

## **HOME ZONES – MEETING THE CHALLENGE**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

A Home Zone is defined as a street where people and vehicles share the whole the street space safely, and on equal terms; and where the quality of life takes precedence over the ease of traffic movement. Changes to the layout of the street should emphasise this change of use, so that motorists perceive that they should give equal priority to others.

The approach adopted to create Home Zones has been to re-engineer the space around people's homes such that they feel more able to undertake social and leisure activities within the overall street space. As well as addressing the traffic aspects, Home Zone schemes also develop a greater pride and responsibility in residents for the care and well being of their surroundings. This is being achieved by the active involvement of residents in the design process.

The strength of community ownership developed through the inclusive participation process also encourages new residents to accept the ethos of the community.

The principle of a Home Zone is to be flexible with the use of space and not to be over prescriptive as to routing or use. A Home Zone may consist of shared surfaces, indirect traffic routes, areas of planting, and features to encourage the use of the street, such as seating and informal play features. Traffic speeds will be low enough that walking in the middle of the street is not unsafe. Clear indications are needed at the entry and exit from an area that is fundamentally different from normal roadspace in its design, layout and use.

This paper will discuss the experience of the 57 English local authorities that have participated in the Home Zone Challenge funded by the Department for Transport

### **BACKGROUND**

In August 1999 the first nine Pilot Schemes in England started the development of Home Zones across UK. They were led by local authorities that were keen to develop an alternative approach to the urban street use, over and above the benefits obtained with 20 mph Zones. These initial schemes have been undertaken with no additional funding from central government, other than a commitment to monitor the wider social benefits that the schemes provided. An important aspect of the Home Zones approach was to involve the local community actively in the design and development of

Home Zones. A number of these Pilot schemes are now complete and early indications are that the social capital of the areas has substantially improved.

There are also four trial schemes in Scotland that are at varying stages of development and being monitored:

Tillydrome area, Aberdeen

Royal Infirmary site, Dundee

Caledonian Area, Edinburgh

Ormlie area, Thurso

Homes Zones are a new concept in the UK. They originated in the Netherlands, but have been successfully implemented in different parts of Europe. They are fundamentally different from 20 mph zones in that they are intended to give residents a much greater priority and freedom within the general road space. They are not limited to changing the character of the road alone, but in changing the whole character of the external space in residential areas. Much of the improvement therefore comes from the “feel” of an area and changing the use from transport or access corridors to overall community space. They are aimed at extending the benefits of slow traffic speeds within residential areas to allow for a greater degree of priority for non-motorised users. Importantly, it is intended that the speed of vehicles should be constrained by design to a maximum speed of between 10 and 15 mph. The aim is to give equal priority to pedestrians and traffic and encourage the use of streets for uses other than the passage of vehicles. Drivers should feel that the car was a guest in the street.

The Children’s Play Council and some resident groups were also concerned that children in particular were denied the opportunity to play safely in areas around their houses where they could easily be observed and supervised by their parents. The increasing use of cars was also turning traditional residential streets into nothing more than car parks and people were becoming isolated within their own homes, taking no part in, or responsibility for, the activities that historically had led to strong and close local communities. The car was seen as a positive disincentive to sustainable community life.

The DfT announced the Home Zones Challenge in April 2001. This was a £30 million Grant award through the Capital Modernisation Fund to develop the concept further and encourage authorities to create Home Zones as an integral part of the residential environment. The Grant is payable for works under Section 272 of the Highways Act 1980<sup>2</sup>, together with Section 126 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996<sup>3</sup> that allows authorities to use capital funds for a wider range of work than just highway improvement.

Following the submission of 236 bids from 100 local traffic authorities, 57 authorities in England were accepted in January 2002 to develop a total of 61 schemes for completion by February 2005. Schemes varied in size and complexity, and individual grants varied between £90,000 and £1.5 million (full scheme details can be found on the project website

www.homezoneschallenge.com). However, all had a common theme of improving the quality of life for local residents and included a commitment to keep the community closely involved in the design process. Inclusion within the Home Zones Challenge provided the opportunity for authorities to address wider community concerns and schemes have attempted to provide an holistic improvement to the physical and social capital of the estates.

