

GUIDE
DOGS



'Scared Surfaces'

The challenges faced by users
of shared surface schemes



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Executive Summary

This report examines the results of a survey conducted by Guide Dogs into the experiences of all road users on shared surface versus traditional streets. The report reveals worrying statistics about the accessibility and usability of shared surface streets for all road users, but particularly those with a disability.




Safety emerges as a key issue with **76%** of respondents reporting feeling less safe on a shared surface area than a traditional street, and **27%** saying they would avoid shared surfaces areas if possible. These concerns were echoed in research by YouGov which showed that with 66% of pedestrians say that traditional streets are safer.¹ The success of shared surfaces at improving traffic flow and reducing speed was also called into question by the survey results: only **15%** of motorists reported consistently lower speeds, and qualitative responses repeatedly emphasised the continued dominance of cars over pedestrians within the street.

The results clearly show a preference among visually impaired respondents for several vital elements of a traditional street design, most notably controlled crossing points (**92%**), tactile paving (**78%**) and raised kerbs (**75%**). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that 81% of them felt that shared surface areas, which lack one or more of these elements, are more difficult to navigate than traditional streets.



Recommendations

The report also notes the lack of clear guidance from some of the relevant national governments for local authorities on designing shared surfaces areas, given the findings outlined above. As a result of this and other related research, Guide Dogs makes the following recommendations for the UK government, devolved governments, and local authorities to commit to in order to ensure that accessibility is built into all new street design:

-  A pause on new shared surface schemes until new guidance is issued
-  Clear and up-to-date guidance on accessibility for local authorities
-  A formal process of engagement with disabled people and their representatives at the beginning of the planning process.

¹: Total sample size was 1006 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28 March to 4 April 2017 among adults who live in: Birmingham, Brighton, Brighton, Bristol, Coventry, Leeds, London, Manchester, Oxford. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

Introduction

Guide dogs help people with sight loss live with the same freedom and independence as anyone else, but a worrying trend towards shared surfaces could turn town centres into virtual no-go areas.

Shared space schemes have become increasingly popular among local authorities in recent years, with many of them including shared surfaces where the kerb is removed and there is no height difference between the pavement and road. Guide Dogs conducted a survey to find out about the experiences of all road users of shared surface streets compared with traditional streets.

Shockingly, this survey has revealed that more than three quarters of survey respondents (**76%**) think that shared surface streets are more dangerous than traditional streets.

“I feel so anxious that I now avoid going to Preston alone. They say that there have been no accidents - that is because [people with a vision impairment] are avoiding the centre all together...”

– **Nia,**
respondent
with sight loss



Many people with sight loss rely heavily on environmental cues and a consistent and sympathetic urban environment to allow them to get about safely and independently on foot. These can include recognising the sounds and smells of certain shops, and tactile and contrast paving, but respondents to this survey said that most importantly they rely on kerbs and controlled crossings to know that they are safely out of the way of oncoming traffic.

Guide dogs are trained to use the kerb to indicate where it is safe to walk and cross the road, and long cane users use the kerb to feel where the pavement ends. A controlled crossing gives a person with sight loss the confidence to cross the road knowing that they are not in danger.

The removal of these non-visual environmental cues can have a very real impact on the confidence and independence of people with sight loss who may end up having to rely on sighted assistance to feel safe, or end up avoiding an area altogether.

Shared space or shared surface?

The Department for Transport defines shared space as “A street or place designed to improve pedestrian movement and comfort by reducing the dominance of motor vehicles and enabling all users to share the space rather than follow the clearly defined rules implied by more conventional designs.”

Measures that can be introduced to create a shared space include the reduction or removal of street furniture such as barriers, bollards and excess signage. Some shared spaces go a step further and remove kerbs and controlled crossings, creating a “level surface,” often called a “shared surface.”

There is often confusion over these terms and conflation of shared space and shared surfaces. For the purposes of this report ‘shared space’ will be used to refer to the broader school of street design, and ‘shared surface’ to refer specifically to shared spaces with levelled kerbs and reduced controlled crossings.

The theory behind shared space is that reducing segregation between pedestrians and motorists improves their interaction and, by doing so, reduces the implied priority of cars over pedestrians. All road users have to be more vigilant and aware because they are in closer contact, meaning that motorists should be moving slower and more cautiously.

The removal of excess street clutter and clarification of the urban environment can be beneficial to pedestrians as long as care is taken to address the needs of all users, including people with sight loss or other disabilities, children and older people.

