UK metric association

Campaigning for a **single** *rational* system of measurement

_UKMA_ADDRESS_

DATE

Patricia Brown
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29 Heddon Street
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Dear Ms Brown,

Response to "Legible London – A wayfinding study"

On behalf of the UK Metric Association, I am writing in response to your general invitation to comment on the Legible London initiative. Our remarks are confined to the units of measurement to be used on pedestrian distance signage.

UKMA is an independent, non-party political, single issue organisation which advocates the full adoption of the international metric system ("Système International" - SI) for all official, trade, legal, contractual and other purposes in the United Kingdom as soon as practicable. We also campaign for better consumer protection through accurate and consistent use of metric units of measurement in order to achieve price transparency. UKMA is financed entirely by membership subscriptions and personal donations.

This response has been approved by a meeting of UKMA's Committee on 7 May 2007.

Summary

We strongly recommend that the world standard units of distance, the metre and the kilometre, should be used exclusively, and without exception, on all pedestrian distance signage.

We recommend that the international standard symbols "m" and "km" (always lower case) should be used, so as to be understood in any language; and not the words "metres", "kilometres", or improvised abbreviations such as "mtrs".

Introduction

Whilst local residents will be interested in issues of design and quality, and the improvement to their neighbourhood that will result from a single coherent system of signage, it should be remembered that the primary users of the information conveyed by pedestrian signs will be visitors to London who will use them to find their way around the city.

It is for this reason that we recommend, that when the units of distance for the new signs are chosen, that of over-riding importance should be the needs of visitors, and in particular whether the distance units chosen will be understood by all visitors.

Whilst UK citizens are familiar with both yards and metres; last year, London received 13.5 million foreign visitors.
http://mayor.london.gov.uk/mayor/brief-for-assemblyplenary-20070117.pdf
The vast majority of these international visitors understand only metres (and kilometres). Most have little or no experience of feet, yards, or miles.

Whether to show distances on pedestrian directional signage

We would not support the approach, that is seen too often in this country, of omitting all references to distance on directional signage. This approach greatly reduces a sign's usefulness and is unhelpful to people who need to know whether a destination is within their normal walking range (often older or disabled people), or whether they should use public transport, or hail a taxi.

Distances on pedestrian signage - one standard system or multiple systems?

We concur with the comments, made on page 16 of the study report …
"*Minutes, miles, metres or yards? Across the systems there are inconsistencies which can be confusing for a pedestrian*.",

and with the observation in "Appendix B – Preliminary sign audit" …
"*Inconsistency in whether and how distance is communicated – Only some systems*
give distances on directional signs (fingerposts) and of those that do there is a varied approach of using either minutes, fractions of miles, metres or yards."

We would argue that the only solution to end the current confusion is to standardise on one unit of distance for all short distance pedestrian signage. The international standard unit of distance, the metre, is the option that best fits this requirement.

The case for the exclusive use of metres on pedestrian distance signage

The metre is the world standard unit of measurement for distance.

Distances in metres shown using the standard “m” symbol can be understood in any language.

The metre is used exclusively on short distance signage in all other countries (apart from the USA). 96% of the world’s population live in countries where metres are used to indicate distances on direction signs.

Directional signs showing distances in metres would be most helpful when using standard maps. For example:

(a) The UK’s national Ordnance Survey maps, often used by walkers, are based on a kilometre grid system, and use scales of 1:50 000 (1 cm = 500 m), and 1:25 000 (1 cm = 250 m).

(b) Street maps, such as "AA Street by Street LONDON", or the A-Z series, are marked out in clear 500 m or 250 m grid squares.

The metre is the standard unit of distance in international sport. A distance of 100 metres can be visualised by anyone who has seen a 100 m race in athletics.

The metric system has been the primary system taught in schools for at least the last 33 years in the UK.

The Highway Code uses metres to describe distances.

Signs using metres are future-proof. At some point in the not-too-distant future, all road signage in the UK, will probably also be in metric units. When road signage is converted to metric units, costs will be saved if pedestrian signs already use metres.

The case against the use of “yards” and “miles” on pedestrian distance signage

If the signage system developed for Legible London were to be used across the entire UK, it is worth noting that exclusive use of the words “yard” and “mile” would not be possible everywhere. In Wales, distances in “yards” and “miles” have to be translated, resulting in inelegant signs such as “100 yds / 100 llath” and “¼ mile / ¼ milltir”. Translation will never be an issue if distances are shown in metres using the standard “m” symbol.

The majority of international visitors have little or no experience of yards, feet, or miles. The prevalence of the use of metres internationally makes it difficult to use yards and miles to the complete exclusion of metres.

Miles, or fractions of miles, are not easy to relate to when on foot – even for Britons and Americans.

The use of yards is perceived by many young (and not-so-young) people to be old-fashioned and backward-looking. This situation can only increase in the future.

The case against the use of "minutes" on pedestrian distance signage

We are unaware of any other major world city that uses the "minute" as a unit of distance on pedestrian signs to the exclusion of conventional units of distance.

Distances in "minutes" can only be relevant if one is travelling at the same speed as that assumed by the designer of the sign. Most people will probably be walking at a different speed from this "assumed speed". Men and women have different average walking speeds, as do young and old people.

To be consistent, a standard "assumed speed" would be needed. Would this change if the journey was uphill?

