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TIMES ONLINE

# The Sunday Times

August 21, 2005

## Prescott to make streets 'women friendly'

Claire Newell

BRITAIN'S streets are set to be made more "female friendly" as part of plans by John Prescott's department to civilise city centres. Ideas being considered include crèches in nightclubs, separate areas for women on trains and buses and hairdryers in public conveniences.

Guidelines to be issued by the deputy prime minister's office are principally intended to encourage women to "reclaim" the streets from rowdy teenagers, which they believe will help curb antisocial behaviour.

Through creating friendlier streets, community spirit will be reinvigorated, the department believes. "Improved social interaction and relations, knowing your neighbours and those around you, came up [in interviews with the public] as one of the key things to make people feel safer and more secure," someone working on the project said. "Women are instrumental in this process."

Prescott's office has backed a three-year pilot project run by the Women's Design Service (WDS), a charity set up by women architects and town planners. At a conference next month the project's findings will be discussed and forwarded to the deputy prime minister's office, where officials will combine them with their own ideas before producing national recommendations.

Isabelle Granet, chairwoman of WDS, said: "The idea came when we realised many women felt unsafe and were finding certain aspects of their daily routine difficult because of the way their city was designed.

"Even though men and women face many of the same difficulties, we feel that as women are more likely to be out in the daytime with children and use public transport more, they would benefit from areas being redesigned or improved by small changes."

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drive to create new “feminised” cities will be measures to improve safety. The most recent British Crime Survey found that one in four young women was “very worried” about being raped.

Ideas discussed in meetings between Prescott’s office and the WDS include better street lighting and repainting alleyways and underpasses to make them brighter. In addition to reducing the height of public hedgerows, the bottoms of hedges could also be clipped to deter anyone from lying in wait under them.

The ideas were drawn from interviews with several hundred women in London, Bristol and Manchester. The women said they were frequently deterred by unsafe or inconvenient town centres.

Despite the focus on safety, the scope of the pilot project is being expanded to tackle other failures in urban design. Women’s pet gripes included awkward stairs, cobbled streets that trip up those wearing high-heeled shoes and motorists who blocked prams by parking on pavements.

In Bristol one proposal is to remove the “staggered” gates at the entrance to parks. Although they are designed to stop speeding cyclists, they also impede pushchairs. In Manchester the council is thinking of moving bus stops closer to busy areas to improve safety and to encourage people to chat to each other in the queue.

Further proposals have been drawn up by Demos, a think tank close to the Labour party, which is preparing a report on town planning. Its women-friendly suggestions include crèches in nightclubs, giving women priority for taxis after 10pm, a range of toiletries in public conveniences, separate areas for women on trains and buses, and siting hairdryers and chargers for mobile phones in public lavatories.

Clara Greed, reader in planning and architecture at the University of the West of England in Bristol, said: “Cities in England are generally not designed with women in mind, they are largely designed by men for men.

“Years ago cities used to have simple, flat pavements that were easier for everyone to walk on. Now, walking around London is like being on an assault course. It’s awful.”

The lack of public lavatories has been another area of concern raised by women. “The decline of public conveniences is something that greatly affects all women in cities,” said Greed. “They used to be a place women could use as a kind of haven — somewhere for them to change their clothes, dry their hair, do their make-up or have a cry if they were having a bad day. Now there are hardly any left.”