Guide Dogs supports the implementation of shared space schemes to create a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape as long as effective delineation is maintained between the road and the pavement, and controlled crossings remain in place.



Methodology

An online survey was conducted between May and October 2015. 2477 people took part from across the UK. 1068 of these identified themselves as having a disability, of which 679 people had sight loss.

Three quarters of survey respondents have visited a shared surface street either as a pedestrian, motorist or cyclist. Survey participants were sought through direct emails to Guide Dogs supporters, via social media and by reaching out to other charities for them to disseminate further. Although every effort was made to remove duplicate records, personal details were not a mandatory question so in some cases duplicates may persist.

If you would like more information about the survey results or methodology, then please email campaigns@guidedogs.org.uk.

More information about the campaign is available at www.guidedogs.org.uk/streetsahead.



How safe are shared surface streets?

The first and most important consideration of inclusive street design should always be safety. The Department for Transport's (DfT) guidance document claims that shared surface streets are a safe and viable alternative to the traditional street, citing research that showed similar levels of casualties before and after a town's redesign.² However, independent academic research has questioned the validity of the DfT's findings, arguing that they were drawn from a sample size far too small to provide convincing conclusions, and frequently mistake correlation for causality.³

In the Guide Dogs survey respondents were asked whether they felt that non-shared surface or shared surface streets were safer. The response was unequivocal:

76% of respondents to the question think traditional streets are safer than shared surfaces, rising to **86%** among those with sight loss.

"I do not feel at all safe. I will not work my dog in these areas without sighted help. I consider these highly dangerous as I am both totally blind and very deaf."

– **Christopher, Southampton**

"You take your life in your hands as a pedestrian. No-one knows who has right of way but car drivers inevitably take it as they are so much less vulnerable. I am fully sighted. I wouldn't dream of crossing a space like this if I wasn't."

– **Fiona, Monmouth**

A traditional street scene within the UK is one in which the activities of motorists, pedestrians and cyclists take place mainly within clearly defined areas. Features such as kerbs, crossing points and signage all act as reference points to help people understand how to use the space, something which is critical for all users but especially those who are blind or partially sighted.⁴

The words "worried", "confusing", "unexpected" and "not knowing" came up time and again in the comments about why shared surfaces felt unsafe. Pedestrians, particularly those with sight loss, reported feeling a constant anxiety about not knowing when hazards would appear and from where, and not having a clear understanding of right of way.

² Department for Transport, Shared Space Local Transport Note, 2011

³ Moody, S. and Melia, S. (2014) 'Shared space: Research, policy and problems', Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers - Transport, 167 (6). pp. 384-392

⁴ Guide Dogs, Inclusive Streets: Design Principles for Blind and Partially Sighted People', 2010, p.6

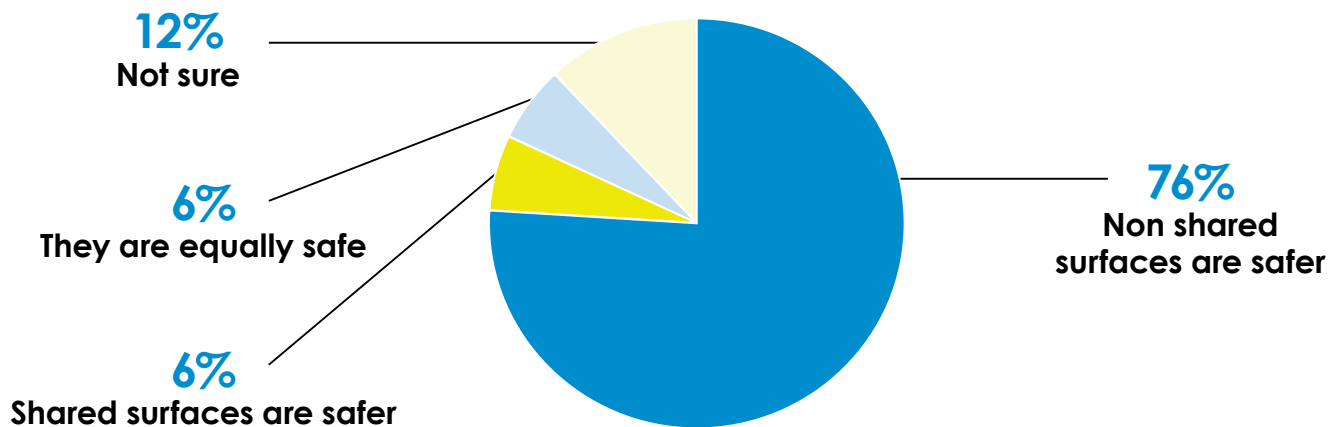
“My guide dog didn't seem to know where they should be going, they didn't stop to indicate there was any type of road and I had no idea I was in the middle of a street until a car came. Basically, I was really scared, something I am not normally.”