Although, not intended, the majority of schemes accepted for the Challenge have been from socially deprived inner urban areas where a variety of social issues have been present. Only one of the schemes is a new development where the innovative approach to external space has been a key element in the overall design of the estate.

## **OVERCOMING INERTIA**

An important part of the Challenge has been to involve the community in the whole of the improvement process and a key element in selection was the presence of strong local community groups. It soon became clear, however, that the degree to which these groups were in place was not always as strong as was indicated in the original bids and the first task was to create the confidence within the communities that something meaningful – and different – was going to happen to their area.

Initially, there was an understandable degree of scepticism amongst the communities that the authorities had already decided upon the proposals and any consultation would only be a token effort. Many suspected that either nothing would happen or that detailed proposals had already been prepared. In all cases (except those that were already underway as part of the Pilot Schemes) the concept of Home Zones was new to all those involved.

The first task was to explain to the community what a Home Zone meant. It was necessary to understand what could be achieved within the area and make it clear that it would involve more than just treating the roads. Cooperation between a number of different local authority departments and agencies involved in these areas was key. Where areas had already been identified as having difficulties, it was often the Housing Department that had a representation and provided the local contact. In others there was no fixed contact and this had to be established.

Initial meetings with local residents were therefore mixed, and whilst all welcomed the ideas for improvement, they brought a number of wider issues to the meetings, not least of which was that proposals were seen as 'anti-car'. Schemes varied in size from single streets to estates of several hundred houses and getting representation and consensus on the elements to be included was difficult.

It was important that the full range of residents were involved in the scheme development process – particularly children and young people and a variety of different techniques have been employed across the schemes.

The starting point in all these schemes was to undertake an open meeting to which all residents were invited, usually via a door to door mailing. This was in some cases seen as yet more consultation in areas where there had been extensive consultation already.

In addition to the public meetings and mailings, the use of 'Fun Days' proved very successful in getting a wide cross section involved. It was important that in addition to the main effort of understanding the issues, activities were provided for all age groups. Street theatre, bouncy castles, refreshments and entertainment were provided in the street that traditionally had only been used for cars. This set the scene for more structured involvement of different age groups.

A key aim was to involve the community throughout the design process and not just regard it as a consultation exercise. A genuine attempt was made to generate stakeholder involvement but the use of conventional plans and drawings proved difficult to engage interest fully. The use of visualisations and simulations was developed at a very early stage in the process, even involving local children in creating models of the area.

## **GENERATING OWNERSHIP**

To generate interest and commitment to making changes within the area, the use of specific events involving a wide range of residents were organised. "Clean Up" Days involving the siting of skips throughout the area and encouraging the removal of rubbish were very successful in getting people involved and demonstrating that things were happening.

Having generated the early enthusiasm, the next challenge was to maintain this involvement as many did not appreciate the timescale that was needed to develop proposals fully. All schemes used a series of design meetings with selected groups of residents who were then tasked with feeding back comments to and from the wider community. A system of 'Street Representatives' proved to be very successful in some schemes in not only channelling information, but also in reinforcing the community spirit within the area. These Street Representatives were naturally those residents who were the keenest to be involved and able to give substantial amounts of time to collecting and disseminating information between residents and the project team.

Regular meetings for the project team operated at a number of different levels. An overall Steering Group was often necessary to ensure that the various funding bodies and agencies are fully informed of progress and more frequent design teams have been established to maintain the momentum. In addition to the community representation on both these bodies, the involvement of police and local councillors, planning, education, housing, health and engineering professionals is also important.

It was necessary for the professionals involved in these schemes to be seen to be active in both the process and in the community. A strong and familiar

presence throughout the process was essential to successful implementation. This required meetings and discussion groups often outside normal working hours and frequent meetings in individual homes or local community centres (and pubs!) were not uncommon.

