

Shared space and sight loss: policies and practices in English local authorities

This publication presents findings from research that was commissioned and funded by Thomas Pocklington Trust and carried out by Professor Rob Imrie and Marion Kumar, Department of Geography, King's College London.

The study considered the policies and practices of English local authorities in developing shared space schemes in urban environments and their impact on people with sight loss.

Summary findings

- Local authorities develop shared space for a mix of reasons. Primarily, these schemes are perceived as a contribution to the economic revitalisation of town centres.
- Most local authorities consulted are developing 'shared space' schemes but not fully 'shared surfaces' as features delineating pavements and roads are retained, though such delineations are not always able to be detected by people with sight loss.
- There is currently insufficient evidence to support some of the positive claims made for shared space and the evidence which exists does not necessarily convince its potential users that they will be safe.
- Consultation with the public, including people with visual or other impairments, generally does take place but not until late in the policy process, after draft plans have been developed.
- There was little evidence of people with sight loss being involved at strategic levels of policy making.
- For the majority of schemes considered, plans were modified as a result of consultations, albeit in relation to small-scale, specific details of design. The involvement of the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association (Guide Dogs) in particular appears to have been influential.

Background

The development of shared space

There is evidence that parts of the urban environment in the UK are being redesigned around 'shared space'. Shared space is a traffic engineering concept that seeks to break down demarcations between motor vehicles, pedestrians, and other road users to facilitate a sharing of street space. One of the main principles of shared space is not to prioritise any particular user; this is achieved by reducing the delineation between pavements and roads, and by removing some of the physical barriers such as railings. In some places, town centre redesign has included the development of 'shared surfaces'. Shared surfaces go a stage beyond shared space in removing all delineations between roads and pavements, so that there is no kerb or any other major distinction. Shared space is part of a wider series of policies to encourage vehicle drivers to reduce speeds, and to adjust their behaviour in ways that make streets safer and more pleasant for people to use. These schemes are based on the premise that giving pedestrians more freedom to move about will result in more cautious driving and this in turn will contribute to a safer, more pedestrian-friendly environment.

Impact of shared space on people with sight loss

The evidence shows that local authorities in the UK are enthusiastic about shared space, and that schemes are being developed and implemented across the country, with many more at the formative stages (TNS-BMRB, 2008, unpublished). The adoption of shared space appears to be occurring despite the absence of clear, unequivocal evidence of how such schemes may operate in practice, and what effect they would have on different types of users. Organisations representing people with sight loss, such as Guide Dogs, suggest that blind and partially sighted people depend on traditional street design, such as kerbs and pavements, to orientate themselves. It is also noted that people with sight loss cannot easily detect or acknowledge the presence of other users of shared space, or negotiate user priorities through eye contact, as proposed by advocates of shared space.

There is a lack of evidence about how policies relating to shared space are being developed and implemented, and how sensitive local authority officers and councillors are to observations about shared space by groups representing people with sight loss and other users. There is also limited evidence about the extent to which data on visually impaired people's actual patterns of mobility and movement are used to inform the process of developing shared space.

Research objectives and method

To address these shortfalls in research the project investigated the following questions:

- Why do local authorities adopt shared space and what understanding do policy officers and other key personnel have of the concept? How does such understanding influence the formulation and outcomes of policy about shared space?
- How much public consultation is done during the process, particularly with regard to people with sight loss, and how far has any such consultation influenced the design and implementation of shared space?

The research included scoping interviews with key personnel in central government and national organisations involved in the development of shared space policy. Meetings were held with representatives from the Department for Transport, Guide Dogs, and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB). The main research comprised interviews with policy officers in ten local authorities in and around London, as well as access officers and people with sight loss. Follow-up case studies took place in three of the local authority areas. In total, 32 face-to-face interviews were conducted between June and September 2009.

Findings

The key findings of the research include:

- Local authorities are keen to adopt and develop shared space for a mix of reasons, the primary one based on the understanding that street redesign can contribute to the economic revitalisation of town centres.
- Most local authorities consulted are developing shared space schemes but not fully shared surfaces as features delineating pavements and roads are retained, though such delineations are not always able to be detected by people with sight loss.
- There is, at present, insufficient evidence to support some of the positive claims made for shared space projects, and some doubt about the relevance of accident statistics that claim to demonstrate their safety.
- It may be argued that shared space policy is one-dimensional insofar as it is focused on achieving technical design standards and does not address issues of behavioural change.

- There is a 'believability gap' in that the evidence to support shared space does not necessarily convince its potential users that they will be safe and free from danger and harm.
- Consultation with people with visual and other impairments, is generally part of the process of developing shared space policy, albeit one that is an expert-led exercise by policy professionals.
- There was little evidence of involvement of people with sight loss at strategic levels of policy making relating to the determination of the broad principles and the scope of shared space policy.
- People with sight loss become aware of shared space schemes at the later stages of the policy process, and are usually drawn into consultation only prior to the implementation of programmes.
- The involvement of Guide Dogs in commenting on specific shared space policies appears to have been influential in changing aspects of design detail and outcomes.
- There was little evidence of policy officers, councillors, or consultees disseminating the outcomes of consultation to people with sight loss throughout the local boroughs.
- There was evidence of changes to details of shared space policy and practice as a result of consultation. Such changes were, primarily, at operational rather than strategic levels, and related to small-scale, specific details of design.

Conclusions

The policy implications and/or principles that follow from these findings include:

- There needs to be clarification of the meaning of 'shared space'.
- More detailed guidance is required on the development and implementation of shared space.
- Users need to be involved at earlier stages of the development of shared space policy.
- There needs to be greater recognition of the needs of all users, including people with sight loss.
- There needs to be continued engagement of users in the development and implementation of shared space.
- The 'evidence gaps' need to be addressed, particularly in relation to personal safety issues.

Authors

Professor Rob Imrie

Department of Geography, King's College London

Marion Kumar

Post-doctoral Research Fellow appointed by King's College London

How to obtain further information

A short project report by the research team, in the form of an 'Occasional Paper' entitled *Shared space and sight loss: Policies and practices in English local authorities*, is available from:

Thomas Pocklington Trust

5 Castle Row

Horticultural Place

London W4 4JQ

Telephone: 020 8995 0880

Email: research@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Copies of this report in large print, audio tape or CD, Braille and electronic format are available from Thomas Pocklington Trust.

The full research report on which this paper is based, *Shared space and sight loss: policies and practices in English local authorities* (2010) is also available on request.

Background on Pocklington

Thomas Pocklington Trust is a leading provider of housing, care and support services for people with sight loss in the UK. Each year we also fund a programme of social and public health research and development projects.

Pocklington's operations offer a range of sheltered and supported housing, residential care, respite care, day services, resource centres and volunteer-based community support services.

We strive to improve continuously the quality standards in our operational centres to meet the changing needs and expectations of our current and future service users. We are proud to be an Investor in People and a Positive about Disability organisation.

Our research and development programme aims to identify practical ways to improve the lives of people with sight loss by improving social inclusion, independence and quality of life, and improving and developing service outcomes as well as focusing on public health issues.

In this publication, the terms 'visually impaired people', 'blind and partially sighted people' and 'people with sight loss' all refer to people who are blind or who have partial sight.

Notes



5 Castle Row
Horticultural Place
Chiswick
London W4 4JQ

Tel: 020 8995 0880

Email: info@pocklington-trust.org.uk

Web: www.pocklington-trust.org.uk

Published by Thomas Pocklington Trust
Registered Charity No. 1113729
Company Registered No. 5359336

ISBN 978-1-906464-36-3

