



Department for Transport

From the Minister of State

Fabian Hamilton MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA



Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DR

Tel: 020 7944 3082
Fax: 020 7944 4492
E-Mail: sadiq.khan@dft.gsi.gov.uk

Web site: www.dft.gov.uk

Our Ref: AA/SK/025214/09

29 OCT 2009

Dear Fabian,

Thank you for your letter of 9 October to Andrew Adonis about the concerns of representatives from the National Federation for the Blind. You raised two issues – shared surface streets and electric vehicles. I am replying as Minister responsible for local transport. I will deal with shared surfaces first.

Shared surfaces are aimed at changing the way streets are used and are often a key feature in shared space schemes. The rationale is that the absence of any physical delineation between pedestrians and vehicles is meant to convey to all users that the street is a place for everyone to share equally. This is aimed at reducing the dominance of vehicular traffic and affording pedestrians greater freedom of movement within the area. Although mainly anecdotal, there are widely reported benefits arising from shared surfaces for the population as a whole, and use of the technique is becoming increasingly popular in schemes aimed at improving the public space.

In recent years it has become apparent that the absence of a kerb can create difficulties for some people, particularly blind or partially sighted people. While we have no firm evidence that shared surfaces are inherently less safe than conventionally kerbed streets, we fully understand why visually impaired people can find them intimidating and we do not intend to ignore those concerns.

However, rather than dispense with the shared surface technique as a way of improving public space, our preference is to try to see how we might make these environments work for all.

In February of this year therefore, the Department started a wide-ranging research project on shared space schemes. Shared surfaces are featuring prominently in the project. A key output is likely to be a comprehensive guidance document on the design of shared space schemes with an emphasis on the needs of visually impaired people. We would expect this guidance to be equally applicable to retro-fitting existing sites as well as to new proposals.

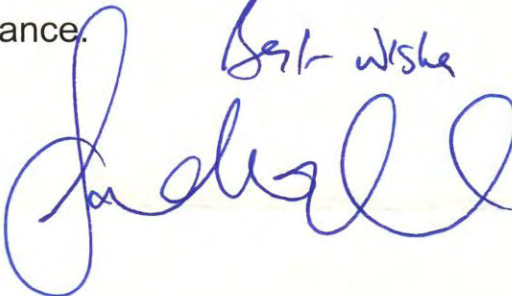
The second issue you raised was that of electric vehicles and their relative silence in operation. Again, we understand how near-silent vehicles can give rise to the NFB's concerns over safety.

In late in 2007 the Department attended a meeting with the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association and Imperial College London to discuss whether quiet vehicles posed a risk to visually impaired people.

The conclusion was that there was insufficient data available to determine whether a safety problem exists in practice. However, electric vehicles are relatively rare on our roads and it is possible that this is why there is little data to consider at present. As electric vehicles increase in number, this could change.

The Department is currently preparing a programme of its own research aimed at looking into the implications for pedestrian safety with regard to electric and hybrid vehicles. As with our work on shared space, this research will focus on the needs of visually impaired people. It is likely to start in early 2010 and take approximately 6 to 9 months.

I trust this is of some reassurance.

Best wishes


SADIQ KHAN