

Street Furniture

NCBI Position Statement

Street furniture is the equipment installed on our streets and in our public places. It can provide physical benefits for a streetscape, such as providing seating places for pedestrians, signage directing people to places of interest, and bus shelters for waiting bus travellers. Trees and planters can make the area more visually appealing, bollards can protect pedestrians from vehicles and bins help keep the streets clean. However street clutter, often caused by A frame signs and outdoor dining spaces, can cause significant access issues for people who are blind or have low vision. A special permit/licence issued by the local authority is needed before a business is allowed to place any street furniture in a public space.

Why is it Important?

People who are blind or vision impaired often use permanent street furniture as a wayfinding tool to support independent travel, in addition to its practical purposes. If designed to be accessible and located appropriately, it can be used as a landmark or boundary on a route. Street furniture can also provide acoustic or visual references as an aid to orientation and navigation.

It is essential that street furniture is designed and placed so that it does not present a hazard or obstruct access. When street furniture is poorly managed and overused, especially outdoor dining spaces and signs, it can become a hazard to pedestrians trying to navigate the environment. In some instances, people who are blind or vision impaired are forced to step out onto a busy road to avoid the obstacle, putting themselves at risk of colliding with cyclists and motor vehicles, and resulting in injury.

Restricting street furniture setups so that only functional furniture is used helps to keep unnecessary street clutter to a minimum, which requires ongoing monitoring by the relevant authorities who have the responsibility to ensure pedestrian accessibility.

The Dublin City Council Street Furniture Guidelines of May 2021 state that:

“Dublin City Council has responsibility for managing public spaces throughout the City. We need to make sure that public domain is safe and navigable for all citizens.”

Accessibility Standards

United Nations’ Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), 2006

Ireland has signed and ratified the Convention, and hence is bound by the obligations that it establishes.

Article 9 of the Convention states the obligations of State Parties to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life. Subsections 1a and 1b of Article 9 also specify that:

“1. To enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment.”

Building Regulations 2010 Technical Guidance Document M on Access and Use:

“Street furniture, such as lighting columns, signposts, litter bins, seats, etc, should be located at or beyond the boundaries of the access route.” (Section 1.1.3.1 d)

“It is important to restrict the number of barriers, restrictions or other hazards that people encounter on an access route.” (Section 0.1 e)

“Where an access route is provided: (a) projecting features, which may present hazards, should be avoided to reduce the risks to people with vision impairment.” (Section 1.1.3.1 a).

Best Practice Recommendations

This position statement does not attempt to list all the technical details of regulations but does highlight in practical terms those issues which need to be addressed in considering best practice duties.

- Local Authorities and development managers adopting KPIs to reduce street clutter and ensuring that this is monitored and measured.
- Ensure the design of street furniture incorporates ground level detection at all points and a consistent profile from the ground up.
- Ensure street furniture doesn't encroach on accessible routes and wayfinding devices such as raised kerbs, building lines, guidance paving and other tactile paving surfaces.
- Ensure street furniture is not highly reflective and does not cause glare or discomfort.
- Ensure street furniture achieves adequate visual colour contrast with all backgrounds against which it will be seen.
- Ensure accessible routes are free from encroachments at all heights, whether freestanding objects such as plants or sandwich boards, cantilevering or hanging objects such as benches or shelves. This is required to avoid obstructions and collision hazards for all users and is especially important for people with vision impairments.
- Where objects overhang a pedestrian route, including tree branches, hanging baskets for floral displays or signage, maintain adequate headroom for pedestrians to pass underneath without any risk of collision.
- Street furniture items should have rounded (not sharp) edges to avoid potential injury if a pedestrian does happen to collide with them and should be designed to not have gaps beneath them.

Summary

There are many physical benefits to installing street furniture and it can also provide aesthetic benefits to all users of the public realm. When designed and placed appropriately, street furniture can be of great use for people who are blind or have a vision impairment as a means of wayfinding.

However, when consideration is not given to types and locations of items of furniture, they can present a significant obstacle for blind and vision impaired travellers who often collide with the street furniture. This can potentially result in injury, embarrassment and frustration and more seriously, difficulties with orientation, wayfinding and a loss of confidence in their ability to travel independently through their local communities.

About NCBI

NCBI, the National Council for the Blind of Ireland, provides support and services to over 55,000 people nationally. Offering technology solutions and innovative programmes to support people in education, the workplace, and wider society. NCBI advocates for a barrier free and accessible society for people who are blind or vision impaired.

NCBI's Possibility Lab is an innovative, solution-focused access and mobility consultancy offering bespoke training, design advice and fee-based access consultations to key stakeholders and businesses who share our vision for a barrier free and accessible society for people who are blind or vision impaired.

If you require any further guidance, please contact NCBI via hello@possibilitylab.ie

Position statement last modified October 2022.