

Sign use

Signs in the highway and public spaces are used for a great variety of reasons. They can be used for:

- ☛ Direction and Information Signs – regulated signs for directing traffic
- ☛ Regulatory Signs – indicate requirements, restrictions and prohibitions as prescribed by the Traffic Signs Regulations. These include prohibited turns, waiting and loading restrictions, bus and cycle lanes etc.
- ☛ Warning signs - to alert drivers to potential danger ahead

Local authorities may also erect non-regulatory signs such as pedestrian direction signs, town maps, pavement inset signs etc. It is also acceptable for many historic and traditional direction signs to be retained, though traffic signs are regulated as to their lifespan.¹

Traffic signs have been one of those elements of the public realm that have increased incrementally as new problems are encountered, or new traffic schemes are implemented. In recent years this has been particularly noticeable in the erection of cycle lanes with signs² at each stop and start.



Figure 1 Signs should be appropriately sized and used in the right location – a keep right sign wrongly used as there is no possibility of keeping left of it



Figure 2 Signs can be poorly considered leading to some bizarrely impractical, if legal, solutions



Figure 3 Some non regulation signs - a wrong solution to a poor design



Figure 4 A pre-Worboys warning sign adds character to a Conservation Area, though has no legal status

Policy framework and regulations

Signs are controlled by regulation³ when they are erected, though there is no duty for an authority to erect a sign unless a Traffic Regulation Order has been made (e.g. to prohibit entry, turning or parking for instance). If a designed layout can guide traffic and make a safe road environment, traffic orders may be avoided and signs and lines omitted.

Warning and Direction signs are largely discretionary. Road markings are also classed as traffic signs and must comply with the Regulations. The regulations and accompanying guidance⁴ are complex and it is known for highways officers to believe a sign or marking is required by regulation when it is not, or for fear of liability to lead to a sign being erected to provide a warning or control a traffic movement more stringently. Such signs are not really a defence alone in law, and in any event current case law⁵ says drivers are 'first and foremost responsible for their own safety'.⁶

Some commonly used signs such as the 'Keep Left' sign bollard seen on so many central islands are not regulatory requirements. Their omission does not leave the highway authority exposed to liability though it does have discretion on whether it signs and marks obstructions in the street. Once the signing or lining is selected, it must be designed and installed to comply with the regulations.

Yellow backed signs are increasingly used to make a sign more obvious. DfT guidance is these should only be used in very exceptional circumstances so as not to reduce their impact where they are installed.

Sign positioning is regulated for some signs, is subject to some guidance for some others, whilst others are for the highway authority's local decision making.



Figure 5 Standard yellow lines used unnecessarily and crudely in a narrow lane impassable in any event to vehicles

In areas 'regarded as environmentally sensitive' (there is no legal definition to this so it need not be a Conservation Area), 50 mm wide yellow lines may be used for no parking. Alternative shades of yellow (cream or primrose yellow) may be used. Other road markings such as white zig-zag lines of pelican crossings are often used excessively. Regulations permit lower numbers of zig-zags than the 'standard' 8 in many circumstances, so on slower speed roads particularly approaches may be laid with only 4 or even 2 zig-zags.

Note that special signs need special DfT approval. The presumption is against approving non-standard signs (including small versions of approved signs) unless circumstances are extremely exceptional.⁷

Should they stay or should they go?

Sign and lines are usually provided at the highway authority's discretion to improve the safety of road users or out of a desire to reduce liability by warning of a hazard. There is no definition of what safety improvement is required or that it is achieved and evidence based design is not common practice. The highway authority has Road Safety Auditors who are experienced practitioners and may advise on aspects of design, though correct Manual for Street⁸ quality audit procedures require safety measures to be

considered alongside environmental and community considerations.

Many signs cannot be seen to enhance road safety, and their need is questionable. This situation may occur in particular circumstances so it is advisable to discuss the issue with a highway officer. Examples might be use of a Give Way sign on a side road junction with another road, a sign that may be useful in some circumstances but is not a regulatory requirement and is often used without considering whether it is really necessary. Other examples include the No Entry sign that often gets used in pairs where regulation allows a single sign where streets are narrow. Other signs are legacies of when circumstances were different and have just not been removed.

The discretionary powers of the highway authority will usually fall on the side of caution however (though there are also cost concerns about adding to maintenance workload). Where a sign can be shown to cause environmental problems, e.g. it seriously mars an historic streetscape or building, the arguments for retention or re-design to another solution that is less intrusive, can be proved and backed up by various government and local policy documentation such as the overarching Community Strategy that leads other local policies on transport and the environment. Many authorities operate a sign audit and removal process under their Asset Management programme, and will listen to arguments from community and environmental groups about concerns.

The alternatives

There are instances when signs and road markings can be avoided altogether. Using Restricted Zones or Historic Core Zones it is possible to designate zones where parking is only permitted where marked (rather than using yellow line restrictions).⁹ This reduces the amount of sign posts or other signs, though a larger sign is required at the zone entrances.

Central white lines are not regulation requirements. Again there is increasing

evidence that their presence in some circumstances makes drivers drive faster. Some villages have worked at removing white lines to reduce the impact of the roadmarkings on the environment and reduce driver speeds, a move that is a more satisfactory alternative to signing.^{10,11}

Signs should be mounted to share poles wherever possible. Multiple poles are usually a result of gradual additional sign installation without site audit before design and installation.

Other alternatives to traditional signs are use of inset stone pavement (non regulatory) signs for cycle path repeaters to avoid the succession of cycle signs often used on lightly trafficked routes.



Figure 6 Keep left signs are not compulsory. Where they are used (where it may not be clear that vehicles should keep left e.g. after a break in a central reserve), then bright yellow/orange panels are not a requirement.



Figure 7 Paving inset cycle route sign

References

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² LTN 2/08 Cycle Infrastructure design
<http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgr/roads/tpm/ltnotes/ltn208.pdf>

³ Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002
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⁴ Traffic Signs Manual, DfT, 2005 and LTN1/94 Design and Use of Directional Informatory Signs, DfT, 1994

⁵ Highway Risk and Liability Claims, UK Roads Board, 2009 <http://www.ihie.org.uk/knowledge-network/uploads/Section%205%20of%20Highway%20Risk%20and%20Liability%20Claims%20-%202nd%20Edition%20July%202009.pdf>

⁶ Ibid. Case is Gorringe vs Calderdale.

⁷ Streets for all Practical Case Studies No. 7, Non Standard signs and best use of standard signs, English Heritage, 2008 <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/Non-standard-signs.pdf?1271894555>

⁸ Manual for Streets, DfT 2007
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⁹ Streets for All Practical Case Study 2, Parking Restrictions without yellow lines, English Heritage, 2008 <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/Parking-restrictions.pdf?1271894555>

¹⁰ Streets for All Practical Case Study 9, Use of White Lines, English Heritage, 2008 <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/White-lines.pdf?1271894555>

¹¹ TAL 11/00 Traffic Calming in Villages on Major Roads
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This Briefing is part of Civic Voice's Street Pride campaign. Further information is available from www.civicvoice.org.uk/campaigns/street-pride, including other briefings on posts, bollards and guard rails and copies of the Street Pride campaign pack.

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