

Spaces for People Webinar Summary report



Introduction

Disability Equality Scotland worked in collaboration with Sustrans the charity whose mission is to make it easier to walk, wheel and cycle to host an event on the topic of Spaces for People, a new temporary infrastructure programme which offers funding to local authorities to make it safer for people to move around their local area, while maintaining a safe distance. The event took place digitally using the Zoom platform on 07 July 2020 in line with physical distancing guidelines for COVID-19.

There were 33 people in attendance.

This report summarises the discussions at this event.

Background

In June 2020, Disability Equality Scotland ran a weekly poll on physical distancing. It was the highest recorded response to a poll, with 920 respondents, of which 99% stated they had encountered difficulties when attempting to maintain physical distances in their local area.

Some of the challenges highlighted by our members included pavements not being wide enough nor equipped to deal with disabled peoples' needs. A lack of dropped kerbs and the prevalence of pavement parking created challenges for wheelchair users. In addition, street clutter such as bins, café A-boards and seating caused issues for those with visual impairments. Equally, there were issues when pedestrians, cyclists and joggers share the same restricted space.

We wanted to explore some of the measures in place to alleviate some of these challenges. Spaces for People was awarded a £30million fund from the Scottish Government to which local authorities could submit applications, which included measures such as widening pavements, closing roads to traffic and suspending street parking.

Presentations

Emma Scott, from Disability Equality Scotland set the context of the day and handed over to Susan Brown from the Active Travel team at Transport Scotland. Susan explained the process Transport Scotland went through in April 2020 just as lockdown was enforced whereby they engaged with a number of local authorities, Sustrans and MACS, gathering evidence of some of the tensions of physical distancing which led to the initial investment in Spaces for People.

Matt Davis and Claire Daly from Sustrans confirmed that the fund has recently closed to applications. Matt shared some examples of temporary infrastructures that have been put in place via Spaces for People. These include:

- Road closures with barriers to close the space
- Widening of pavements
- Temporary cycle lanes making it easier to cycle on the road, separate from traffic
- Removal of railing and pavement clutter

The applications for funding are assessed against strict criteria, which includes accessibility criteria, supported by an Equality Impact Assessment and safety audit. Local access panels are involved where possible in providing accessibility advice and Sustrans coordinates linking local authorities with MACS or local panels as appropriate.

The Space to Move website has been created to allow members of the public to offer feedback on temporary infrastructure and can be viewed here: <https://www.sustrans.org.uk/space-to-move>

In addition, Sustrans have worked with Cycling Scotland, Living Streets and a range of organisations to promote walking and cycling and have collated information for the public, which has been endorsed by MACS and Public Health Scotland and acts as a Code of Conduct. Sustrans reiterated how

useful the Disability Equality Scotland poll on physical distancing was to inform this information.

Key discussion points

Lifespan of temporary structures

Disability Equality Scotland members were keen to understand whether these 'temporary' changes to infrastructure would be made permanent over time? Sustrans explained that that any new measure would stay in place for as long as physical distancing was in place and beyond this, it would be for the local authority to consult with its residents to gauge feedback on whether there is a desire for changes to be made permanent.

Communicating changes

Some attendees indicated that they had not been aware of changes to outdoor space which would allow cyclists and pedestrians to share pathways. In some cases this had resulted in crashes and near-misses, particularly concerning those with visual impairments. Sustrans indicated that their 'Code of Conduct' was being shared with local authorities

Impact on car parking spaces

Many blue badge holders were concerned about a reallocation of accessible parking spaces as part of temporary infrastructures. Sustrans reiterated that local authorities need to take account of blue badge spaces and ensure that they are provided; but in some cases this could be at a new location. The guidance published by MACS ensures that local authorities are mindful that not everyone has the same choice to get out of their car to walk or wheel.

Applications for funding

Sustrans confirmed that applications had now closed to the Spaces for People fund but that the majority of projects were at the design and early implementation stage. All but three local authority areas had applied, resulting in a mix of urban, rural and island communities having access to the funding.

Accessibility criteria

Applications are subject to Equality Impact Assessments and Sustrans expect local authorities to undertake these to ensure any proposed infrastructure does not negatively impact on accessibility. For example, using stickers to indicate a one-way system on pavements is not acceptable for those with visual impairments and is therefore not accessible.

Monitoring and evaluating Spaces for People

Case studies will be developed as part of ongoing monitoring of the scheme. It is important that these case studies reflect the full breadth of the scheme and include a wide range of temporary measures. Disabled people are encouraged to feed back to their local authority their views on the accessibility of temporary structures as they are developing.

Active travel

Our members have often indicated their view of being 'left out' of active travel, which by its nature, focuses on walking and cycling although has recently made wheeling more of a priority. The panelists stated that active travel is important and relevant for disabled people because it is fundamentally about getting out and about in the local area. It was suggested that messaging around 'active travel' has to clearly demonstrate that it is about everyone moving about; not just focusing on fit and active people and that active travel can also be accessible.

Disability Equality Scotland

July 2020