– Penny, Coventry

“Cars still park on the shared surface, so you have to navigate round them in to the centre of the road. I would let my 9 year old walk on a pavement by herself but I would not like her to do so on a shared surface. If a car comes, you need to be able to make a quick decision about the safest place to stand.”

– Survey respondent

Which is safer, a shared surface or non shared surface street? (All respondents, 1120)



Three out of four people (**76%**) say traditional streets are safer than shared surface streets.



The impact

Guide Dogs asked survey respondents what their reaction would be to the creation of a shared surface street in their local area.

27% of those who answered stated that they would avoid using the street if possible. One third (**33%**) of all respondents with a disability said that they would avoid the area.

It is unacceptable that one third of people with disabilities should find any street to be effectively off-limits to them, but the fact that shared surfaces are frequently developed in town centres and high streets means this will have an exaggerated effect on their ability to get out and about independently.

This number is even higher among respondents with a vision impairment:

Respondents with a visual impairment:

What would your reaction be to the creation of a shared surface street in your local area?

I would avoid that area if possible	35.6%
I would be less likely to go out	7.2%
I would be more apprehensive of using the space but would still try to use it	30.3%
I would only go out if I had sighted company	13.9%
I don't think this would affect my decision to visit an area	5.6%
I would have no apprehension about going out as usual	4.4%
I would be more confident moving around an area if it was a shared street	1.7%
Not sure	1.4%

A huge number of people with sight loss in the UK already live in alarming social isolation. Around 180,000 people with sight loss rarely leave their homes alone, and shared surfaces do not help solve this problem.⁵



⁵ Pey, Nzegwu & Dooley for Guide Dogs, 'Functionality and the Needs of Blind and Partially Sighted Adults in the UK', 2007

Motorists, cyclists and shared surfaces

Motorists and cyclists also reported feeling unsafe and unsettled. Of all survey respondents who reported having visited a shared surface street as a cyclist or motorist, only 10.8% felt that they were safer than a traditional street. A common theme among comments was worry about the safety of pedestrians and cyclists, and fear of causing an accident.

One of the principles of shared surface schemes is the concept of increasing driver uncertainty. Motorists responding to our survey, however, have reported serious concerns over the safety risks that this posed to all road users:

“No idea of right of way or pedestrian crossings. Just managed to leave the area without harming anybody and was relieved.”

– **Belinda, Burnside**

“As a pedestrian I was unsure vehicles would stop, as a driver I was unsure vehicles would stop and who knew who had right of way, and as a cyclist it’s extremely intimidating.”

– **Julie, Coventry**

Despite their increased uncertainty, only **15%** of motorists felt that traffic always moves more slowly in a shared surface area, and pedestrians consistently reported feeling that cars still took priority in the space. Together this paints a picture of a streetscape in which cars maintain their dominance and pedestrians who attempt to utilise the space are put in greater danger because neither are clear about right of way.



Pedestrians and shared surfaces

Respondents were also asked to assess to what extent they agreed with the statement "Pedestrians feel comfortable or safe navigating the street". Less than 5% said that they 'always' felt safe navigating a shared surface, a figure which drops even further when we remove respondents with no disability.

Essential street design

The Department for Transport's 2011 guidance note to local authorities in England has a section on accessibility for people with sight loss which recommends ensuring that the roads have proper tonal contrast to ensure that road boundaries are properly delineated. The guidance note states: "If the context and objectives of a shared space scheme proposal indicate that a kerb-free design is desirable, mitigating measures may be required."⁶

However, our research showed that when asked to name the most important street features for safety, **75%** of respondents felt that raised kerbs were vital, compared to only 35% for contrast paving.

92% of people think controlled crossings are an essential feature of safe street design. It's vital that controlled crossings are maintained to ensure that people with sight loss can use the street safely and with confidence.

"...when in shared street area it is almost impossible to know which way to orientate as traffic is amongst you. If one ever dares go to shared space all navigation as a totally blind person goes."

– Vicky, Coventry

"Hazard awareness is essential to my navigation, I need all of the things [listed in the survey] to inform my hazard awareness, take one or all of them away and I am a lot more at risk."