An informal, yet structured, approach to these meetings was often developed with professionals dressing casually and acting as facilitators to the process. The more traditional approach of the design team working in relative isolation to set design standards and seeking approval to a series of increasingly more detailed designs has been less successful and eventually a more inclusive approach has had to be adopted.

In order to be accepted by the community, the designated contact had to be able to address the wider concerns, even if these were outside their normal professional remit. They had to be able to relay the concerns expressed at meetings to those in a position to achieve. Their most important role however was to act as a single, committed driver for the scheme.

It was also necessary to achieve some tangible improvement quickly. This could be as simple as refuse collection, improvements to street lighting or maintenance on a more regular basis. Alternatively, it has involved the early establishment of community facilities and 'drop in' centres where people can meet informally, both with neighbours and with contact officers to address specific concerns.

Even with this amount of additional effort, not everything has run smoothly. Every scheme had its 'Mr or Mrs Angry' and a disproportionate amount of time often had to be spent in dealing with the minority view. Intensive, and often one to one, discussions have taken place to mitigate the disruption that strongly held minority views could have on the schemes. Inevitably, not all views could be incorporated within the final schemes and several iterations of the design layouts had to be considered. The involvement of those with differing views in group discussions was also a positive way of modifying the schemes to take all interests into account.

Overall, the amount of time envisaged to engage the local community and generate a local sense of ownership was underestimated and two years after the start of the process, less than ten of the sixty-one schemes had been completed and opened. Despite the amount of time and effort that this inclusive process has required, all those involved agree that it is time well spent in achieving a successful outcome.

Notwithstanding this effort, two of the original 61 schemes have been abandoned due to lack of consensus. Whilst many schemes have been successful in levering in additional funding, the opposite has also been true in that schemes have had to be 'designed down' as resident expectations could not be met over the full area to be treated. Focussing treatments into specific 'feature' areas and even reducing the overall extent of the scheme has been experienced throughout the Challenge.

## DESIGN ISSUES

One of the main criteria for the designation of a Home Zone has been the control of vehicle speed and the creation of an environment where pedestrians and vehicles use shared space at comparable speed. This requires the adoption of reduced clear vehicle paths and the introduction of constraints to easy and direct vehicular passage.

As Home Zones were seen by some as a development from 20 mph Zones, initial ideas were to introduce more severe and frequent traffic calming features. However, the response from resident discussion groups was often that a different approach was required, and many wanted streets to be opened up rather than to be closed down. This introduced a particular conflict between the functional and visual understanding of the street.

A successful way of resolving this has been to redefine the streetscape away from the conventional linearity of carriageway and footway to incorporate a single shared surface between property boundaries and even blur the distinction between private and public space. This approach has worked successfully in creating areas where activities other than movement can be undertaken safely whilst still allowing vehicles access. Consideration has still had to be given to defining the vehicle path but the use of different surfacing and colouring has introduced uncertainty in the mind of drivers such that they do not have the same rights as on conventional carriageways. Consequently, vehicle speeds are reduced and early indications are that substantial reductions in speed over conventional traffic calming have been achieved.

The use of horizontal shifts in vehicle paths, rather than frequent vertical deflections has been the preferred choice. This has been achieved using a variety of features. An important element to successful speed reduction has been to eliminate long through vistas for drivers, giving the impression that no clear straight route exists. The incorporation of vertical features, such as planting and grouping of street furniture, or the creation of defined activity areas in former carriageway and strategic positioning of blocks of parking have been particularly successful.

Despite innovative approaches, difficulties have still arisen where the initial designs prepared through the inclusive participation exercise have then been passed to design teams and 'engineered' to formal designs that have compromised the constraints developed at earlier stages. Consultations with service undertakers, the emergency services and refuse collection services have been particularly problematical where they have not also been involved in the early development of the concepts.

