

Home Zone Residential Areas

Traditionally, streets were designed with vehicle access in mind, but as car ownership increased they became less safe for pedestrians and children playing in the street all but disappeared. Streets became predominantly car parks.

Over the last twenty years this approach has been changing and more recognition given to pedestrians and cyclists. In parallel, the concept of Home Zones has developed where people and vehicles share the whole of the street space safely, and on equal terms, and where the quality of life takes precedence over the ease of traffic movement. The concept has been used for both new developments and for converting traditional streets.



Traditional designs

Traditionally, roads in England have been designed according to national standards developed by the Department for Transport (DfT) for use on the national trunk road network managed and operated by the Highways Agency. These standards have been commended as best practice to all local highway authorities and local networks have been expanded, improved and maintained on this basis.

This approach caters primarily for the needs of movement – particularly for motor vehicles and less importance has been given to the other functions that a complex and naturally developed highway network fulfils. The wider needs of non-motorised users (pedestrians, cyclists and public transport) have historically been of lesser importance.

Roads are highways where movement is the prime function and streets where other activities take place. These can include simple residential streets or major public spaces – anywhere where non-movement activities happen. For too long the focus was on the movement function of residential streets, the result often being places dominated by motor vehicles to the extent that they fail to make a positive contribution to the quality of life. Over the last twenty years this approach has been changing and more recognition given to the distinction between roads and streets, particularly in the urban area.

Until recently, the generally used standard for designing housing estates has been ‘Design Bulletin 32’ which was first published in 1977. This concentrated on street layouts that were comfortable for vehicle movements and more often than not resulted in streets where vehicles and pedestrians were separated, on carriageways and footways respectively. This was replaced through the publication of the DfT’s Manual for Streets (MfS). It demonstrates the benefits that flow from

good design and assigns a higher priority to pedestrians and cyclists. MfS1, as it is now referred, focused on lightly traffic streets but the more recent MfS2 developed this concept to apply to busier local roads. Prior to the publication of MfS, the concept of Home Zones was developed.



Home Zones

A Home Zone is defined as a residential street where people and vehicles share the whole of the street space safely, and on equal terms, where quality of life takes precedence over the ease of traffic movement. It is a concept that is new in UK, but present in Europe in various forms for more than thirty years. The layout of the street should emphasise this change of use, so that motorists perceive that they should give equal priority to others. The concept can be applied to either new housing areas or to existing streets of a more conventional nature. For an extensive new development or established area, its use would be limited to a small number of streets within the larger area.

The approach adopted in UK to create Home Zones has been to re-engineer the space around people's homes so 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 wellbeing of their surroundings. This has been 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. As the involvement of the community has been at the core of successful Home Zones, it has been perceived that these cannot be applied to new developments and can only be used to change and improve the streets around existing homes.

However, the North East has been prominent in developing Home Zones for both new and existing residential streets. Formal Home Zones have been designated in Gateshead, Blyth, North Tyneside, Middlesbrough and Darlington using powers in Section 268 of the Transport Act 2000. The legal procedure for creating a Home Zone is



set out in Quiet Lanes and Home Zones (England) Regulations 2006 and guidance is provided in DfT Circular 02/2006.

Developers sometimes implement ‘Home Zone style’ schemes without formal designation, and this can omit many of the non-highway benefits that are achieved with formal designation. If it is an entirely new estate, the requirement for community consultation is thereby difficult to achieve. In those cases, the efforts and skill of the local planning officers can be crucial in achieving a good community Home Zone development.

The principle of a Home Zone is to be flexible with the use of space and not to be over prescriptive as to the use of streets. 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.

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. Importantly, it is intended that the speed of vehicles should be constrained by design, using the different elements that make up a Home Zone in an innovative way to constrain vehicle speeds and make it clear to drivers they are not within a conventional highway. The slow traffic speeds within residential areas allow for a greater degree of priority for non-motorised users. 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 practical differences between a conventional housing estate road and a Home Zone street should be evident. For example there would be few if any kerbs and little, if any, distinction between a footway and carriageway. These ‘shared areas’ are not uncommon but in a Home Zone it would be compounded by a lack of rounded corners. The line a vehicle would take driving through the street would not always be well defined, the driving line would be relatively narrow, and passing vehicles would have to wait at short, wider areas.

Visibility at corners might be deliberately constrained so that vehicles slow down. The width of a street would vary as it led through the estate. Landscaped blocks, parking areas, play or sitting areas could be part of the communal street width adding variety to the street scene and supporting the non-conventional feel of the area.

Practical aspects cannot be ignored. Emergency vehicles must have guaranteed access and a minimum width between obstructions. They must have a reasonably obvious route through an estate so as not to be delayed. Heavy vehicles such as refuse collection vehicles need to be able to manoeuvre without undue difficulty and, where there are culs-de-sacs, they need to be able to turn around or reverse with ease.

The competing demands of vehicles and people are difficult enough to balance in a new green field Home Zone estate. In an established residential area, for example an area of terraced streets, it can be more difficult. The UK Children’s Play Council and some resident groups were 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 Home Zone concepts can be brought into conventional streets by creating a different outdoor environment where traffic still has access and is tolerated, but not to the exclusion of other activities. High quality materials and finish help to show that the space differs from a conventional highway. Nevertheless, many residents prefer a conservative approach that has resulted in a mixture of surfaces either by creating specific defensible spaces, or by creating specific ‘feature’ areas.

The creation of these areas within what would otherwise have been conventional carriageway can be achieved by the use of contrasting surface colours and/or textures. It achieves the break-up of the street’s linearity and constant width but care is still needed to ensure that the spacing of these ‘feature’ areas still constrains vehicle speeds.

Parking has been a major issue throughout the schemes even in areas of relatively low car ownership. In most areas the existing parking provision was at a premium and any reduction was strongly resisted. Therefore maintaining or increasing parking provision has been necessary. This has been accommodated either by improved in-curtilage parking or laying out parking blocks along the street, leaving a narrower and variable width for vehicle movements. In some schemes, by providing more formalised parking arrangements, on-street parking provision has been increased.

One of the key objectives of Home Zones, to increase the opportunity for children to play, can be achieved through play spaces. Formal play spaces have been developed as segregated areas with play equipment, sited where they are well overlooked and catering for a range of different ages. Sensitive placing is necessary to ensure that the play space can be adequately observed, but at the same time not creating an unacceptable nuisance for neighbours.



The provision of formal play facilities has been one of the most contentious issues raised during the consultation process. It is particularly important to involve children and young people throughout the design process in achieving acceptable schemes.

As well as the positive traffic impacts, it is important to understand the wider impacts that have accrued. As a consequence of implementing a conventional layout to Home Zone standards, many other benefits can arise, benefiting the community as a whole.

The main outcome of successful Home Zones has been the development of stronger and more integrated local communities. This was achieved by the active involvement of residents at all levels in the design process and is evident through community events such as Christmas carol services and barbecues as well setting up ongoing activities such as gardening clubs. Formal designation of an area under the Home Zone Regulations allows alternative use of otherwise highway space as agreed by the community as a whole.

Home Zones have built on the natural affinity for people to socialise and provided them with opportunities to mix safely with others in areas where they previously felt intimidated or isolated. This can be equally true in new and existing communities.

Thanks to John Barrell at TRL for preparing this article.

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