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# Coronavirus and remaking streets – local sustainable transport measures and the impact on people with sight loss

Coronavirus response measures are beginning to be eased across the world. With this easing, we are seeing temporary changes being made to the layouts of streets and public spaces. The Welsh Government recently signalled intentions to begin [introducing temporary transport measures](https://gov.wales/written-statement-funding-local-sustainable-transport-measures-response-covid-19?_zk_sc_t=6214364b25b3974fbd1e2462da5d175fbb9f05c90a1e209deb08217d41965252653f744e1bc68a21b7fef2f8390e3053d3081273476fb91c0a7bb6d5081924f9ae2945e80c6a4b502850c75e1cecb0d7a772a928996001da46140ccd7e660747e59181e6d0eb1cf2950f892e77b43c2a8ee6fd4a326e9f9d57cb66dcf2a74ec159773eb7b5337bb7ca96bb6042e7527235fad7a748949afa6a54fd989521f287b4bff377cfa1b658f941a50a601891a356c2eed66050e5c95e9fb801f79a22d62d18cfb0364a7d7699a99480a8c86489ec729549a901d9657593c06ae27c8b34) to enable safe social distancing and to encourage a shift towards more sustainable transport.

RNIB Cymru and Guide Dogs Cymru fully support the Welsh Government’s aim to encourage more active travel. Many blind and partially sighted people enjoy walking and tandem cycling and a reduction in air pollution is a positive development for the whole community. However, the speed of implementation risks quick changes which could make our streets especially inaccessible to this group.

This document summarises our concerns and provides a series of actionable recommendations to address the challenges of social distancing and promote an inclusive approach.

# Summary of concerns

Around 121,000 people live with sight loss in Wales today.

Social distancing is extremely difficult for blind and partially sighted people, which makes getting out and about for essential journeys or exercise particularly challenging.

* Many are unable to tell how far away other people are, making it harder to keep 2m away from others. Guide dogs are also not trained to maintain social distance.
* There have been incidences of passers-by challenging or shouting at blind and partially sighted people who haven’t been able to keep their distance. Such unsettling and intimidating experiences have a lasting detrimental impact.
* People with sight loss are more likely to use touch to navigate – this means they are more at risk from contracting the virus from surfaces.
* People with sight loss often use familiar, learned routes. Where these have been altered in response to coronavirus, this can present challenges to independent mobility.
* A number of visually impaired people rely on sighted guides, which involves physical contact. In the current circumstances only household members are able to offer this support.

**Key ask: Coronavirus Courtesy Code**

Street layouts can cause difficulties at the best of times for people with sight loss. We want to ensure that any temporary changes to our streets allow blind and partially sighted people and those with other disabilities to continue to get around safely.

It is essential that people are aware that not all disabilities are visible and are considerate to other pedestrians and passengers who may have hidden disabilities.

**We therefore recommend that a** [**Coronavirus Courtesy Code**](https://www.rnib.org.uk/campaigning/priority-campaigns/inclusive-journeys) **should be developed to raise public awareness and promote safe social distancing for all pedestrians, road and public transport users**.

We would be pleased to work with the Welsh Government and other organisations in its development. This would need to be backed up by a sustained public awareness campaign.

**Changes to the built environment**

1. **Widening Pavements**

Other countries that have begun introducing new layouts are using cones and barriers to widen footways along lengths of road, particularly outside shops and transport hubs, to provide more space to allow people socially distance.

We fully support the intention to increase the available pavement space to allow pedestrians to maintain safe distances, but people with sight loss are accustomed to orientating themselves by using familiar landmarks, walkways and a known environment. If new barriers are introduced, visually impaired people may not be aware or able to interpret the intention, leading to disorientation and increased risk.

* Cones, tape and other temporary measures are not suitable for people with sight loss. Guide dogs do not perceive these as solid obstacles and will attempt to navigate between them. These are also difficult to detect using canes.
* Because of this, any temporary barriers should begin at ground level; they should also be colour contrasted, tall enough to prevent them becoming a trip hazard, and securely fixed so as not to be blown over (flimsy barriers and tape must be avoided.)
* Kerbs should be retained as a known delineator between the footway and the road.
* People with sight loss are likely to use the original pavement space, even where additional space is created on the road. It is important that every effort is made to ensure that new barriers are solid, do not impinge on dropped kerbs, and do not restrict access to controlled crossings. Existing controlled crossings should be maintained.
* Where any changes to street layouts have been made, it is essential that these changes are communicated in an accessible way to the blind and partially sighted people who live locally or might use those streets.
* Transport operators must give consideration as to how blind and partially sighted passengers will be able to find the right bus stop or platform.

