



Briefing 13/01

January 2013

Reducing sign clutter on the highway

To: All contacts in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Key issues

DfT leaflet aimed at reducing the number of signs and signals.

Recommends audits of signs, signals and road markings and consideration of the wider environment when replacing units or developing new schemes.

1. Context

The DfT have issued Traffic Advisory Leaflet 01/13 titled 'Reducing Sign Clutter'. It notes the importance of traffic signs, signals, and road markings as a key method for communicating with the road users and that proper use of signs is vital to their effectiveness. However it notes that over-provision of signs can have a detrimental impact on the environment and can dilute more important messages if they result in information overload for drivers.

The leaflet is one of the early deliverables of 'Signing the Way', the outcome of the Department's major review of traffic signs policy in Great Britain. Minimising the impact of traffic signs on the environment is a key priority and the review recommends action under the following objectives

- Provide more flexibility for local authorities
- Reduce signing on the road network
- Deliver effective enforcement
- Traffic signs for all road users
- Provide road users with better information
- Develop local solutions built on local knowledge

The newly released leaflet gives practical advice on reducing sign clutter, emphasising that designers should use their engineering judgement and local knowledge to complement guidance to ensure signing solutions are effective. For new schemes, the aim should be to design clutter out from the start.

The leaflet can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/43525/tal-reducing-sign-clutter.pdf

2. Guidance

2.1 The leaflet highlights that there is no legal requirement to provide any signs and the approach of 'less is more' is a good place to start in designing a scheme. It states that signs should only be provided where a clear need has been identified, and should be minimal and sympathetic to their environment, both urban and rural settings. It notes that traffic sign clutter often occurs over time, where additional signing is provided without consideration of any existing signing.

Good sign design can prevent clutter happening in the first place, and integration of signing requirements into the design stage of a scheme can help ensure the number of signs is kept to the minimum needed without compromising on the messages they need to deliver. Careful design of the signs themselves, integration of signing requirements into the design stage, consideration of existing signage and combination of signs onto fewer separate structures are noted as good practice.

2.2 The leaflet states that local authorities should consider auditing their traffic signs, traffic signals and road markings on a regular basis so enabling them to manage their assets better and to determine whether their existing signs are necessary. The Department also recommends auditing existing signing before new signs are introduced and where new traffic schemes are being planned to help identify obsolete or unnecessary signs which can be removed.

2.3 To identify if any regulatory signs can be removed, the leaflet recommends review of TROs. Where the TRO is no longer needed it should be revoked and the signs removed. The leaflet highlights signs to diagram 610 and 'keep left' signs as examples of overuse of regulatory signs and by restricting their use only to those sites where they are necessary, authorities will save money both on the cost of the sign itself and on sign lighting.

2.4 The leaflet states that although warning signs play an important part in improving road safety, they should only be used where there is a specific safety issue or hazard, not to sign routine features of the road, such as bends and junctions, as overuse can dilute their effectiveness. It specifies roundabout or traffic signal warning signs, in addition to map-type advanced direction signs or where the traffic signals or roundabout are clearly visible and junction warning signs in street-lit urban areas, where there are frequent side-road junctions, as often being unnecessary. Local authorities should work with local communities where specific issues and concerns are raised, to make sure the right solution is found. Warning signs should only be installed where there is an identified hazard or road safety problem, and not to solely meet a perceived need.

2.5 The leaflet notes that authorities should distinguish between facilities used primarily by local people such as schools, churches and surgeries and major tourists destinations with the former often not needing any signs. Tourist signs should only be provided for major destinations and not for facilities used primarily by local residents. It goes on to say that tourist signs should only be provided where existing directional signs are not sufficient. For most tourist attractions, and all tourist facilities, it is likely that signing would only be appropriate within the last two to three miles.

2.6 In terms of temporary signs, the leaflet notes that authorities should consider if temporary signs are necessary in the first place, with all temporary (white-on-red) signs removed as soon as they are no longer needed. Signs such as 'new road layout ahead' (no later than 3 months) and black-on-yellow temporary signs (within 6 months of housing development completion) should also be removed as soon as possible.

2.7 The leaflet also refers to the removal of unnecessary road markings claiming this can reduce clutter and maintenance costs with for example, worded markings such as 'keep clear' and 'slow' being assessed to see if they are still needed and yellow lines and parking bays being removed where the TRO has expired or been revoked. It notes that the use of restricted parking zones and 'permit holders only past this point' area-wide parking controls can be an effective way of removing the need for road markings to indicate waiting restrictions and parking bays.

