

## **PE1595/S**

Charlotte Bennie Letter of 9 January 2016

Petition 1595

I am registered blind, and have been so for almost twenty years, since my mid forties. On a good day, I can distinguish shapes but not distance, on a bad day, and these are more common, I bumble around in a mist, which can be any of several shades. Luckily, I have the assistance of Whitney, who is my third Guide Dog. Without her, I would never be out on my own.

Between us, Whitney and I rely on various forms of tactile assistance. Kerbs, dropped kerbs, tactile slabs, or as I call them, bobble slabs. I have to admit, I also find railings useful, such as we have bordering our pedestrian crossing, as they make me feel safer as I approach the crossing and, being metal, I can often see a touch of their gleam if it's sunny.

I hate Shared surfaces. All the clutter of street furniture, vehicles parked and moving randomly and other pedestrians moving around in a state of confusion. Shared surfaces are a reason why I can't travel to and around Dumfries just with my Guide Dog. The absence of Shared Surfaces is why I can travel around my home town of Newton Stewart with only the assistance of Whitney. In fact, if I knew a town had Shared Surfaces, I would be unlikely to visit it. And, this is something my husband and I take into account if touring around the UK. What's the point in visiting a town where both of us will be on tenterhooks all the time? Me, because I would be relying on my husband as well as my dog; and my husband, being more concerned than ever about my welfare. Perhaps towns with Shared Surfaces or considering installing them, should ponder the effect of this dreadful fashion on their tourism.

However, to return to the example of Dumfries. I am citing this town for two reasons. One is because it's the biggest town in our region, Dumfries and Galloway. The other is because I have heard its Shared Surfaces scheme regularly cited as a success story by a representative of Sustrans on Radio Scotland programmes dealing with this topic. Very strange, as it transpires this representative of Sustrans has never visited Dumfries. Well, I have, as recently as 4<sup>th</sup> January. Negotiating Friars' Vennel is a nightmare. As I've already said, there are bits of street furniture scattered all around; a frames and in better weather, plant pots. Vehicles, especially delivery vehicles, are parked at random. Moving vehicles weave their way around and through this melee as best they can. Pedestrians, whether fully able bodied, visually impaired, hearing impaired, the young and the elderly, to name just a few examples of folk who cannot move around or react quickly, have to take their chances. Oh yes, this particular scheme is further exacerbated by a dreadful road surface; daft, wee setts, mostly shoogly and several missing. Sighted people tell me the whole effect is of a run

down alley in some third world backwater. And this is what Sustrans considers a good example of town planning!

Push a local councillor into giving an honest answer, not very easy, and he or she will admit that Shared Surfaces are cheap. Great eh? Limit the freedom, dignity and independence of many groups of people to save a few quid.

On the subject of saving money, I wonder if this is why so many road surfaces are now a particular form of tarmac which is so smooth, it becomes dangerously slippery with only a slight frost and is even slippery in the rain. Add this type of tarmac to a Shared Surfaces scheme, and you increase the danger even more as vehicles will have a greater difficulty in avoiding pedestrians.

The Glasgow Bin Lorry Tragedy of last December gives me more cause for concern. For one thing, it emphasises the problem of people driving vehicles who have kept quiet about disabilities which make it dangerous for them to drive. Imagine the possible mayhem and havoc if such a driver loses control of their vehicle in a Shared Surfaces area! No kerbs or pedestrian crossing railings to act as buffers. Just a smooth path to hurtle into pedestrians or the windows of shops and cafes.

Then, there is the danger from electric cars and hybrid vehicles. I know Mr. Goodwill Mp in Westminster thinks silent vehicles will benefit the environment by reducing noise pollution, but for a great many people, noise from vehicles is a safety feature. The visually impaired know what is approaching and from where; cyclists know what is following them; children, people with learning difficulties and elderly folk who are becoming frail are more likely to react to vehicle noise. However, combine these vehicles with Shared Surfaces and again, pedestrians, especially the more vulnerable, are put into danger.

I imagine someone might say that so far, there haven't been all these accidents. Give them time! Probably, however, many vulnerable folk have just withdrawn indoors, or only venture out by taxi or with an able bodied assistance. No longer able to enjoy exercise as and when they like. Becoming more unfit and depressed in the process, and a greater drain on our already overburdened NHS.

Isn't it a dreadful restriction on human rights and personal freedom that councils and Sustrans are so determined, in a belief of cheapness or naïve ideas about aesthetics, to inflict these Restrictive Surfaces on the general public?

In my opinion, every politician, both local or national, who becomes involved in transport and or town planning, should spend several days simulating various disabilities. Without assistance. Because those of us who become disabled start off without assistance, and some poor souls never get this. Bumbling and bouncing one's way along Friars' Vennel in Dumfries or stumbling in front of a car on the

streets of Stranraer which is another town with minimal kerbing, would, I think, bring everyone involved in these daft schemes to their senses.

Finally, as I am writing this while various towns and cities scattered around Scotland and the North of England thole the worst flooding for many years, in some cases, the worst flooding ever, here's another thought. I assume a street which has a proper system of pavements with decent kerbs provides a channel for water in the event of flooding? This might not save all buildings from inundation, but would certainly give more vital time for traders and householders to do what they can. However, a Shared Surfaces area will allow water to rush wherever it wants. Thus causing much more destruction much more quickly. Has any town planner or Sustrans official bothered to considered this point?

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