



Imtac statement on the use of “colourful crossings”

(January 2022)

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Making our information accessible

As an organisation of Deaf people, disabled people, older people and carers Imtac recognises that the way information is provided can be a barrier to accessing services and participation in public life. We are committed to providing information about our work in formats that best suit the needs of individuals.

All our documents are available in hard copy in 14pt type size as standard. We also provide word and pdf versions of our documents on our website – www.imtac.org.uk. In addition we will provide information in a range of other formats including:

- Large print
- Audio versions
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If you would like this publication in any of the formats listed above or if you have any other information requirements please contact:

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About Imtac

Imtac is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including carers and key transport professionals. The role of the Committee is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

Imtac's aim is to ensure that Deaf people, disabled people and older people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (hereafter referred to as the Department).

Introduction

Imtac has been made aware of a growing trend for the installation of colourful patterns on road crossings in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland one council has already installed a "colourful crossing" and the Committee has been contacted by other councils for advice about installing similar crossings in their area. Because of the growing demand for this type of intervention and concerns being expressed about their impact on road safety, Imtac has decided to develop and publish this statement making clear our position about colourful crossings and setting out our advice to government and other bodies in Northern Ireland with responsibility for the public realm.

We are an organisation founded on the principles of inclusion and openness to all. We are firmly opposed to all discrimination. This statement about colourful crossings is about safety and accessibility concerns. Our concerns must not be weaponised or used to further marginalise other groups in society, particularly the LGBTQ+ community.

Impact of "colourful crossings"

Being able to cross our roads safely is a fundamental requirement to enable pedestrian journeys and vital for local community access and travelling more widely. It is essential that the pedestrian and wider built environment is safe, inclusive and accessible to all including Deaf people, disabled people and older people.

Imtac believes there is significant evidence that the installation of “colourful crossings” poses a risk to Deaf people, disabled people, older people and others including children. Recent correspondence from the Access Association¹ to UK Government Ministers sets out who is most affected by this type of crossing including:

- People with a visual impairment
- People with learning difficulties
- People with dementia
- Neurodivergent people including people with autism
- People with conditions that affect balance

We have included the text of the letter from the Access Association in an appendix to this statement with more detailed evidence of the impact of colourful crossings.

In London the Mayor has paused further installation² of colourful crossings following the publication on an open letter raising concerns from seven disability organisations.

Our advice on “colourful crossings”

Evidence indicates that colourful crossings represent a hazard for some disabled people and older people. Imtac has significant concerns that their use will not only put people at risk but create no go areas in our towns and cities which Deaf people, disabled people and older people avoid because they do not feel safe.

Given these concerns we recommend that any current or future plans for the installation of colourful crossings are stopped and those that are in place be removed.

The Committee recognises that street art can make our public realm a more attractive and vibrant place as well as helping to celebrate diversity and inclusion. Street art can also help to make our built environment more inclusive, for example assisting with way finding. To maximise the

¹ <https://accessassociation.co.uk/2021/09/06/colourful-pedestrian-crossings-letter-to-ministers/>

² <https://www.transportforall.org.uk/news/success-as-mayor-of-london-agrees-to-pause-installation-of-new-colourful-crossings/>

benefits of street art in our public realm without creating road safety hazards Intac recommends:

- DfC and DfI develop guidance on the inclusive use of street art in public realm
- Deaf people, disabled people and older must be involved in the design of guidance and any future street art schemes
- All future street art schemes must be subject to equality impact screening

Appendix

Colourful pedestrian crossings letter to Ministers – correspondence from the Access Association

There is a growing trend of installing art on road crossings, often referred to as ‘colourful crossings’. Our membership believes this form of public art poses risks to disabled people, older people and children, and will impact their ability to make safer active travel journeys.

In response The Access Association has sent a letter to Government ministers:

- Justin Tomlinson MP – Minister of State at the Department for Work and Pensions
- Grant Shapps MP – Secretary of State for Transport
- Chris Heaton Harris MP

Dear Ministers

We write to you on a matter which is of increasing concern to our membership and disabled people who we work with. There is a growing trend of installing art on road crossings, often referred to as ‘colourful crossings’. Our membership believes this form of public art poses risks to disabled people, older people and children, and will impact their ability to make safer active travel journeys for a variety of reasons as briefly set out in this letter.

Our membership believes that the government should urgently take a proactive position on this matter. We ask that you write to all responsible highway authorities advising them to stop installation of any new colourful crossing schemes with immediate effect, recommend that those that are in place should be removed and amend the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions to specifically address the surfacing of crossings.

The Access Association is a national network for access and inclusion professionals and people interested in creating barrier free environments. We are a not-for-profit organisation with members throughout the public, private and third sector. Our members include disabled people, Local Authority Access Officers, members of the National Register of Access Consultants and local Disabled People’s Organisations.

