

Report on the Panel's Scrutiny of the Facilities for Disabled People in Town Centres

1. Introduction and terms of reference

- Following the request of the then Councillor Parry, in response to a question at the Ashton-under-Lyne District Assembly, the Panel in April 2000, decided to examine the facilities for disabled people in town centres.

The Terms of Reference for the scrutiny exercise are as follows:

To investigate the provision of facilities in town centres for disabled people in Tameside, such investigations to cover the following areas:

1. Street Furniture - provision of seating, waste bins, the avoidance of unnecessary obstructions, such as bollards, shop displays, that encroach onto pavements.
- (b) 2. Highways - location and number of dropped crossings, special surfacing at crossings (tactile paving), provision of pelican crossings with audible warnings, the duration of all red traffic lights to facilitate pedestrians crossing.
3. Town Centre Safety - the support and protection of the most vulnerable people in society against intentional or accidental injury.
4. Access - to shops, leisure facilities, municipal and government buildings, parking facilities, transport and public toilets.

2. Method of review

- The Panel received written submissions from a number of Heads of Service. These included documents received from the Engineering Development Manager indicating car park facilities, tactile pedestrian crossings, traffic control facilities and policies for public transport,
- (a) especially buses and railways. The Borough Planning Officer submitted a report which outlined the obligations of Building Regulations, Part M standards for disabled facilities, including external ramps, toilets and lifts, and how these were enforced through planning regulations.

The Panel interviewed the General Manager District Assemblies, the Town Manager (Hyde and Longdendale), the Head of the Engineering Service, the Engineering Development Manager and the Borough

- (b) Planning Officer. The interviews related to the written advice presented by these officers and enabled Members to pose supplementary questions. These contributions were greatly valued.

- The Panel also met representatives of disabled persons organisations and received
- (c) information from members of the public who, prior to the meeting had been interviewed by Quality Audit Officers to record their major concerns.

- (d) Disabled people and their companions both provided information to the Panel and questioned Members on policies and facilities provided.

The Panel also met Councillor Hilditch to consider her views acquired over many years from her experiences in the Health Service, working with charities and her work with disabled people and in the community.

- (f) The Panel also received written information outside meetings from Heads of Service within the Authority, other service providers in support of matters raised at meetings and members of the public.

- (g) The Panel also interviewed the Cabinet Deputy (Personal Services).

3. Observations from service users

- (a) Disabled people strongly believe that that they are discriminated against and this discrimination has never been properly addressed. They felt that many of the issues that most concerned them had existed for decades.

There was a feeling that dialogue between disabled people and the Council had declined in the past few years, especially since the conclusion of the Equal Opportunities Sub Committee. Reference was also made to district assemblies, with one person attending the Panel being a member of a district assembly advisory group.

- (d) It was felt that this had a positive effect, firstly it enabled him to raise disabled issues in a public forum and secondly it meant that these issues were raised in a mainstream Council activity. There was, however, not a disabled person connected with all district assemblies.

It was felt that the Council should do more to promote issues affecting disabled people and as a facilitator for disabled people and their problems. It was also felt that the Council should be doing more with the owners and tenants of properties to raise awareness of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

- (f) It was felt that the Council could, in a number of activities such as building control and planning approval, do more to influence developers or builders to remove obstructions which affect the disabled such as unnecessary steps and level changes.

Concern was expressed about the criteria for the orange /blue badge scheme which included the need to be able to walk no more than 50 metres. The practical consequences of this was that a person could walk more than 20 metres from their vehicle to their destination, 10 metres whilst they were there and 20 metres to return to their vehicle. This would not enable them to access town centre shops from the main car parks.

Strong feelings were also expressed about the alleged misuse of the Orange Badge Scheme and it was felt that genuine disabled drivers and car users would benefit from more rigorous enforcement

Whilst appreciating the provision of disabled parking bays, especially the wide bays being introduced by the Council, it was felt that the actual siting could be improved in certain circumstances if there was further consultation. There was also an issue for people who, although not eligible for an orange/blue badge, did have stiff legs and needed to open car doors to a full right angle in order to get in and out of their cars. Reference was also made to the new policy of charging to enable wheelchair users to park at the side of Ashton Town

- (h)

Hall. It was pointed out that not all disabled people were wheelchair users.

Having regard to footpaths and highways, it was suggested that there were some examples of pelican crossings where the timing did not enable disabled people to cross the road safely. Dropped kerbs had been installed to varying standards and some were so steep that they

- (i) were very difficult for wheelchair users, the very people they were designed to help.