2.8 Issues such as reduction in environmental impact, the size of signs and planning of new signing schemes are noted in the leaflet as further areas where local authorities should work closely with their communities. It is strongly recommended that authorities include details of sign designs and locations when consulting on proposals such as parking restrictions, so residents can

understand and comment on the placing and appropriateness of the signs. Where possible, symbols should be used instead of legends on tourist signs to reduce sign size. Signs should be mounted so that they are visible, but not intrusive. The possibility of mounting signs on walls, railings and other street furniture should be investigated to reduce the need for separate posts.

2.9 The leaflet notes that as result of changes in TSRGD 2002, many signs are no longer legally required to have lighting. Unnecessary sign lighting is expensive and increases carbon emissions and light pollution and it states that local authorities should review their current sign system to ensure that they light only those signs which require it.

2.10 The leaflet re-iterates that for permanent traffic signals, TSRGD requires a minimum of two signal heads on each approach, one of which must be a primary signal head (i.e. one located just beyond the stop line). It goes on to say that the use of extra signal heads at stand-alone crossings has become almost a matter of course in some places and are often unnecessary, create extra clutter and should be avoided except where necessary to address a particular safety problem. The same applies to 'tall poles'; those where an extra signal head is mounted on the same pole above the standard signal head. It states that there will always be circumstances where extra signal heads are required, but their use should be carefully considered at the design stage. The aim should be to provide the minimum number of signal heads necessary.

3 Summary

The leaflet notes that good practice in sign, signal and road marking maintenance will

- improve the streetscape by identifying and removing unnecessary, damaged and worn out signing
- help rationalise signs to help ensure they are provided only where required
- help minimise the environmental impact of signing through careful design, including siting, size and colour
- reduce the costs associated with providing traffic signs and lighting units, and
- reduce the need for maintenance, for example for sign cleaning, lamp changing and foliage cutting.

4 Examples of signs removed

In an associated press release the Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin urges local authorities to continue a cull on signs pointing to an example in London where 8,000 repeater signs and 4,000 poles installed on the capitals' roads in the early 1990s have been ripped out. He also refers to Hampshire where 200 traffic signs have been taken away along a 12 mile stretch of the A32 and Somerset where a further 1,000 signs have been removed.

5. APSE Comment

APSE welcomes the leaflet and the work undertaken in the review of traffic signs policy as a prompt for local authorities to review local signage on the highway. Some of the issues noted such as a reduction in the need for lighting of signs means less spend on energy whilst the removal of unnecessary signs will result in less maintenance of signs and the foliage around them, so there will be a beneficial impact on cost and workload.

Auditing of signs and signals is a fundamental element of an effective service. It informs cleaning, maintenance and renewal programmes and is in place in many local authorities. However, where this is not yet in place it is a significant exercise to undertake and may involve the bringing together of disparate databases or the compilation of new ones. It can be an expensive and time consuming exercise but should be carried out in all local authorities.

The leaflet notes for example that the correct length of post should be used, such that the top of the post does not extend above the sign, unless it supports a lighting unit, as a relatively easy way to improve the appearance of signs. Also colours and designs of posts should be co-ordinated with lamp columns and other street furniture where possible and use of LED lighting is recommended. These are all desirable but there will be a cost attached to making these improvements to existing signs. This type of change is unlikely to be a budget priority in councils at the moment.

Those councils who have retained their own sign shops are in a more advantageous position when addressing this issue as they are both able to produce signs at a cheaper cost than market cost and they can sell their services to other councils.

Councils have also started gaining income from companies advertising or sponsoring signs and this is seen as an important source of extra finance for example through 'Welcome to' signs or adverts on roundabouts.

However, there are other issues over which the council has little control, for example, the phenomenon of local firms and individuals placing advertising placards on existing sign poles. Although not including traffic information, they do distract drivers and add to street clutter. Local authorities have a number of different powers to control fly posting and distribution of literature for example through the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005. This gives local authorities the power to remove advertisements, posters and placards that are displayed unlawfully and to recover the costs of removal and damage to property. Using these powers will enable local authorities to address the issues of street clutter and the dangers of drivers reading material found on sign poles as well as taking a whole environment approach on the highway. However when budgets are tight, finding the resources to tackle this issue is challenging which makes this type of intervention the exception rather than the rule.

APSE welcomes the point raised in the leaflet which refers to designers and engineers using local judgement when designing signs. Clearly there will be occasions when local knowledge needs to be brought to the fore and national standards are less important.

APSE also agrees with the point raised about obstructions on the footway and their impact on pedestrians and vulnerable road users. However, in this regard signs and signals must be viewed as only part of the problem as local authorities are constantly dealing with litter, detritus, dog mess, fly tipping and other obstructions on the footway, and indeed highway. This leaflet recommends that some local authorities take on board new approaches to dealing with signs and signals. This leaflet and guidance is welcome but should also refer to the wider issues of keeping footways clear, addressing littering, the erection of adverts and billboards at junctions and other sites which could distract drivers and other issues which have an impact upon the experience of all highway and footway users.

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