In central London, walking times vary considerably based on the numbers of pedestrians and the volume of road traffic. In rush-hour, and during peak tourist times, progress on footpaths is limited by the huge numbers of pedestrians. Waiting times to cross roads can also increase. No standard time can be meaningful.

Why invent another unit of distance, "a minute's walk", when there is already a perfectly adequate (and more precise) unit familiar to everyone?

It would be difficult to correlate distances in "minutes" with distances on any map.

On page 21 of the study report, it states that, "Journey time is a more important factor than distance when it comes to deciding whether to walk, with 75% of respondents describing a journey in minutes, rather than metres or miles."

The study does not give the exact wording of the question that elicited this response. A similar response might be obtained for train users or car drivers. Many people measure their commutes in terms of minutes. It does not follow that people want distance signs to be shown in "minutes".

There is also the "chicken and egg" effect here. People will describe their journeys in terms of minutes if there are no distance signs to tell them how far they have walked. As soon as pedestrian signs showing distances in metres become common place, people will be more inclined to describe their journeys in terms of metres.

The legal position relating to distance signage

Under Directive 80/181/EEC, “The Units of Measurement Directive”, as amended, the UK has an obligation to “fix a date” for the conversion of road signs (including pedestrian signs) to metric units. We believe that it would be unwise to install long-lasting signs using units other than metres (or kilometres). Well within the intended lifetime of the signs, or even before the 2015 completion date mentioned in the study, it is quite conceivable that signs using yards or miles (or even minutes) would have to be replaced with signs using metric units of distance.

The current “Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions” (SI 2002:3113) do not permit the use of metres (or minutes) on road signs. However, metric units can still be used on informal direction and distance signage (e.g. Appendix A).
All that is needed is consent under the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisement) Regulations 1992.

UKMA believes the legal position to be as follows :
All signs are defined as "advertisements" for the purposes of the Town and Country Planning Acts. Most advertisements require consent under the T&CP (Control of Advertisement) Regulations. However, the Regulations provide that signs which conform to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002 (TSRGD) do not require a separate consent. The TSRGD does not authorise metric signage (with the exception of height and width restriction and warning signs, provided that they are accompanied by an imperial sign).

However, it is open to anybody (including local authorities and private individuals) to apply for consent under the T&CP (CoA) Regulations to erect a sign. Consent can only be refused on grounds of "amenity" or "public safety", and the content of the sign may not be controlled by the Planning Authority. Thus, the authority may object to the position, size or level of illumination of the sign, but they cannot refuse consent because of what it says or the measurement units which appear on it.

Therefore, if any individual or authority obtains "express" consent for an advertisement beside a road or footpath, they can use metric units.

For a more detailed explanation please see our web page :
http://www.ukma.org.uk/Transport/annexe.htm

Recommendations

For short distances, we strongly recommend that the international standard unit of distance, the metre, should be used exclusively, and without exception, across all pedestrian distance signage.

For longer distances, the use of kilometres should be allowed. This would not need to be obligatory for all distances greater than 1000 m. It would be quite acceptable, for example, to show a distance as “1500 m” rather than as “1.5 km”.

We recommend that the international standard symbols “m” and “km” (always lower case) should be used, and not the words “metres” or “kilometres” - the spelling of which varies according to language. We would not support the use of improvised abbreviations such as “mtrs”.

Ideally, there should be a “half-space” between the numbers and the “m” symbol. e.g. “100 m” (and not “100m”).

Finally

May we take this opportunity to congratulate the efforts that are being made towards the use of a coherent system of signage for pedestrians visiting London.

A copy of this letter has been e-mailed to you for your convenience.

Thank you for your kind attention.

Yours faithfully

Appendix A: Examples of metric pedestrian signage in the UK and abroad

Metric distance signage in Portsmouth – Distances shown to the nearest 250 m. Please note that we do not support the use of fractions when used with metric units

Metric distance signage in Berlin - On pedestrian signage, all distances are shown in metres (to the nearest 50 m). Note the use of metres for distances greater than 1000 m. On cycle routes, all distances are shown in kilometres (to the nearest 0.1 km).

Appendix B: Official reports and White Papers advocating the primary or exclusive use of the metric system in the UK

Select Committee appointed to consider the practicality of adopting a simple and uniform system of weights and measures (1862) *Report* Parliamentary Paper

Select Committee appointed to enquire into whether any and what changes in the present system of weights and measures should be adopted (1895) *Report* Parliamentary Paper

Committee on Weights and Measures Legislation (Hodgson Committee) (1951) *Report* Cmd 8219 HMSO

Committee on Consumer Protection (1962) *Final Report* Board of Trade

Standing Joint Committee on Metrication (1968) *Change to the metric system in the United Kingdom* HMSO

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1972) *Metrication* Cmnd 4880 HMSO

Department of Prices and Consumer Protection (1977) *Metrication* HMSO

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1995) *Guidance Note on the use of Metric Units of Measurement by the Public Sector* DTI

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (1999) *The adoption of the International System of Units as the primary system of measurement in the United Kingdom* DTI

Appendix C: Reports by the UK Metric Association (UKMA)

Metric Signs Ahead (UKMA) (2005) *The case for converting road signs to metric units*
ISBN: 978-0-9552351-0-8

A Very British Mess (UKMA) (2004) *A response to the National Standardisation Strategic Framework*
ISBN: 978-0-7503101-4-7