

# **Statement on the Tactile Surfaces within Buildings**

## **Policy Statement**

**July 2004**

**Joint Committee on Mobility of  
Blind and Partially Sighted People**

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## **Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People**

### **Statement on the use of tactile surfaces within buildings.**

The Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People (JCMBPSP) is an independent body consisting of representatives of the principle organisations of blind, deafblind and partially sighted people with a specific interest in mobility. The Joint Committee believes that blind, deafblind and partially sighted people should be able to move around safely and independently.

Tactile surfaces are used to provide information, guidance or a warning to visually impaired people. It is therefore essential that suitable tactile surfaces are provided in appropriate circumstances. JCMBPS endorses, and was involved in developing, the Guidance on the use of Tactile Paving Surfaces published by the (then) DETR – now Department for Transport (1998).

There has recently been much debate among members of the National Register of Access Consultants, and others, about the use of tactile surface at the approach to internal stairs. Approved Document M (2004) states that it is not reasonable to require this internally as there is no recognised safe surface to specify however goes on to say designers should be aware of the potential risk of having a stair directly in line with an access route. AD M is of course guidance on the minimum standards required and is thus not necessarily best practice guidance. Therefore, the suggestions in the Approved Document to Part M do not, in themselves, prevent designers going beyond the guidance but there is naturally a reluctance to do so.

In a new development, and possibly major refurbishment, design options could protect the stairs but in existing situations the scope for such options can be severely limited and often there may be little alternative to the provision of a tactile warning at the approach. What is needed is to appropriately and adequately advise visually impaired people of an impending hazard (in this case a change of vertical level). **To do nothing is to leave visually impaired people at serious risk.**

It is of course vital that any provision made to assist visually impaired people is not itself a hazard. The research conducted in the preparation of the DfT guidance was based on the use of tactile paving for external areas, and is applicable in transport buildings where there are hard surfaces. The Joint Committee has called on the Department of Transport and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to initiate research into the use of tactile surfaces in internal environments with a view to provide recommendations for it's safe use. We were assured at our AGM in July 2003 that this research would be undertaken. JCMBPS continues to call for this research as a priority.

In the meantime, the Joint Committee on Mobility of Blind and Partially Sighted People recommends that a surface distinct in texture and colour should be used at the approach to internal stairs. Such an indicator is very important to enable visually impaired people to identify the presence of a

potential hazard and to use stairs safely. It is particularly vital that the surface is provided where stairs are in the direct line of travel or can otherwise be encountered without other prior warning.

The installation of the surface should be undertaken with due regard to safety and with careful consideration of the surrounding floor surfaces.

This will include

- friction and slip resistance characteristics similar to those of the surrounding floor.
- contrasts of colour and tone, to assist people with impaired vision.

The provision of good, evenly distributed lighting, appropriately highlighted step nosings, appropriately designed, continuous handrails, and adequate contrast of the handrail against its background (in terms of both colour and luminance) are also essential features of a well designed staircase.

JCMBPS statement revised July 2004

Carol Thomas,  
JCMBPS Secretariat

This statement was featured in an article in Access Journal 2004 with the following quotes:

**Andy Shipley of DRC, and Peter Barker, Chair of DPTAC Built Environment Group as well as JCMBPS, both visually impaired themselves, are supporting this issue.**

**Peter Barker** "The present guidelines are based on three years research at the University of Cranfield sponsored by DFT. This was followed by several years practical experience.

Clearly additional research would be welcome but until that has been completed and new guidance issued Visually Impaired people will be at risk if no warning is provided at internal stairs. I know my colleagues in DPTAC share my view that research is required as a matter of urgency.

Until that research has been completed, and to avoid visually impaired people continuing to be at risk, designers should consider providing some recognised indicator of the imminent approach to steps and stairs. A tactile warning at the approach to stairs, such as a change of floor material, is the most suitable way of providing that information at this time. To do nothing is not an acceptable option.

The JCMBPS statement has been issued to avoid any misinterpretation that could arise from the A/D of Part M, which, it must be remembered, is only a suggested way of meeting the obligations of the Regulation itself"

**Andy Shipley** ““Whilst I recognise the difficulties presented to designers in providing suitable tactile warning at the top of internal stairs and the problems for Building Control surveyors in regulating them, the safety of visual impaired people still remains an issue. Although Approved Document M deems it unreasonable to make the provision on internal stairs it does not prohibit their use. Clearly, where internal stairs are finished in a hard surface, there should be little difficulty in applying the corduroy material appropriate for external use. I would hope that in the spirit of good practice, designers and service providers would adopt an innovative approach and seek to install flooring and tactile warning surfaces of compatible slip resistance. I would also urge Government and manufacturers to carry out the necessary research to improve the supply of suitable products to satisfactorily overcome this safety issue.”