

TO: JOINT TRANSPORTATION BOARD
DATE: 17 SEPTEMBER 2007
SUBJECT: Sittingbourne High Street – Works to Assist Visually Impaired People
BY: Head of Amenities
Classification: Unrestricted

Summary: This report provides an update on the work already carried out to improve access for visually impaired people through the painting of bollards in the High Street, Sittingbourne with high-visibility painted bands. The report highlights some of the concerns raised following this work being undertaken and draws attention to comments of the Council's Conservation and Access Officers. In considering the extent of further works to assist visually impaired people a balance needs to be maintained to meet the needs of all users of the town centre and consideration given to the impact of any work on the character of the conservation area. It is therefore recommended that the street lighting columns are not painted with the high visibility band but further work be undertaken to explore whether the tactile paving, already implemented, can be enhanced. In addition the Christmas lighting poles, which have caused problems to the visually impaired in the past, will only be allowed to be erected if painted with a contrasting high-visibility band.

Implications:

Human Resources Implications: None

Finance Implications: Budget of £50,000 for works to improve disability access in and around Sittingbourne Town Centre

Legal Implications: None

Crime & Disorder Implications (Section 17): None

Equalities & Diversity Implications: The report identifies measures already undertaken to improve access for people with disabilities and discusses further measures that could be undertaken.

Sustainability Implications: None

Risk Implications: None

Decision Required: **I recommend that:**

- 1) **The street lighting columns are not painted with high-visibility bands but further work be undertaken to explore whether the tactile paving, already implemented, can be enhanced**
- 2) **The Christmas Lights Group be informed that they will not be allowed to erect their lighting posts unless they are painted in the Sittingbourne corporate green colour with a high visibility band.**

Background

1. The chairman has requested an update report on the works to assist visually impaired people in Sittingbourne High Street and particularly the situation with the painting of bollards and other street furniture with high-visibility paint.

2. Kent Highways have undertaken works to paint the bollards in the High Street with two bands of high-visibility paint. When this work was carried out there were a number of concerns raised by the public and the work was stopped at the completion of the painting of the High Street bollards at the request of Council Officers pending a review of the scheme and a report to this Board. The concerns raised were that the highlighting colour was very bright and unsightly and the workmanship in painting the strips was poor. The quality of the work improved as the work progressed but painting the raised bands on the bollards with such a vivid and contrasting colour will always be difficult.

3. A meeting has been held with the Chairman of this Board and Swale Borough Council's Access Officer and Conservation Officer to discuss the work so far carried out and the options for further works. In relation to the painting of the two bands on the bollards it was thought that a more acceptable finish could possibly have been achieved by painting out the original gold bands on the raised embellishments of the bollards so that they have the uniform green colour and then painting or applying an adhesive band of contrasting colour between the two raised embellishments. A photographic representation of this alternative solution will be available for Members consideration at the meeting. However, given that all the bollards are now painted it is not recommended that the bollards are repainted at this stage but this alternative highlighting should be considered when the street furniture is repainted as part of general maintenance.

Discussion

4. The Conservation Officer comments as follows:

"The Council's Conservation Officer has revisited the painted bollards and makes the following observations: The high-visibility bands which have been painted on the bollards are of necessity eye catching. Striking a balance between the Council's statutory duty to have regard to preserving or enhancing the character of the conservation area and the needs of the partially sighted was always going to be challenging and I expressed my reservations at an early stage.

In my opinion the bright paint gives an unfortunate and unwelcome appearance to Sittingbourne town centre and may even appear a mistake to people visiting the town. It dilutes Sittingbourne's corporate colour scheme and causes visual harm to the character of Sittingbourne conservation area. I would be extremely concerned if the scheme were to be extended to the Borough's other historic town centres, particularly Faversham.

The fact that there are so many items of street furniture on Sittingbourne High Street (literally hundreds) is the route of the problem. Rather than highlighting their existence a far better approach would be to remove them or locate them in a way that does not present a risk to the partially sighted. This approach has worked well in Faversham where there is a rolling programme aimed at removing street "clutter" as part of the adopted Streetscape Strategy. Whilst it will never be possible to remove all the obstacles, proper street design should be the key to avoiding the problem in the future."

5. The Access Officer comments as follows:

"There is DfT guidance but it seems a little vague. It talks about the need for contrast but I'm not aware of any specific (e.g. British Standard or other) guidelines. Hitherto, authorities have provided contrast strips for the benefit of drivers at night but little has been done for the visually impaired. Increasingly, good contrast is being provided for the benefit of the visually impaired and the criteria are very different. The rail companies have been providing some good examples.

Access group members were delighted with the arrival of the contrast strips. Some members could see them for the first time and said 'we never knew there were so many bollards'. They

are anxious that other obstacles such as lampposts should have strips to help avoid collisions.

There is a duty on all local authorities to promote positively the interests of disabled people via a Disability Equality Scheme. Swale Borough Council are in the process of developing a scheme although there is nothing specific on this issue. The local press seemed very sympathetic once they knew the reason why and local people seemed to be happy once they learned the reason behind the strong contrast.

I know there are a number of other factors - such as conservation - but I would like to think that Swale can lead the way with a solution that blazes a trail."

I understand that Kent Highway Services are also developing a process in order to assess new schemes in accordance with the Disability Equality procedures

6. In the development of the town centre enhancement scheme, completed in 1995, a balance was struck in providing for all users of the town centre. The widened footways and traffic calming has greatly improved pedestrian movement and safety. The many level crossing points have also improved access for people with mobility difficulties, particularly for wheelchair users. However, the level platforms have caused concern to the blind and partially sighted who would prefer a conventional kerb throughout the length of the High Street as a guide route. To assist the blind and partially sighted Kent Highway Services have recently completed the introduction tactile paving at the platforms.

7. Allowing traffic through the town centre with limited waiting parking bays has always formed part of the town centre enhancement scheme. The bollards have specifically been positioned in locations along the road to prevent vehicle/pedestrian conflict. The bollards are therefore a major safety component of the street scene and it is unlikely that their number can be safely reduced as suggested by the conservation officer. The lamp columns are located away from the pedestrian crossing points and generally cause less of an obstruction than the bollards.

8. A further difficulty experienced by the blind and partially sighted are the lighting posts erected by the Christmas Lights Group. These posts are located in fixed points within the High Street but because they are erected for only a short period of the year they cause confusion and hazards. The group have been asked to mark the posts with contrasting bands to assist the partially sighted but this has not always been properly carried out in the past.

Funding

9. Kent Highway Services have a budget allocation of £50,000 to improve disability access to Sittingbourne Town Centre. Part of this allocation is for improving mobility access along routes into local centres including Sittingbourne town centre and suitable routes for improvement works are being explored with the Access Group. These typically involve provision of dropped crossings and tactile paving along these routes.

Recommendation

10. Given the comments of the conservation officer I would recommend that the street lighting columns are not painted with high-visibility bands but further work be undertaken to explore whether the tactile paving, already implemented, can be enhanced. However, the Christmas Lights Group will be informed that they will not be allowed to erect their lighting posts unless they are painted in Sittingbourne corporate green colour with a high visibility band.