



INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Walking Consultation
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Dear Sir

On the Move by Foot – A Discussion Paper

I refer to the above consultation document.

The Institute of Historic Building Conservation is the professional body representing conservation specialists and practitioners in the public and private sectors in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It has around fourteen hundred members divided between fourteen branches. The Institute exists to establish the highest standards of conservation practice, to support the effective protection and enhancement of the historic environment, and to promote heritage-led regeneration and access to the historic environment for all.

The IHBC strongly welcomes the Government's aspirations to encourage and facilitate walking. In addition to the benefits of walking put forward in the discussion document - health, transport, equity and sustainable communities - the IHBC would add urban quality. Vehicular transport infrastructure dominates the public realm in many towns and cities. Where pedestrians have been given a greater priority and traffic is managed, or removed altogether, the quality of the urban environment is greatly enhanced – visually, in terms of noise and disturbance, through cleaner air, and by creating better conditions for social interaction and cultural and economic activity. This is especially important in sensitive locations such as conservation areas or within the setting of listed buildings. Transport intrusion can harm the quality of the historic environment, visually intrude, and even cause physical damage to historic buildings.

The Institute would particularly like to emphasise the need for careful and sensitive planning and design in the provision of all transport infrastructure, taking full account of the need to create and maintain a high quality public realm, especially for pedestrians. Unfortunately, poor practices in this respect are wide-spread, even in sensitive locations such as conservation areas. The IHBC believes that similar statutory duties should be imposed on designers of highway infrastructure as those imposed on the planning process by Sections 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. These provisions could be widened to apply more generally to the quality of the public realm, with emphasis on the pedestrian experience.

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Historic areas often developed at times when a large proportion of the population relied on walking to get around. Such areas tend to provide superior provision for walkers in terms of permeability, legibility, convenience and quality of pedestrian environment/experience. Study of the historic environment therefore provides a useful basis for the development of innovative new urban forms. It is necessary to re-establish the pedestrian ethos, providing a better balance with car-orientated urban development.

Some cities have made considerable advances in recent years in reclaiming public spaces for people, and creating new high quality public spaces (for example, Victoria Square and Brindley Place in Birmingham). However, such best practice is the exception rather than the rule. Strong encouragement needs to be given through guidance and funding to develop similar initiatives around the UK.

Walking can not be considered in isolation. It must be considered against the context of all modes of sustainable transport (cycling, light-rail, heavy rail, buses, etc). People would be more likely to leave the car behind and use alternative means of transport, including walking, if public transport was made more convenient, with better integration between different modes. Unfortunately, the deregulation of bus services in the 1986 and privatisation of rail services in the 1993 precludes the kind of integrated planning of sustainable modes of transport that occurs in many other European countries. This is a serious problem in the UK, requiring urgent attention. The three in ten households currently not having access to a car are seriously disadvantaged compared to car-owning households. This is a major cause of inequality, restricting choice and limiting access to jobs, retail, leisure and other facilities. This should not be the case – there is a pressing need to greatly increase the mobility and life-opportunities of non-car owners.

The UK's failure to adopt a proper integrated transport strategy over several decades has resulted in unsustainable urban patterns and poor transport infrastructure, especially for walkers and users of public transport. The challenge facing the Government is immense. There is no room for timidity – genuine radicalism is required if a significant proportion of the population is to switch to sustainable modes of transport.

The discussion document does not contain targets for walking. If it is to have any real impact, targets need to be introduced, both nationally and for local authorities.

In response to the questions raised in the discussion document, the IHBC would make the following comments:

Questions 1 - 3

Although numerous guidance documents promote walking and alternative modes of transport, they tend to be generalised in nature. Clear and specific requirements should be written into policy and guidance where possible. For example, planning guidance could include an explicit statement that building entrances should be located on highway frontages, not just on frontages to side or rear car parking areas. This would give equal priority to those arriving on foot or by public transport.

Given the vague nature of policy and guidance, it is often difficult to establish whether development proposals are in compliance or not. Too often, new development and transport infrastructure afford low priority to the needs of pedestrians and users of alternative transport modes. For example, pedestrian access should be required between adjacent retail units –often retail units are set back from the road behind car parking areas and boundaries between adjacent units are non-permeable to pedestrians. This necessitates the non-car user walking the full depth of both car parking areas to move between adjacent units. The practice of setting buildings back behind parking not only inconveniences pedestrians, but creates a very poor public realm to the highway. The pedestrian using the footway is sandwiched between moving traffic and car parking.

Major new roads have been constructed in the last decade without cycling lanes and affording low-priority to pedestrian convenience - indeed, new roads can greatly reduce pedestrian permeability

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

and choice, unless carefully designed and planned. There should be a requirement in the provision of new roads to provide cycle lanes and maintain or improve pedestrian facilities and permeability.