– Nathan, Cardiff

Most essential pieces of street design for people with sight loss:

Pedestrian controlled crossing points	92%
Tactile paving	78%
Raised kerbs	75%
Cues and clues in the environment e.g. landmark features	63%
Contrasting coloured paving	35%
Audio information points	25%
Tactile maps	9%

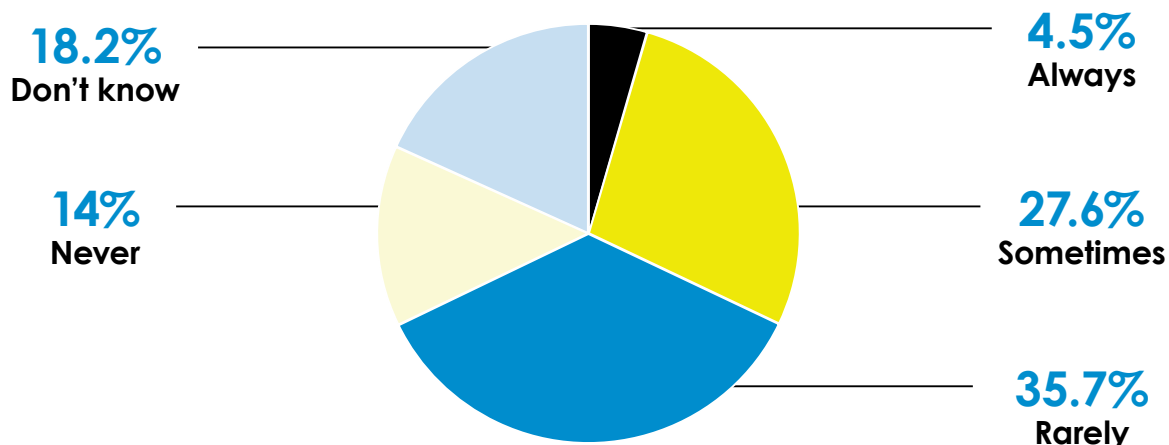
⁶ Department for Transport, Shared Space Local Transport Note, 2011, 3.12-3.14.

How successful are shared surface streets?

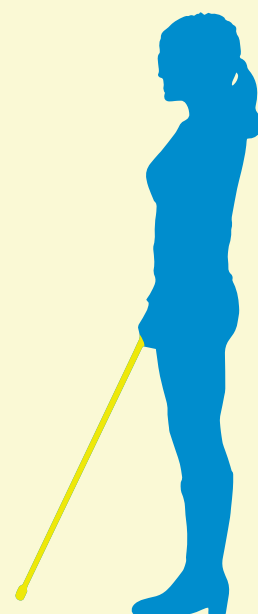
According to the Department for Transport's definition, a successful shared space street should permit the free movement of traffic as well as enabling pedestrians to use the road space more freely, crossing as and when they would like and feeling comfortable spending more time in the area.⁷

Survey respondents were asked how shared surfaces affected the behaviour of road users, including motorists and pedestrians, and the responses show a different story. When asked if traffic flows better in a shared surface, less than 5% of respondents said that this was "always" the case, 28% "sometimes", and 50% "rarely" or "never". It is interesting to note that these figures remain consistent when broken down by the disability of the respondent, as well as among those with no disability.

Traffic flows better:



"I found it pretty terrifying, as it wasn't easy to gauge when to cross. I did not have a guide dog at the time, but I would be even more concerned with the guide dog that I wouldn't be able to decide correctly and it would result in an accident for both of us. It's not easy to navigate around either, because those crossings are navigation points, and it helps us to understand where we are in the town/environment. I understand the concept of getting everyone, pedestrians and car drivers, to be more aware of each other, but that's a very selective portion of people who this works for, and visually impaired and those with guide dogs this does not. It really poses as a problem for us!" – **Ione, Exeter**



Respondents reported feeling that the shared surface was not having the desired effect of slowing down drivers and ensuring they conduct themselves in a more cautious manner, particularly among people with disabilities.



“People that implement shared surfaces perceive shared surfaces as making traffic behave better around pedestrians. They are wrong. The vehicles often act as if the space is all theirs and drive no slower. Others hesitate and drive so slowly that they just cause a different hazard. Also cars then park in inappropriate spaces because with no kerb the road seems wider - actually blocking the pavement. Kerbs and pavements protect pedestrians and shared spaces should be banned as a bad idea.”

