

7.3. MM03: Access and Inclusion – urban design challenges for people with low vision and blindness

Council’s Access and Inclusion Committee, when considering the design of recent Council projects, raised concerns in respect of urban design.

These concerns reflect the preliminary findings of research by UTS and Guide Dogs NSW/ACT that:

- *Accessibility depends on predictability and intuitive design.*
- *Footpaths are fundamental but widely inaccessible due to poor maintenance and obstructions.*
- *Crossings are the most stressful aspect of mobility; lack of tactile and auditory cues is critical.*
- *Public transport is essential but inconsistent; floating bus stops and shared paths increase risk.*
- *Urban design trends (flush intersections, shared zones) often compromise safety.*
- *Council communication is a major barrier with websites and complaint processes often inaccessible.*
- *Self-advocacy is strong but exhausting; systemic change is needed. (UTS/Guide Dogs NSW/ACT, 2025)*

There are significant challenges around flush crossings and Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSIs). These challenges are summarised in a March 2025 article in New Planner (PIA) entitled *Equitable and inclusive planning policy and practice for neighbourhood walkability: listening to lived experience*, Thompson, Mesnage, and Moon as follows:

Flush crossings

Termed flush or seamless crossings, these are where the road and footpath meet at the same level. They are commonly found in shared spaces, in combination with continuous footpaths, and where there is a flush finish intersection. Such designs and footpath treatments significantly challenge the safe and independent mobility of people with low vision or blindness (in the survey over 80 per cent held high concerns about them). In part this is related to the removal of traditional environmental cues, most importantly the change of physical level from footpath to the road. Assumptions are made about how to designate the footpath end and commencement of a roadway with fast moving vehicles.

Tactile Ground Surface Indicators (TGSIs)

TGSIs are generally installed to denote the end of one use and the start of another, with the assumption that they will be sufficient to alert the pedestrian. This is widely accepted in practice and policy (for example, Australian Standard 1428.4.1; US Access Board) despite the lived experience of people who are blind or have low vision. For them, tactiles on their own are extremely challenging to detect and need to be accompanied by some form of gradient change between footpath and roadway, such

as compliant, aligned kerb ramps. Where there is no physical indication of such a change, a guide dog or cane user will generally walk onto the road unaware. In a busy, noisy and crowded urban environment, it is mentally demanding for blind or low vision pedestrians to detect the tactiles underfoot to safely cross a road when there are no other physical indications to warn of potential hazard.

Guide Dogs NSW/ACT have undertaken a number of surveys and research in relation to urban design and the visually impaired. Ms Jennifer Moon, Guide Dogs NSW/ACT Social Change Advocate, recently met with Council's Director Open Space and Infrastructure to discuss the significant safety risks associated with the use of flush transitions between footpaths and roadways where the change in environment is not detectable and the practical barriers to changing the urban design approach. They identified that amendments to the Australian Standards are required so that councils may implement footpath crossings that meet the needs of all pedestrians including the visually impaired.

Subsequently, Ms Moon wrote to me seeking support for the establishment of a technical working group with representation from multiple councils to address these issues at their source through amendments to the relevant Australian Standards, specifically AS 1428.4.1, Clause 2.5.

Ms Moon advised:

My initial discussions with Standards Australia have been encouraging; however, the principal challenge will be identifying an amendment that is both technically effective and practically achievable. This will require collaboration between technical specialists and subject matter experts with both lived and professional experience to ensure any revision delivers functional safety while supporting practical urban design outcomes.

I believe North Sydney Council is particularly well placed to take a proactive and influential leadership role in this space. These issues are becoming increasingly well documented not only across NSW, but nationally, and there is a clear opportunity to contribute to meaningful and lasting change.

I therefore recommend:

- 1. THAT** Council establish a technical working group with representation from multiple councils (with both technical specialists and subject matter experts with both lived and professional experience) to address amendments to the relevant Australian Standards, specifically AS 1428.4.1, Clause 2.5, to ensure a revised Standard that delivers functional safety while supporting practical urban design outcomes.
- 2. THAT** Ms Moon be invited to participate in the working group.

**COUNCILLOR ZOË BAKER
MAYOR**