Obstacles such as street furniture, lamp columns, signs, etc., prevented free access across town centres.

- (m) The improvement of access across town centres had been undertaken in a piecemeal fashion rather than with co-ordinated planning to enable designated 'routes for the disabled' to be formed.

- (n) There was considerable concern expressed about pavement obstructions such as advertising boards, wheelie bins left in the middle of the pavement and traders placing displays, etc., outside shops and stalls. The unexpected nature of these obstructions caused particular problems for blind or partially sighted persons. The Council was urged to take a more vigorous stance over the use of advertising boards which caused an obstruction and danger to pedestrians.

- (o) Litter was a particular problem for disabled people with blind people being vulnerable to discarded material which could be slippery or could become wrapped around legs. Grass cutting also could cause difficulties which a sighted person would avoid.

- (p) Disabled people were critical of the co-ordination of public transport provision with some routes not having low access buses and unpredictable timetables. Kerb sizes also created access problems and increased pedestrianised areas meant that shops were further away from bus stops.

- (q) Pedestrianised areas were favoured by disabled people for ease of mobility but concern was expressed about the use of vehicles in such areas which a danger because they were unexpected.

- (r) It was pointed out in written evidence that there were approximately 328 public seats in the Town Centre of Ashton-under-Lyne and of these 12 were raised from 16 - 17 inches to a minimum of 20 - 24 inches. It would be very helpful to disabled especially with arthritis for more of these seats to be provided. Additionally seats with normal arms were of limited use to people with disabilities affecting their arms.

- (s) Concern was also expressed about the actions of retailers, especially in markets who placed boxes or items for sale in the aisles and walk ways. This, albeit often inadvertently, caused access difficulties for wheel chair users and the visually impaired. In addition high level obstructions such as adding plastic sheeting, often supported by metal bars and large clips also was a danger for the visually impaired. This needed to be drawn to the attention of those people responsible.

- (t) The Council's Performance Indicators quoted only one of the Authority's public buildings as being suitable for and accessible to disabled people. It was understood that this figure was under representative of the level of disabled access because of the criteria set by the Audit Commission, It was however, still an issue and access to a number of Council Buildings required consideration. There were examples of the disabled toilets and the design of the parking bays at the Council Offices which were cited as being unsuitable.

4. Information received from service providers

- The Head of the Engineering Service informed the Panel that disabled people were viewed as part of the community and there was a requirement to meet the needs of all the community.
- (a) Parking and walking routes and facilities were designed for the whole community and not specifically for disabled people.
- A Statement of Intent had been agreed by the Strategic Planning and Transportation Committee several years ago and following extensive consultations and discussions with
- (b) focus groups, appropriate parking bays for disabled persons were identified and brought into operation. Approximately 60% of car parks had disabled facilities and it was intended to cover the whole area within two years.
- In terms of budgets, there was a specific budget provision of £100,000 per year in the Revenue Budget in Other Services which is for disabled access. This actually a revenue contribution which funds a capital scheme for this purpose. Funds were also available for
- (c) access work to Hyde and Denton Town Halls. In addition, approximately £50,000 per year was spent out of Engineering Budgets for disabled access which is incorporated into engineering schemes.
- It was agreed that there was a need for a co-ordinated approach to the provision of facilities and there was an on going programme to provide more pelican crossings with audible warnings, at strategic junctions with tactile paving routes. There were plans to provide more
- (d) 'tactile routes' from car parks to, and between specific town centre locations although these had not been completed and a more comprehensive provision should be made. There was however a major backlog of these environmental works. It was considered that there were dropped crossings to enable wheelchair users to get to major town centre locations in Ashton-under-Lyne including the bus and railway stations, although these were not sufficient.
- The Ashton in Bloom provision made in 2000 had been planned to create as little obstruction
- (e) as possible, although there had been some complaints from disabled people about increased street furniture.
- Complaints had been received about the abuse of town centre pedestrian areas by motor
- (f) vehicles and it was noted that some initial temporary action to restrict vehicle access had been brought into effect.
- (g) The Panel interviewed Dene Donalds and Julie Maher from Social Services who outlined the operation of the Orange Badge Scheme
- (h) There were approximately 8000 Orange Badge users and they were being issued at a rate of 150 per month, together with 200 renewals.
- (i) Constant abuse of the scheme could result in disqualification. Over the past two years and average of 6-8 people were suspended from the scheme on a temporary basis.
- Social Services worked closely with the Traffic Warden Service to ensure that the scheme was
- (j) operated properly. The change from the Orange Badge to the Blue Badge Scheme would be an opportunity to review to whom badges were issued. It was noted however that badges were issued on the basis of disability and not income.
- (k) The Council had launched a key fob access system for a car park for disabled people at the side of the Town Hall. Some consultation had been undertaken with regard to this proposal.

