

DfT Traffic Signs Policy Review

Environmental draft reports:

1. Clutter Busting - Less is More, Alan Baxter, June 2010
2. Reducing Traffic Sign Clutter, TRL, June 2010

Response to Consultation

This document is the response of the Institute of Highway Engineers (IHE) to Graham Hanson's request for comments on the above reports in his email of 6 August 2010. This response is also supported by the British Parking Association (BPA).

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Comments on Report 1 (Alan Baxter)

We agree with the authors that any change to primary legislation is unrealistic, and therefore that traffic signs cannot easily be brought within the remit of the planning or control of advertisement or similar procedures. Any additional restriction on highway authorities' ability to erect signs would be an unreasonable burden upon them and out of keeping with the current thinking on localism and deregulation.

Recommending that authorities include sign drawings in consultations for regulatory measures is a good idea, as it both communicates the proposal more readily and forces the authority to think about the signing at an early stage. However, particularly for parking controls, the number of signs and their detailed placement will need to be remain flexible to accommodate site conditions encountered during installation and the need to use existing structures for their mounting whenever possible.

We support the report's emphasis on updating the Traffic Signs Manual and providing the best possible guidance to authorities, but we foresee problems in trying to reorganise it by category of road. This would result in a lot of duplication between chapters and arguably more clutter on people's bookshelves! The advice on the environmental aspects of signs and their mounting, issued by DfT in Circular Roads 7/75, needs expanding and reissuing, work that we understand is in progress.

Imposing quality audits of signing presupposes that there are sufficient people with the necessary training and time available to carry them out, which we doubt. To say whether or not a particular sign is essential, desirable or not needed requires an extensive knowledge of traffic sign legislation and guidance, and of traffic engineering generally. It is likely to be more cost-effective and viable to train the original designers and checkers that 'less is more' and to be their own cluster-busting champions.

Comments on Report 2 (TRL)

General

This is a very worthwhile report. However we consider it focuses too much on removing redundant signs and not enough on making sure that remaining signs are correct, neat and doing a good job.

In many cases reducing clutter will involve cleaning signs, removing vegetation that obscures them and replacing life-expired signs, to ensure that those signs selected to remain are conspicuous and readable. There is often an opportunity to combine two or more existing signs into one neater arrangement, or to re-make directional signs with fewer destinations (having checked for continuity) or simply with a better layout that eliminate some of the blank space.

There is a lot more to reducing sign clutter than simply identifying signs for removal. In many cases it involves complete replacement of all signs, as the Kensington High Street project, quoted in the report, demonstrates.

The report suggests that many authorities have a signs inventory but never audit it. We find this hard to fully believe and it seems to be based upon a self-selected sample. It is likely that the authorities that chose to respond have the best signing records and that those that didn't had none – or indeed no staff member specifically responsible for signing.

Section 2

We support the idea that authorities need a Streetscape Policy, but we would go further and suggest they need policies in other areas relating to signing:

- directional signing plan or policy;
- gateway signing (at authority, town and village boundaries);
- tourist signs and signs to individual premises (including charging, maintenance and eventual removal);
- erection of temporary signs to new housing developments;
- erection of temporary signs to events by AA, etc.;
- policies relating to non-traffic street signs (street nameplates, CCTV, dog-fouling, refuse collection, etc.).

Section 5

We think it unrealistic on the audit form to ask for those inspecting to identify the sign diagram number. This and other information suggested would be more economically identified by office-based staff looking at the photographs and other data collected. A photograph of the manufacturers' label on the back would also be helpful in determining the sign's age and specification.

Some of the other items of information (e.g. overlay film) are unlikely to be discernable or easily identifiable from a site inspection, but these fields should be retained in the database as they *can* be completed for new signs that are erected.

For assessing directional signing (overload, continuity, etc.), it is essential to record the destinations and route numbers shown on each sign. A digital photograph may suffice for this, provided it is indexed and accessible from the database, but at some point the information will need to be transferred into a computer-searchable form.

Assessing directional signing continuity requires specialist software in all but the most trivial of cases.

Sections 9 & 10

The approach suggested for reducing the number of signs seems to be by a sign-by-sign individual assessment. We would suggest that authorities would wish to prioritise for decluttering areas that have an identified overload problem for the road user or a particular problem of visual intrusion. The treatment of these would need to be site based, taking into account the entire inventory of signs near that location. For the signs that need to be retained, it would include identifying multiple signs that could be combined onto a single structure or simplified in some other way.

General comments on reducing sign clutter

We believe that sign clutter results primarily from two factors:

- a fragmentation of responsibilities in many authorities, leading to several disparate teams each putting up signs without reference to each other or to the effect they are having on the street scene and the road user;
- a lack of skills, training and experience on the part of the individuals responsible for designing schemes and specifying traffic signs. This is compounded by a lack of effective checking of designs by someone with the necessary knowledge.

We consider that there needs to be much greater recognition of traffic signing as a specialism within traffic engineering, and that people entering this field need adequate training and mentoring. In order to establish that an individual has acquired the necessary skills and experience, the IHE, with the support of DfT, Highways Agency and ADEPT (previously CSS), has introduced a Professional Certificate in Traffic Sign Design. To qualify for this award candidates are expected to show a full knowledge of the wider aspects of signing, including the need to avoid overload and clutter. There is also an NVQ level 3 module for sign manufacturers that assesses traffic signs design skills, and the BPA offers an NVQ in parking management.

Once sufficient people have been assessed, we believe it should become a strong recommendation that no sign design or signing scheme should progress to manufacture or installation without having been approved by someone holding a suitable qualification.

Where smaller authorities do not have sufficient volume of signing work to justify recruiting or training a specialist, we suggest that they form a joint signing team with adjacent authorities, or simply arrange to check each other's work before designs are finalised.

The importance of joined-up thinking and good communication between teams needs to be emphasised. Parking policies, 'local solutions' and effective traffic management and parking enforcement are often decided upon without considering the signing that will be needed to effect those changes and whether it will be easily understood and/or over-intrusive. Greater local flexibility on signing standards will lead to local diversity whereby some authorities will inevitably choose to use a larger total area of signing than others to convey the same message or restriction. This may cause

pressure from road users on the ‘minimalist’ authorities to increase their amount of signing up to the level of the others.

In short, it is all down to traffic sign designers knowing their craft and, sadly, far too many do not. We can largely stop the problem of sign clutter arising in the first place by recognising the need for knowledgeable and well-trained people to design and vet schemes.