1. **Pop-up cycleways**

Many cities have also began to install ‘pop-up’ cycle facilities using temporary measures such as flexible plastic wands to protect cyclists from other traffic, and widening existing cycle lanes to enable cyclists to maintain social distancing.

These pop-up cycleways can present multiple hazards to blind and visually impaired people.

* Blind and partially sighted pedestrians find it extremely difficult to detect cycles, whilst cyclists may not realise that a pedestrian has sight loss.
* Mobility aids such as white canes can get caught up bicycle wheels, which is a further hazard to both.
* Visual cues to distinguish between pedestrian spaces and cycleways, such as painted lines are not detectable to people with sight loss.
* Many existing bus stops and pedestrian road crossings are inaccessible to people with sight loss if these must be reached across cycle lanes.
* It is vital that detectable kerbs between cycle routes and pavements are maintained. Where new routes are introduced, these must be colour contrasted and physically separated. Painted white lines to delineate pedestrian spaces from cycleways are not an acceptable solution.
* Shared space between cyclists and pedestrians must be avoided.  Where extra space for cycle lanes is required, it should be allocated from the road; it is important to retain adequate space on pavements.
* The creation of bus bypasses, or 'floating bus islands,' (where a pedestrian must cross a cycle lane to get to a bus stop) should be avoided wherever possible. In Cardiff, controlled crossings are being trialled to ensure that pedestrians can cross in safety to bus islands, reducing the risk of collisions.
* Any signage indicating any new pop-up cycle lanes should be placed on the road/cycle lane, not on the pavement, where it could cause a hazard.
* If shared spaces must be introduced, these must be clearly signified by tactile warning paving at the start and end of shared routes, so that blind and partially sighted people are aware of the presence of cyclists.
* New cycle lanes should not cross pavements or affect access to infrastructure like bus stops without accessible crossings.
* Warning markings and signs must also be provided to instruct cyclists to stop when pedestrians are near or on the formal crossing.

1. **Additional cycle parking facilities**

Additional cycle parking facilities have also been introduced at key locations in many urban areas (outside stations, high streets), to accommodate an increase in cycling.

* Temporary cycling infrastructure and other obstructions on pavements can present tripping hazards and impede mobility for people with sight loss
* Any additional cycle infrastructure which is installed must be done with careful consideration to the needs of disabled people and others who rely on clear pavements to access transport hubs and other key locations.
* We are aware of instances where additional cycle parking will be introduced in repurposed parking spaces. Pavement space should be protected wherever possible.

1. **Public transport**

Changes to bus and rail infrastructure will have a significant impact on the mobility of people with sight loss. The Welsh Government is currently considering options as to how public transport might be restarted in a way that allows all passengers to travel safely.

Locating a seat can be difficult for people with sight loss. The means by which they locate a place to sit puts them at a particularly high risk in the current circumstances. Transport operators can work to reduce the level of risk.

* If seating is reconfigured to allow passengers to social distance, blind and partially sighted people are likely to have difficulty finding the correct seat.
* Other new measures, such as queues and visual instructions present challenges for people with sight loss.
* As part of the likely reconfiguration of stations and platforms, barriers are likely to be needed. Broadly, the same requirements apply to the types of barriers to be used at transport hubs as elsewhere – i.e. they should begin on ground level, be solid and colour contrasted.
* When reconfiguring seating to allow people to social distance, focus should be on maintaining priority seating areas with sufficient space for disabled and vulnerable people. This should be accompanied by clear signage about who is eligible to use these seats, enforced by the operator.
* Passenger assistance must be available when booking all train journeys. Assistance should aim to keep the passenger safe, and away from others, including avoiding queues, and facilitating access to and exit from the train. Careful consideration must be given to how to manage social distancing on unstaffed stations.

**Conclusion**

All public authorities have a duty under the Equality Act 2010 to ensure they meet the needs of disabled people, and actively involve disabled people in the design and delivery of their services such as the provision or improvement of pedestrian routes and cycle routes.

Similarly, the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013 requires Welsh Ministers and local authorities, in the performance of functions under the Highways Act 1980, to take reasonable steps to enhance the provision made for walkers and cyclists. The Act explicitly includes disabled people who use aids to mobility (such as guide dogs and canes) under the definition of ‘walkers and cyclists’. The active travel design guidance document reiterates the need for routes to be inclusive by design.

**The Welsh Government must provide guidance for local authorities to ensure that people with sight loss and other disabilities are not unfairly disadvantaged by changes to the built environment, or any other measures taken in response to coronavirus.**

If you would like any further information on the issues raised in this briefing please contact:

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