– **Survey respondent with no disability**

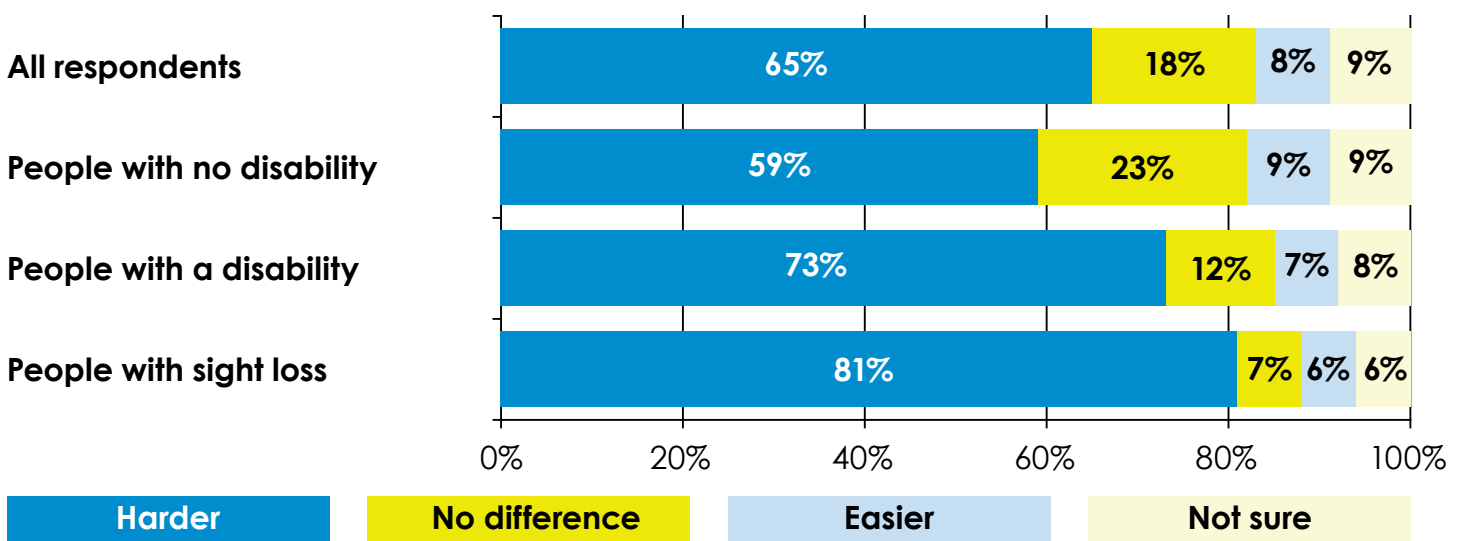
“Trying to cross the road as a pedestrian was very difficult due to the speed of cars. As a driver it was hard to predict when a pedestrian would just walk in front of the car.”

– **Sheila, Reading**

Difficulty knowing when and how to cross was reported repeatedly in the comments.

When asked how they found navigating and orientating a shared surface street compared to a non-shared surface street, **65%** of all respondents said that shared surface streets were harder, and **18%** said it made no difference.

81% of people with sight loss find shared surfaces harder to navigate than traditional streets.



Wheelchair users, for whom elements of a shared surface area such as the reduction of street clutter and the removal of kerbs might be an advantage under the right circumstances, reported significant problems dealing with uncooperative traffic.

One respondent said: "The drivers would not stop to let me and my carer cross with my wheelchair. 145 cars passed us, and we took a detour to another street instead."

"I was a manual wheelchair user, so was slower than walking people. I felt in the way of other pedestrians and vehicles, as I had to wheel more towards the middle as the camber was impossible to use. Hated it and won't use that street again."

– **Partially sighted respondent**

"My autistic son cannot cope with shared spaces at all, because of the lack of order and vehicles of all descriptions appearing suddenly, plus lack of clarity about where he would be safe. Wheelchair often hidden by other vehicles, so too many close encounters. **Scared space is a more appropriate title.**"

– **Sheila, Bath**

How desirable are shared surface streets?

The survey respondents were also asked which street design they would choose between shared and non-shared surface streets for their local high street.

