

Disability and the built environment inquiry:

Written evidence submitted by David Hunter, Not for Profit Planning

Executive Summary

- The poor state of British streets is a major obstacle to disabled peoples' mobility.
- Significant problems exist with regard both to how streets are designed, and how they are managed.
- Effective systems for design and management will benefit everybody (not just disabled people) and need not cost anything at all, if built in from the outset.
- Official guidance on barrier-free street design ('Inclusive Mobility') is out of date and needs to be revised.
- The 2010 Equality Act has not yet been influential in improving streets for disabled people. The EHRC should bring forward more cases against authorities which fail to take into account the needs of disabled people in street design and maintenance works.

About myself

1. I am an independent consultant, trading as Not for Profit Planning - www.nfpplanning.com - who has worked for 30 years in a range of roles promoting accessible transport and inclusive streets. I am, amongst other things, a member of the statutory Mobility And Access Committee for Scotland and an Associate Research Fellow at Napier University's Transport Research Institute.

Submission

2. My focus in this short submission is on 'the public realm' - especially streets. It is my belief that the poor state of streets in Britain is the single biggest obstacle to disabled people's mobility in most of the country. It is more important than the accessibility of any mode of transport, although more attention is given to access to trains, buses and aeroplanes. Although "disabled people" is clearly a diverse group with many different needs, I use the term principally referring to people with mobility difficulties including wheelchair users, although people with (and without!) sensory, mental or other impairments benefits from well designed and managed streets.
3. I helped introduce some of the first low floor (accessible) buses to be used in Scotland in the 1990s at Lothian Regional and City of Edinburgh Councils. Although these vehicles have been a real game-changer for disabled people in urban areas, too often people cannot use them because they cannot get to or from the bus stop. Even bus stops themselves may be inaccessible - over a third of coach stops were reported as inaccessible by the BBC in 2014 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30126954>
4. A recent street audit of the Tollcross area in Edinburgh which I organised for Living Streets Edinburgh on a voluntary basis highlighted many typical problems encountered by disabled people in urban Britain - lack of dropped kerbs (or better, level pavements),

poor pavement surfaces, difficulty in crossing the road, or obstacles on the pavement. The report of this audit and a number of photographs illustrating such problems can be seen here: <http://www.livingstreetsedinburgh.org.uk/2015/10/15/tollcross-edinburgh-street-audit-final-report/>

5. I would classify the key problems with the built environment in two categories - problems of design, and problems of management. In terms of design, too many streets are not designed to be 'pedestrian-friendly' - they are principally designed for the convenience of motorised vehicles. Better design means things like wider pavements, more level pavement surfaces, easier road crossings and general traffic calming in busy streets. 20mph speed limits would also help. If good design is built in at the start of a construction or major maintenance programme, 'fully accessible' streets should be no more costly than inaccessible streetscapes.
6. The Department of Transport's useful and influential 2005 guidance on inclusive street design 'Inclusive Mobility' <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-mobility> is out of date and needs to be revised. For example it does not cover emerging urban infrastructure such as shared spaces, segregated cycle ways and 'floating bus stops' which may pose challenges to disabled people. I would urge the Committee to press for regular revisions to this guidance.
7. Equally important as good design, streets need to be much better managed. This involves no capital spending and (like inclusive design) benefits everyone who uses pavements, not only people who have a mobility impairment. Typical problems with street management (again, many highlighted in the Tollcross report referred to above) include tackling pavement parking, removing clutter such as 'A-boards', signage poles and waste bins, keeping streets free of rubbish, dog dirt etc. Local authorities need to have a joined-up system to monitor streets, report and solve problems. This will also encourage walking more generally, to the benefit of local economies, health and community.
8. The 2010 Equality Act does not appear to have had much if any effect on improving the built environment for disabled people. I carried out a survey of all 32 Scottish Councils in 2013, to see what they said about making the built environment accessible in their Equality Outcomes (publishing these Outcomes was a new statutory duty from April 2013). Only 10 Councils made any reference to this subject at all (please see 'Streets for All' <http://www.nfpplanning.com/news-and-events.html>). And I am sceptical that many of those that do acknowledge the importance of the subject in these documents take commensurate action in practice. My understanding is that few, if any, cases have been brought by the EHRC against councils which fail to take account of the needs of disabled people when undertaking major street works. I would like to see the Committee encourage EHRC to establish more case law in the area, to encourage councils to prioritise their responsibilities in this area, and to recognise that failure to do so carries a real risk of legal action.

David Hunter
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