shared space issue was also recently debated in the House of Lords. Lord Faulkner, speaking on behalf of the government, stated that:

“Shared space is not new....use of the technique long predates the relatively recent claims that it presents a danger to so many people;

Honestly if shared space really were as perilous as has been claimed, we would have been aware of the problem decades ago;

Designing public places almost inevitably involves accommodating conflicting aims to ensure that the schemes reflect a reasonable balance of the needs of all users; and

To discourage the introduction (of shared surfaces) would be to deny the people the advantages (of them).

Royal Town Planning Institute

The value of shared surface/space design has been recognised by the Royal Town Planning Institute which recently gave its annual Award for Town Regeneration to the shared space Ashford Ring Road Project.

2. Brent's emerging policy on Shared Spaces

Brent's emerging policy/approach to shared space is contained within the draft Brent Public Realm Policy and Design Guide which will be presented to Members for adoption in due course.

The document will very much be a guide for developers, partners and council officers setting out the general approach Brent is seeking to improve the consistency and quality of the Public Realm.

While the guidance in relation to shared spaces may need to be amended in the light of new information or feedback from Members and as research findings emerge, the following extracts from the guide explain the current approach:

Page 28: Shared Space

“One method of balancing the community and movement functions (of a street) is through the use of shared space. In contrast to previously accepted design practice, which has promoted the physical and visual segregation of street users, the shared space approach tends to combine rather than separate street functions in a way that provides a more equitable and effective balance between motorists and pedestrians. It seeks to improve the quality and experience of streets and spaces without needing to significantly restrict or banish motorised traffic, a practice which has resulted in pedestrianised town centres becoming deserted and edgy places after dark.

There is no specific ‘one size fits all’ design template to achieve shared space and design proposals will vary according to the characteristics of the location under consideration and the level of pedestrian and vehicular activity. It is perhaps best to consider the creation of shared space not as a specific design intervention like a speed table or a pedestrian crossing but more as a process for creating better places. This is achieved firstly by reducing segregation and secondly by encouraging mutual interaction between the various road users through the introduction of some degree of ambiguity. The shared space approach seeks to change driver behaviour by requiring drivers to respond, not to a set of predetermined rules and traffic signs, but to local conditions ‘as they find them’. Behaviour is largely determined by the physical environment and through observance and communication with other road users; in this respect eye contact is of particular importance.”

Page 47: Shared Surfaces

“While there are many benefits associated with shared surface for all users of the public realm, their design should not disadvantage key groups of users such as blind or partially sighted people. This particular topic is the subject of much current research and designers should refer to the latest advice, guidance and examples of good practice when preparing proposals which incorporate some element of shared space.

3. Current proposals

There are no current proposals to introduce specific ‘shared space schemes’ within Brent although all public realm schemes may include some element of what may be considered ‘shared space’. A very good example of this is the recently implemented

Streets for People scheme in Kilburn (Priory Park Road/Hazelmere Road/Tennyson Road). All new proposals will of course be subject to the usual rigorous consultation with all stakeholders.

Contact details:

Tim Jackson, Head of Transportation

E-mail: tim.jackson@brent.gov.uk

Telephone: 5151

John Dryden, Transportation Unit

E-mail: john.dryden@brent.gov.uk