

Inclusive landscaping

The early involvement of disabled users in the planning of town centre improvements in St Helens has ensured the streets are free, quite literally, of some traditional sticking points. **Rachel Parker** finds out how paved-through metalwork has enabled the new landscaping to pass the wheelchair 'road-test'.

The award-winning £6.7 million refurbishment of St Helens' town centre has been delivered through an innovative partnership between St Helens Council and main contractor, Mayfield.

The Council was keen to ensure that new landscaping would facilitate 'inclusive access' in line with its responsibilities under the DDA.

The general public may not be aware that metalwork in the ground can be a serious obstacle to wheelchair access. Uneven, dislodged or broken metalwork can create a raised edge within paving, obstructing wheelchair movement and posing a trip hazard to ambulant people.

Asset managers at St Helens Council invited focus groups, including wheelchair users, to assess products planned for landscaping upgrades to the town's shopping centre and neighbouring areas.

Jones of Oswestry, a DDA landscaping product specialist based on the Wales/Shropshire border, was asked to consult on and supply suitable access covers, drainage gratings and tree surrounds for major parts of the refurbishment. They supplied over 100 recessed products, as well as specially adapted versions of its Aquadish grating.

John Sheward, asset manager with St Helens' Council Environmental Protection Department, said: "We set up a test installation of the Aquadish product to trial with access and mobility groups, enabling wheelchair users to travel over the unit. Based on this, we asked for a shallower profile to ease over-run by manual and motorised wheelchairs."

As well as manufacturing the gratings with a gentler curve, Jones of Oswestry reduced the width of the drainage slots to avoid the possibility of trapping canes used by the visually impaired, in line with the DDA.

Manager of St Helens Shopmobility, Paul McQuade, is very familiar with the problems that wheelchair users encounter on the street. He said: "Gully gratings can be a big issue for wheelchairs. People with severe arthritis, or spondylitis in the neck, for example, really suffer if they are jolted by rough metalwork and poorly designed landscaping.

● The new landscaping in St Helens has been installed with disabled users in mind.



"The impact for them is equivalent to a car going over a cattle grid. The grating used, with its gentler contour, is much easier to run across with a wheelchair."

Protruding metal edges, gaps and broken paving resulting from metalwork moving or flexing can even cause falls from wheelchairs.

Recessed products also offered a solution to longstanding problems that St Helens asset and highways teams had experienced in sourcing serviceable tree surrounds.

With plans for extensive tree planting to green up and soften the streetscape, the Council invited disabled users to assess Jones of Oswestry's Arborslot recessed tree surround.

Sheward explained: "We outlined features of the Arborslot design and installations to our focus groups, including wheelchair users. They immediately appreciated the benefits of the even, paved finish in relation to their experiences of traditional grids."

Overall, shopping in St Helens for disabled people has been significantly improved by the installation of recessed covers and gratings, which effectively conceal most of the metalwork to allow a much smoother ride across.

McQuade added: "We used to get quite a number of complaints about mobility problems with broken or uneven tree grids, rough surfaces to ironwork or difficult dips in gratings where wheels can get caught. The recessed products installed have eliminated many of these problems, making life easier for users of wheelchairs, mobility scooters, walking frames and blind people who are also vulnerable to problems from uneven ground underfoot."

With a key objective of setting KPIs that 'challenged the notion of industry improvement', the project has won acclaim for its sustainable approach to design and construction, and channelling benefits to the local community and economy. ●

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