Question 4

Highways authorities often have an ingrained ethos of prioritising vehicular provision and accommodating rather than restraining traffic growth. In addition, little attention is often paid in the development of new transport infrastructure to urban design, environmental impact, impact on historic buildings and areas, the effect on regeneration potential, or the need to promote social inclusion. Much more action is required to change this ethos. There should be explicit requirements on highways authorities to consider the needs of walkers, to identify barriers to walking, and to adopt programmes to improve pedestrian facilities. In addition, there should be a requirement, preferably in legislation, to consider environmental, social and wider economic factors when designing transport infrastructure.

Question 5

It is better to attempt to reduce speeding through careful and thoughtful urban design and road orientation than through the addition of speed restriction devices, which are often visually intrusive and can be uncomfortable for some users – for example where buses need to travel over speed bumps. In historic areas, special attention should be paid to the design of speed control structures (and they should be avoided where possible). Highway authorities should be encouraged or required to take a more positive approach to innovative highway and parking designs. Many highway authorities are currently reluctant to move outside of their preferred and sometimes inflexible standards.

Question 6

High quality design and materials for footway surfaces, seating, and landscaping would all help to improve the walking experience. Good design in the development of sites abutting footpaths is also important – for example ensuring live building frontages or high quality landscaped spaces about the pavement rather than servicing elevations or car parking areas.

Question 7

A Web site may be helpful, but there needs to be some degree of compulsion for highway designers to adopt best practice in their everyday activities. In many respects, a web site would cater mainly for the already enlightened practitioner.

Question 8

Research into why people choose not to walk is essential to guide future policy and guidance. The proportion of trips made on foot has declined in the past decade. Research needs to identify the reasons for this so that they can be addressed in a robust walking strategy.

Question 9

Good urban design can dramatically reduce the scope for crime and perceived safety of the public realm. Compulsory design training for officers and elected members involved in development control and highway design would be very beneficial – helping to deliver better results on the ground.

Question 10

Reducing or removing traffic (except for disabled access and parking) helps create better and safer environments for all, including those with mobility or other impairments. Sensitivity and strong attention to design quality is necessary if the provision of facilities for the visually impaired and less mobile are to be reconciled with the need to create a high quality public realm and to preserve or enhance historically sensitive areas and buildings.

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

Question 11

The most effective way of promoting walking would be to publicise the benefits to health and in particular weight control.

Question 12

It should be appreciated that most decision makers involved in the development of transport infrastructure and the built environment are not cyclists, walkers or users of public transport. This builds a number of assumptions and biases into the decision making process. Intensive training is required to raise awareness of the needs of walkers and users of more sustainable transport modes.

Question 13

The IHBC would support the establishment of a Walking Regional Development Team.

Question 14

A walking projects fund would help to raise awareness of the need to provide better facilities, and help disseminate knowledge of best practice. The criteria for funding should emphasise both functional and visual aspects of good design.

Question 15

The public perception indicator is the most important. This would help to identify and prioritise improvement schemes based on need.

Question 16

The greatest barrier to improving walking facilities is the low priority given to the issue by decision makers at all levels of national and local government.

Many developers are reluctant to consider the needs of walkers and public transport users and the planning system does not currently intervene strongly enough to ensure facilities are provided.

Walkers and public transport users are widely considered as second class citizens. There is a strong car-owning ethos in the UK. This is partly a result of the continuing failure to adopt a robust integrated land-use and transport strategy, such as those in other EC countries such as the Netherlands.

Question 17

The benefits of walking need to be presented to the wider population. The assumption of car ownership needs to be challenged. This will be difficult given the neglect of sustainable transport provision over several decades. Campaigns and marketing can only have a limited impact, given the physical conditions often facing walkers. A change of ethos is necessary, and this needs to translate into better practice on the ground.

Questions 18-20

Local Government practices need to change, both in highway design and control of development. This will only happen if central government can provide better, stronger and more specific legislation and guidance and funding specifically aimed at sustainable modes of transport. Where, successful and creative initiatives to reclaim the public realm for pedestrians are identified, steps are required to make sure that such good practice becomes much more widely spread.

Conclusion

The IHBC deplores the current situation where pedestrians and users of sustainable modes of transport are effectively second class citizens, with greatly reduced access to facilities and more

INSTITUTE OF HISTORIC BUILDING CONSERVATION

limited life opportunities. If this situation is to change over the following decades, urgent action is required including changes to legislation and national guidance and compulsory training for decision makers. The public realm needs to be reclaimed for people, not cars, especially in city, town and village centres. Most importantly, there needs to be a robust integrated approach to transport and land use planning in the UK, drawing on best practice from Continental Europe.

I trust that these comments are helpful.

Yours faithfully

Dave Chetwyn
Consultations Secretary