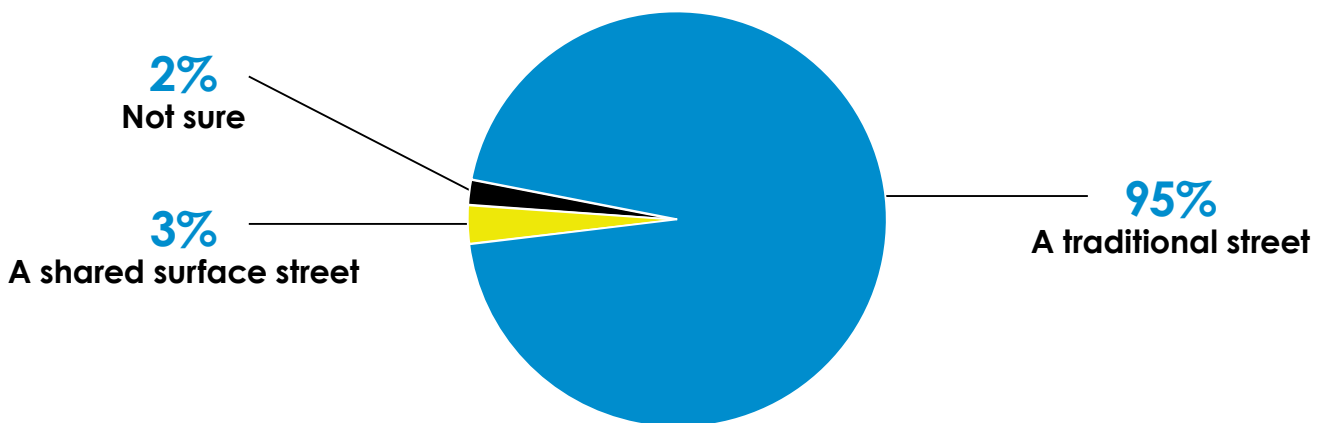
84% of respondents chose the traditional street design, rising to **95%** among guide dog owners.

Among people with no disability only **13%** of respondents would prefer a shared surface street for their local high street.

It's clear that shared surface streets are not a desirable outcome for the majority of people, and can even lead to some people being excluded from areas of a town.



Guide dog owners: which would you choose for your local high street?



What is the UK Government doing?

In the House of Lords Select Committee's 2016 report on the Equality Act 2010, a recommendation was made that "The Department for Transport should update its 2011 Local Transport Note to offer guidance to local authorities on how shared spaces schemes can best cater for the needs of disabled people. Local authorities should review existing schemes in the light of that guidance, make changes where necessary and practicable, and base any new schemes on that guidance."

The UK Government has responded that while they had no plans to do so, the Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation (CIHT) would produce guidance on shared surfaces that would "identify good and bad practice and try to move away from the idea that shared space is synonymous with a lack of definition between road and footway." However, in December 2016 the CIHT stated that they will not be producing new guidance, but instead they will complete a review of some existing schemes, and make recommendations based on these findings.

It is vital that new guidance is produced for local authorities to follow when considering a shared surface scheme to ensure that people with disabilities are considered from the outset.

Guidance and planning in different parts of the UK

Planning is a devolved issue in the United Kingdom. In England, street design guidance is issued by the Department for Transport. The devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have developed their own street design guidance, some of which also refers to guidance and research from the Department for Transport.



Conclusion




These results have shown that shared surfaces are both unwanted and unsuccessful when it comes to improving the local environment. None of the groups identified in the survey, including cyclists, motorists, non-disabled pedestrians and people with disabilities responded favourably to the idea of having a shared surface street in their local area. **Three quarters of all respondents felt that shared surfaces were less safe than a traditional street.**

The survey also revealed the significant levels of anxiety and discomfort created by visiting a shared surface area among a large proportion of road users, but especially among people with disabilities. People with sight loss rely on controlled crossings and clear delineation between the road and the footway in order to feel safe and confident navigating alone. By removing these vital elements, shared surfaces make all road users, but especially those with sight loss, feel anxious and vulnerable when attempting to use the space.

Shared surfaces have a disproportionately negative impact on people with disabilities, particularly those with sight loss. One in three respondents with a disability said that they would go out of their way to avoid visiting a shared surface street – in effect these areas would be off-limits to a significant proportion of the local population.

Recommendations

Guide Dogs makes the following recommendations:

-  Local authorities to acknowledge their public sector equality duty not to discriminate against blind and partially sighted people, and pause the development of new shared surface schemes until new guidance is issued.
-  The UK and devolved governments ensure their guidance is up-to-date, clear, and emphasises that local authorities have a duty to ensure that the development or redevelopment of any street layout must be safe and accessible for people with sight loss.
-  A formal process of engagement with disabled people and their representatives at the beginning of the planning process.



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Julie, Coventry



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