The obvious concern from highway designers has been that reducing forward visibility will lead to an increase in casualties, particularly amongst children. The key element throughout the design process has been to create a 'non-highway' environment where it is clear to drivers that they are not in a conventional roadway and that they are sharing the space with other uses. This has been achieved through clear signing and the use of different

surfacing materials. This has, in itself raised issues of longer term maintenance and liability which has extended beyond the highway issues into formal play space and equipment. In many instances, the residents themselves have readily accepted the maintenance responsibility for landscaping and other features.

One of the key concerns for both residents and professionals at an early stage of the detailed design process has been how to cater adequately for less able bodied members of the community. The creation of single surface areas benefits those with mobility handicaps, but can disadvantage the partially sighted, where no clear guidance is given. The whole ethos of a Home Zone is to be flexible with the use of space and not to over prescribe routing or use. Boundary features are still present that provide some guidance for those with sight problems and traffic speeds are low enough that walking in the middle of the street is not unsafe.

Consultation with DIPTAC and the DfT Mobility Unit has been ongoing at various levels and it has been concluded that no special provision for those with mobility or visual impairment is necessary within a Home Zone. Clear indication is still needed to all users at the entry and exit from an area that is fundamentally different from normal roadspace in its design, layout and use.

## **ACCOMMODATING VEHICLE MOVEMENT**

It is important that all those involved in the scheme development have a full understanding of the community rationale behind the overall concept. Whilst the schemes have to accommodate necessary vehicle movements, they do so under less favourable conditions than have previously been accepted. Where response times for emergency vehicles might be compromised early involvement of the local representatives is vital. It has become apparent that there is not necessarily a consistent view between or within the emergency services. Across the schemes, different views have been expressed as to what form of layout and clear path constitutes a problem, especially where unregulated parking could take place.

The introduction of larger vehicles by many emergency services and the need for side access has increased the amount of space necessary to negotiate such features. Again the involvement of these authorities throughout the design process is important to understand both the operational requirements and altered priorities within the street.

To overcome these issues, full scale mock-ups have been used, with the proposed alignments marked out temporarily and modified where necessary to accommodate specific movements. In some cases it has still been necessary to modify features once implemented as the over swing of refuse vehicles with hydraulic rear loaders has still caused problems.

## **PARKING**

Parking has been a major issue throughout the schemes. Even in areas of relatively low car ownership there are aspirations for car ownership levels to rise (and actual instances where they have) during the course of scheme implementation. In most areas, the existing provision was at a premium and any reductions were strongly resisted. Therefore maintaining or increasing provision has been necessary. This has been accommodated either by improved in-curtilage parking or structural (echelon) parking blocks along the street with a reduced and variable running width.

The time taken to implement the schemes has meant that the turnover of residents, particularly in non-owner occupied properties, has sometimes resulted in new residents not fully appreciating the intended operation of the street and leading to inappropriate parking. The potential for this to cause obstruction was one of the main concerns of the emergency services during the design process.

Self-enforcement is the ultimate aim within these areas and the strength of community ownership developed through the inclusive participation process encourages new residents to accept the ethos of the community. So far, no undue difficulties have been experienced in any of the completed schemes, despite the areas not being used wholly as intended.

The best approach is one of flexibility where, even when designated spaces are provided, people are still able to park in areas that would not cause obstruction even to the emergency services. Areas where parking is not available should be readily identified by their restricted width to such an extent that obstruction is clear.

## **DEVELOPING SOCIAL USES**

Over a number of years, the trend towards centralisation of services and the removal of local facilities within estates has led to the increase in travel distances to fulfil everyday activities such as work, school and shopping – often by car. This has contributed to a feeling of isolation and danger for some individuals outside their own houses and a reduction in everyday contact with neighbours.

Under the Highways Act 1980<sup>2</sup>, streets are provided and maintained solely for passage and any other activity can technically be described as an obstruction. Traffic Authorities have the ability to introduce Speed and Use Orders on streets designated as Home Zones under Section 268 of the Transport Act 2000<sup>4</sup> (consultation on the regulations in England is currently underway). These powers allow authorities to designate non-movement activities and open up many new opportunities for communities within the street as part of the everyday function of the street. These are proposed under five or six generic headings that will regularise many things that have already developed or traditionally taken place and have either required specific Traffic Regulation Orders or merely happened on an ad-hoc basis. They will also allow for



specific areas to be designated for non-traffic purposes such as children's play or entertainment.