Our members have now encountered or been involved in discussions about colourful crossings. They have identified several concerns and serious impacts relating to colourful crossings. The impacts will vary from one installation to the next and depend on users and the artwork itself, but it is also noteworthy that the variation between different designs is itself a problem. Inconsistency will affect user confidence and may lead to people's loss of independent travel and increased social isolation. Overall, we believe that colourful crossings will impact users' confidence to travel and force some to use other routes or unsafe practices such as crossing adjacent to the coloured areas. At the very least we expect the impact on confidence will extend crossing times for many users.

We have set out some broad concerns from different users' perspectives below to help you understand our view.

Blind people and people with vision impairments

The majority of blind and partially sighted people have some sight. It is well established that for this community to confidently use pedestrian surfaces there should not be bold contrasting patterns with the exception of the long-established and recognisable wide 'zebra' stripes. With the variation of art and striking colours being used we believe a significant number of users would not be confident using many of the colourful crossings we have seen. Our members have received feedback from blind and partially sighted users to this effect. We are also concerned about the impact of colourful crossings on assistance dogs who are trained to help users' cross roads. The inconsistency of design will make training very difficult, and the appearance of colourful crossings overnight is likely to have immediate impacts on a dog's willingness to cross the road.

Neurological effects

Visual hypersensitivity is experienced by a significant number of people, including many neurodivergent people with a sensory processing difference. Sensory overload and/or distress can be caused when encountering "visual noise" such as bright colours, patterns and stripes, particularly when these are unexpected. This may also result in people not recognising the road crossing and attempting to cross the road elsewhere where it is less safe. Processing the visual complexity of the crossing may also result in people stopping or taking longer on the crossing itself.

As an example of the difficulties these crossings can cause, one of our members who invited comment on a colourful crossing was told by an autistic person who is also dyspraxic that they would have to walk around the actual crossing because the pattern would be difficult to process and affect their depth perception, ultimately risking them falling over. They also raised the issue of sensory overload while using crossings, which are already difficult for many people because of the close interaction with traffic.

Dementia, learning disability and hallucinatory conditions

For people with dementia, including people living in the community, colourful crossings may not be understood at all. Depending on the designs, people may become confused, believing the design to be objects in the road or reminiscent of play spaces. They will simply not recognise the crossings, withdrawing a fundamental safety feature from their use.

Equally, people with learning disabilities are likely to find it difficult to interpret a variety of artwork as a crossing. The consistency and hence familiarity of the recognisable zebra stripe plays a large part in everyone interpreting a road crossing as a safe place to cross, as opposed to a colourful crossing which looks different every time one is encountered and therefore no amount of training or instruction can easily prepare someone for the variety they may encounter.

The presence of colourful crossings could be confused with hallucinatory conditions, such as Charles Bonnet syndrome, commonly experienced by people with vision impairments, or similar conditions affecting people with neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's and dementia. We also have concerns regarding people experiencing psychosis. We have seen examples of colourful crossings incorporating 'hidden meanings' and are concerned that such art may take on more significance for some people experiencing psychosis.

Conditions affecting balance

The impact on people with vestibular disorders, such as Ménière's disease, and many older people with balance related conditions, is also a concern. As the balance organ is faulty, the brain becomes more dependent on information coming from the eyes and sensors in your

body. Strong patterning on ground surfaces can trigger instability and falls, and results in loss of confidence in accessing outside spaces.

These are just a few of the potential impacts we foresee with colourful crossings which are now appearing at an alarmingly quick pace around the UK. If not stopped these will have a very real impact on inclusion.

Whilst the application of art on crossings, and to some extent footpaths and stairs, is relatively new, the impacts of such bold patterns on people has been well understood for some time. Even in 2001 there were British Standards advising against bold, contrasting patterns on flooring within buildings. More recently BS 8300-1: 2018, which is specifically concerned with external environments, contains explicit recommendations against contrasting patterns on pedestrian surfaces, it states:

“Although visual contrast is very useful in enabling partially sighted people to perceive boundaries, bold surface patterns can be disorientating or misleading, and should therefore be avoided.

NOTE 2: The use of colour, patterning, lettering and imagery on pedestrian surfaces can be particularly problematic for people who are blind or partially sighted and people who have sensory/neurological processing difficulties.”

We consider the lack of guidance on this issue will allow the continued proliferation of colourful crossings which will have adverse impacts on people’s abilities to make safe and sustainable travel choices, so we reiterate we believe the government should take a proactive position on this matter urgently.

Our members welcome art in the public realm, especially because it can assist with way-finding, strengthen communities and promote inclusion of people who may otherwise feel excluded. We would like to continue to see exciting artwork in the urban realm, including pieces that promote inclusion and community cohesion, but not at the cost of undermining the safety of many members of society – the location and placement of the artwork is key to doing this safely.

If it is useful, we would be happy to meet to discuss our views on this matter. We have copied several organisations into this letter, both for information and because some may also wish to express their opinion on the matter directly to you.