

Notes from Reducing Signs and Lines – the Bury St Edmunds Experience held at Stratford upon Avon Town Hall on Thursday 17 March

Present: Neil Basnett (Chair, Business Improvement District), Roger Bennett (Transport & Parking Group, Warwickshire County Council), Peter Burgess (Historic Spine Group), Jean Clymer (Stratford Society), Julie Crawshaw (Warwickshire County Council), Roger Davis (Transport & Parking Group), Elizabeth Dixon (Transport & Parking Group, Accessible Stratford), Cllr Jenny Fradgley (Transport & Parking Group, Stratford Town & District Council), Cllr Ian Fradgley (Stratford Town & District Council), Ian Heggie (Chair, Transport & Parking Group), Cllr Simon Jackson (Stratford District Council), Paul Ogden (Transport & Parking Group, Stratford District Council), Robin Sankey (Transport & Parking Group), Pat Whitehouse (Transport & Parking Group, Retailer), Cllr Kate Rolfe (Stratford District Council/Warwickshire County Council).

Visitors from Bury St Edmunds: Ian Poole, Planning Policy & Specialist Services Manager, St Edmundsbury Borough Council, former Chair, Historic Towns Forum, Steve Boor, Engineer responsible for implementing the restricted zone in Bury St Edmunds' Historic Core Zones Project Suffolk CC.

Apologies: Charlotte Gallagher (Stratford District Council).

A representative had been invited from the Guide Dogs Association but had not replied.

Ian Heggie referred to a new leaflet produced by our local MP about reducing signage "Poles Apart" (circulated to the Transport & Parking Group in late February).

Ian Poole asked us to consider what is a 'road' or 'street'; one gets you from A-B the other can be used for "essential, discretionary and social use". The multiple functions of a street make it more like a shared "front room". A PowerPoint presentation showed heritage management in some UK towns, like Ipswich, and then moved on to examples from Europe. The latter were based on work carried out by Ian while on a CABI Space scholarship in 2008. A limited number of copies, entitled "The Management and Maintenance of Historic Streets and Squares: Examples from Europe" were distributed at the meeting.

In the case of Bury St Edmunds, the local authority had worked with local community groups – including the local civic society, retailers, chamber of commerce, etc. – to develop a programme to get rid of clutter, remove unnecessary signs and reduce the size of those that remained. They had looked at examples of good practice in towns like Stroud, Bangor and Bolton and had then developed a Strategic Plan informed by asking "What Makes a Great Place". Essential uses had to take place in a street, regardless of how awful it was, while discretionary uses had to compete with other places and social uses evolved from using the street as a place to engage in social interaction with friends neighbours. The quality of the Public Realm was key to the discretionary and social activities carried out in a street. The defining quality of a street relied on free pedestrian movement, ability to appreciate heritage assets, narrow historic streets, less signage, smaller signs (600mm x 800mm) and innovation in the design and placement of signs. When necessary (i.e., when departing from the DfT's signage manual), they were not afraid to ask for

dispensation from DfT to use non-standard signage. For example, 'disabled' signage indented into stone paving blocks, instead of painting intrusive white lines on the road. Likewise, using brass studs instead of tactile markings. They had also widened pavements, narrowed the road and integrated parking bays into the roadway. In the case of large signs, they had placed the signs in a gateway feature designed by local artists. Funding had been mainly local (80% Borough, 10% County), with the balance from the Heritage Lottery Fund, and the scheme was implemented over 15 years. Much of the work was done under a national programme, The Historic Core Zones Project, involving four towns – Bury St Edmunds, Shrewsbury, Halifax and Lincoln – who all shared experience.

Steve Boor spoke about how Bury managed to reduce signs and lines in a Restricted Zone, compared to the plethora of signs and lines in other areas. He showed examples of signage on walls where possible or, if not, on a pole placed to minimise intrusion. In one way streets (at the suggestion of DfT) some signs had been turned to face drivers (rather than being parallel with the road) to make them more visible to motorists.

Throughout the meeting, there were questions and answers about what Bury had achieved and how we might adopt some of their best practice in Stratford upon Avon.

After the meeting, the two visitors joined several of the meeting participants on a tour of Waterside to examine signage in general and the disabled bays in particular.

Ian Heggie thanked Ian and Steve for joining us and presented them with book tokens as a sign of our appreciation.