The concept of Home Zones has been to re-engineer the space around people's homes such that they would be encouraged to undertake more social uses within the street. As well as addressing the traffic aspects of these fears, the Home Zone schemes have also developed a greater pride and responsibility in residents for the care and well being of their surroundings. People generally are also more involved with their neighbours and a more pleasant street environment encourages them to spend more time socialising within the street. This has been demonstrated through the high standard of resident maintained planting and reductions in crime and vandalism.

Typically, planting areas, informal seating and play areas have been particularly successful in encouraging community use and responsibility. Residents are often encouraged to take responsibility for the maintenance of plants in the locality of their homes. A strong desire within all the schemes has been to introduce play facilities, and whilst formal play areas have been difficult to achieve – and maintain – both from a legislative point of view and because the age structure of communities is constantly changing, a wide range of play opportunities has been incorporated.

## **DELIVERING STRONGER COMMUNITIES**

The main outcome of successful Home Zones has been the development of stronger and more integrated local communities. This is being achieved by the active involvement of residents at all levels in the design process and is evident through community events such as carol services and barbecues as well as the setting up of other ongoing activities.

In addition to adapting the existing streets, the increased awareness of the wider range of issues facing communities has resulted in substantial modification of schemes from the original proposals. Most schemes have expanded their original remit to include for demolition; rebuilding and new facilities where non-highway issues have been involved. The support of the Single Regeneration Budget and Housing Renewal funding, as well as mainstream local authority funds has been successful in increasing the funding available for schemes well in excess of the original Grant allocations. In some cases overall schemes have attracted funding in excess of six or seven times the original Grant, delivering an end result that all the community have been involved in and that addresses issues far beyond the original scope of the scheme.

Early indications from the Pilot and Challenge schemes are that increased activity is now taking place in these streets, residents are taking ownership for the areas around them, and additional investment is being made by the private sector in sustaining and developing these areas. People are much happier with their environment, crime is reduced and the longer term costs required from the local authority in these areas are also reduced.

## **THE FUTURE**

The Home Zone Challenge schemes have concentrated on modifying existing streets, where communities are already established, even if they are not wholly integrated. However, it is recognised that in order to meet the growing demand for housing the greatest potential for developing Home Zones lies with new construction.

Only one scheme supported through the Home Zones Challenge has been entirely new build. This is the first phase of some 400 homes at Gateshead Staithes, South Bank, Gateshead. In this case there was no community to consult, and a multi-disciplinary team of professionals developed the design concepts. The 'community' involvement was achieved by proxy, both through the development control process and by the house builder in its promotion of the final scheme to potential buyers. Through a sustained development process, the scheme has generated substantial national interest and initial house sales have been rapid.

Many other house builders and urban regeneration organisations are keen to see the concept of Home Zones taken up widely by new developments. Local authorities are sometimes less keen, as they foresee negative impacts of increased maintenance and congestion. As with the modification of existing streets, there needs to be a continuing dialogue between the developers and the local authority to ensure that the full benefits of Home Zones can be maximised, whilst minimising the statutory obligations of the local authority. To achieve this, there needs to be much more flexibility in the design approach and a clear understanding that whilst physical measures are being introduced, they are there to influence positive social behaviour. Ultimately, to function correctly formal designation needs to be achieved. Without this the area is not a Home Zone.

A wide range of skills are needed to successfully develop Home Zones as an integral part of the social fabric of communities and the whole process will involve more time and effort, and a wider range of skills, than has traditionally been employed. To be successful they need to involve strong multi-disciplinary teams that bring together the most appropriate expertise at the right point in the process. The involvement and understanding of the individual communities is vital.

## **DISCLAIMER**

This paper has been produced as part of a contract for the Traffic Management Division of the Department for Transport. All views expressed are those of the authors and not the Department for Transport.

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