Some 12 key fobs had been issued at a cost of £20.00 each. At the suggestion of the Head of Scrutiny and Best Value Audit, which was endorsed by the Panel, it was agreed that consideration would be given to making the £20.00 returnable deposit for the fob that activated access to the parking area. This would overcome the problem of fobs being the subject of unauthorised transfer and indicate that the payment was a deposit rather than a charge.

(l) The key fob scheme was carefully monitored and required a special pass for the vehicle to enable people to use these parking spaces. In the event of abuse, the key fob could be deactivated at source.

(m) The wide parking bay scheme was also being introduced, which enabled disabled people to have more space around their vehicles in order to manoeuvre wheel chairs etc.

(n) There were a number of connected issues that related not only to disabled people such as fear of crime and people with prams etc., having to cross the road using dropped crossings and wishing to avoid obstructive street furniture.

(o) Town Wardens had as part of their remit tackling litter and trying to enforce the careless use of advertising boards. It was however the Town Managers' policy to have a balanced and pragmatic approach to the problem of such boards, depending upon the locality. There was concern not to be too prescriptive with an adverse effect on trade.

(p) A number of initiatives had been introduced into the field of public transport. Access improvements to bus and rail stations, low access buses, better information, etc., have all improved matters and the GMPTE undertook consultations with groups representing disabled people.

5. Recommendations

The Council should take action to eliminate the perception of disabled people that it gives low priority to their issues.

It is recommended that, as part of the staff training programme, staff are made aware of appropriate etiquette when dealing with disabled people and matters that affect them. Such training would:-

- (a) 1. Raise the awareness of issues affecting disabled people amongst Council employees.
2. Ensure that the Council's genuine concern and intent to help disabled people is better understood by all the population of Tameside.
3. Help create an environment where the Council is seeking to understand issues raised to prevent misunderstanding, poor prioritisation or even provision of unwanted facilities.
4. Provide information on the legislation around disabled peoples' issues.
5. Improve networking with other providers, organisations and the private sector, in the general area of disabilities and exclusion.

(b) Although the Council devotes considerable resources on facilities and services for disabled people in town centres there was still a need for an overall co-ordinated approach across service areas.

- It is recommended that a Strategic Director be specifically designated as the Lead Officer for issues concerning disabled people with responsibility to co-ordinate all resources and projects being implemented with regard to disability issues. This role (which in part is the current responsibility of Social Services) needs to be implemented through all Council services streams.
- (c) It is recommended that policies clearly recognise the different responsibilities of Social Services to individuals and the separate responsibility of the Authority to provide services as a whole to this section of the community, thus reducing any exclusion.
- (d) It is recommended that consideration be given to the provision of street furniture and facilities, such as seating which is easier for disabled people to use. In addition issues relating to access and the clearing of obstructed footways, etc., should be addressed.
- (e) It is recommended that consideration be given to the key fob parking scheme for disabled people at the side of the Town Hall, Ashton-under-Lyne and regarding the £20.00 payment as a deposit returnable if the key fob is returned in good order.
- (f) It is recommended that budgets that include funding for the provision of facilities for disabled people be properly identified, co-ordinated and monitored, to ensure that there were no areas of duplication or waste.
- (g) It is recommended that business plans should reflect all resources available for facilities and services for disabled persons and link capital projects such as pedestrian schemes, bus station
- (h) It is recommended that District Assemblies include representatives of disabled persons' organisations be included in the membership of Advisory Groups of District Assemblies.
- (i) It is recommended that a guide be published for disabled people and those providing support or services for disabled people. Such guides are published in other authorities and are well received.
- (j) It is recommended that consideration be given to the authority lobbying for the alteration of legislation and services specified by Central Government, which are not in the best interest of disabled people, such as funding, RADAR and similar schemes, some planning and building controls.
- (k) It is recommended that difficult and possibly emotive issues such as the withdrawal of badges due to misuse be given consideration.
- (l)