

**DISABILITY ACCESS STUDY
(Report by the Head of Administration)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to remind Members of the progress that has been made in the course of the study on Disability Access.

2. ORIGIN OF THE STUDY

- 2.1 The Panel, at its meeting on 7th November 2006, considered the scope of a study on access for those with disabilities to premises, facilities and other sites in the District, excluding those provided by the District Council. Members discussed parking on pavements, the installation of dropped kerbs and access to buses as potential areas of investigation. It was agreed that further information should be submitted to a future meeting on the Council's existing policies in relation to disability equality and access and on research carried out in this area before precise the remit of the study was decided upon. The Council's Disability Equality Scheme was endorsed by the Panel at its meeting on 5th December 2006.

- 2.2 The research findings on which the Policy was based were submitted to the meeting in February 2007. At the December meeting the Panel also invited Mr G Morris, the consultant who undertook research for the Council's Disability Equality Scheme, to attend to discuss possible avenues for further study. In his view the principal challenges were improving public understanding of and attitude towards those with disabilities. He also outlined the duties of facility and service providers under the Disability Discrimination Act, the main purpose of which was to enhance inclusiveness.

- 2.3 Having discussed the prevalence of disability in the District and the Council's provisions in terms of facilities and of advice, the Panel highlighted improving enforcement of disabled parking bays, extending the hours bus passes could be used by the disabled, the Council's paperwork and advocacy services at Council offices as potential study areas. The Panel also referred to the benefits of introducing, for Council decisions, a dedicated group of consultees, representing those with learning, physical and sensory impairments, possible opportunities to promote the needs of those with disabilities through the Local Strategic Partnership and the Local Area Agreement and the County Council's role in this area.

3. CAMBRIDGESHIRE PARLIAMENT

- 3.1 The Panel received a presentation by a number of representatives of the Cambridgeshire Parliament on the work of Speaking Up, a Cambridge based provider of advocacy services for those with learning difficulties, mental ill health and other disabilities. Reference was made to the experiences of those with disabilities concerning the accessibility of places and services and how improvements might be made in these respects, which included the provision of toilet facilities for those with high support needs, improvements to leisure, transport

and employment opportunities and enforcement of parking in spaces allocated for blue badge holders.

- 3.2 The Panel then discussed the Council's consultation with the Parliament, the location and cost of disabled toilets, the Council's communications, including the benefits of producing Council information in a larger size print, and the possible introduction of advocacy services located in Huntingdonshire.

4. CONSULTATION WITH MEMBERS AND TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

- 4.1 The Panel asked that Town and Parish Councils along with all District Council Members be consulted on a range of matters arising from the study. A questionnaire was approved by Members on 3rd July 2007 for this purpose. 33 responses were received from Town and Parish Councils. This amounts to a 39% response rate, which generally should be regarded as a high rate of return.

- 4.2 Analysis now is given to those issues raised and similarities between Councils are highlighted. The main concerns highlighted throughout the responses received are as follows:

Buses

- 4.3 Many of the authorities reported on the infrequency and irregularity of public transport. It was noted by many that the type of bus provided was ill-equipped to cater for the needs of its disabled passengers. This lack of transport and access to vehicles such as buses were mentioned by most respondents, reflecting in particular the needs of the rural parishes. It was recommended that more low liner buses should be provided and that the need for appropriate dropped kerbs/pathways leading to buses should be addressed as currently they limited an individual's mobility.

- 4.4 The idea of a disabled bus pass was warmly received; however, concerns regarding the hours in which the holder could use the pass were raised. It was also recorded that there should be a form of carer's bus pass for those who are required to travel with disabled individuals.

Information

- 4.5 It was recorded that the majority of information surrounding the needs and requirements of disabled people was sought directly from disabled people themselves and members of the community in relation to friends or family with a disability. The District Council featured as a useful site for obtaining information; however, some authorities requested access to further information with regard to representation, service planning and the availability of funding. The need for education and training for Council employees and associated organisations to improve awareness of disability access also was raised. There may be an opportunity for the Panel to review the information the Council provides and the way it is presented.

Funding

- 4.6 Funding and financial support was an issue that seemed to arise from a lack of information and confusion regarding claims. The need for better communication on available funding was a common finding throughout the study. Although this is not the Council's responsibility, Members could consider how this situation might be improved.

Parking

- 4.7 Dedicated parking, greater penalties for anti-social parking in disabled (accessible) bays and adjustments to roads and paving were highlighted as a key solutions to many outstanding issues. The majority of authorities reported on the inconvenience of illegal parking in particular outside schools at peak times and local shops and the effect on members of the public in an area.

5. CAMBRIDGESHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

- 5.1 The Panel received a presentation by Gerald Riley, Access Officer for Cambridgeshire County Council, on the County Council's responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and his role in ensuring the County Council complied with them. The County Council has three duties through its policies and practices as an employer, through the design and delivery of services and through the discharge of its public functions. In each of these areas the County Council has to demonstrate that they have been informed by the Act. With regard to accessibility in the built environment, the County Council has to ensure that those with a disability have been consulted as part of the design process. Every Head of Service has individual arrangements for involving disabled users in the development and monitoring of service plans.
- 5.2 Mr Riley reported that dropped curbs are designed to accommodate wheelchairs of a certain size but that problems now arose as larger chairs are being manufactured. Problem areas can be reported either to the County Council or to the Environment and Transport Area Joint Committee. Mr Riley confirmed that maintenance standards are informed by the DDA
- 5.3 The Panel decided that the precise location of defective dropped kerbs and areas where dropped kerbs should be installed and their priority should be obtained from those who had responded to the survey. Once obtained they would be forwarded to the County Council either for action or identification of those areas that did not fall within its remit. On receipt of the latter, Town and Parish Councils would be informed accordingly. It also was decided that a similar exercise should be carried out on parking practices within the District, with the findings being forwarded to the Police for comment.
- 5.4 Councillor R W J Eaton has informed Members of the findings of consultations he had carried out within his ward on disability access. He has suggested that the County Council should liaise with disabled groups to identify the best location of dropped curbs and problems with the hardscape and measures to alleviate them.

6. DIRECTIONS PLUS

- 6.1 Gerri Bird, Forum Manager for Disability Cambridgeshire (Directions Plus), attended the meeting in April to discuss the study. Disability Cambridgeshire's purpose is to provide information and advice to disabled people and / or older people and carers in Cambridgeshire. It offers short courses in disability awareness in accessible locations around Cambridgeshire. It also is funded to undertake developmental work with voluntary and community organisations in Cambridgeshire and across the Eastern Region. Staff from Disability Cambridgeshire provide representation / liaison to a number of committees and working groups from very local to Regional Assembly levels.
- 6.2 Mrs Bird outlined the problems she had experienced with incorrectly installed dropped kerbs and her perception of the causes of abuse of Blue Badge parking permits. The main points are summarized in the following sections.

7. BLUE BADGES

- 7.1 The Panel has been acquainted with information from Cambridgeshire County Council on the application process and measures currently in place to identify abuses of Blue Badge permits and the enforcement that is undertaken. Having discussed the problems experienced by legitimate Blue Badge holders as a result of the abuses of the system, the Panel asked that clarification be sought on the procedures involved in applying for a permit. This information has been obtained and will be reported at the next meeting.
- 7.2 Mrs Bird stated that there is a need to introduce separate permits, which distinguish between those with temporary and permanent disabilities.

8. BLUE ROUTES

- 8.1 Councillor P K Ursell has suggested that there might be benefit in introducing Blue Routes, which would assist those with disabilities in navigating their way round the District's towns. They might also have the added benefit of influencing the County Council's pavement maintenance programme.
- 8.2 Despite extensive investigation no trace of these routes has been found. Even if blue routes had been found to have existed, it appears they are no longer in use. Given this the Panel may wish to consider whether the production of Blue Routes might be pursued as part of the study.
- 8.3 It was agreed to consult the Papworth Trust on whether there existed routes that were regularly used by the disabled. However, the Papworth Trust has advised that it does not have such routes in the District.

9. ADVOCACY SERVICES

- 9.1 The Panel has discussed the provision of advocacy services around the District. It was decided that such services might also help

address demand for information and for details of available funding from other organisations.

9.2 Mrs Bird confirmed that Disability Cambridgeshire already provides an advocacy service.

9.3 The provision of advocacy services around the District was discussed with the Cambridgeshire Parliament. The Parliament has indicated that it would be prepared to make available representatives to provide an advocacy service at Council premises. The Panel might want to consider the locations at which they might be provided and whether any other organisations should be approached also to provide this service.

9.4 The Panel has previously indicated that this is something that might be discussed with the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations.

10. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

10.1 With regard to public transport services, Members have agreed to forward to bus operators, comments from Town and Parish Councils concerning the need for more low level buses and issues surrounding training for public transport employees on the needs of those with disabilities. Despite an initial enquiry on their policies in these respects and a subsequent reminder, no replies have been received.

10.2 In addition, it was agreed to refer to the County Council a suggestion that those who care for individuals with disabilities should be provided with free bus travel. Carers UK have been consulted on similar practices elsewhere in order to provide an evidence base to support the case.

11. CONSULTATION ON COUNCIL POLICIES

11.1 The Panel previously has suggested that the Council should introduce a list of organisations and individuals representing those with learning, physical and sensory impairments who would be involved as a matter of course in all consultations on policies. Mrs Bird concluded by stressing that the Council should incorporate the views of those with disabilities into its policy making. There would be no obligation on consultees to respond but they would be given the opportunity to do so if they thought it necessary. Potential consultees have been approached. Progress on finalising a list of organisations and individuals representing those with learning, physical and sensory impairments who might be involved in all Council consultations has been hindered by a surprising lack of interest on the part of the organisations approached in taking up this suggestion. The Cambridgeshire Parliament has indicated that it would like to be included in the list of consultees. The Panel also considered whether the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations and the Papworth Trust should be consulted on potential bodies to include on the list.

12. OTHER MATTERS

12.1 The Panel has received an update on a new government initiative to introduce a countywide coalition of disabled people.

- 12.2 During the initial stages of the study the Panel recognised the importance of the Council's documents being produced in larger size print. This idea, together with a number of other recommendations, has already been incorporated into the Council's new corporate identity.
- 12.3 Another idea that emerged at an early stage concerned the opportunities available to promote the needs of those with disabilities through the Strategic Partnership. This is something that the Panel might make a recommendation on at the conclusion of the study.
- 13.4 The Department for Work and Pensions reimbursed the disabled for travel to work costs.

14. CONCLUSION

- 14.1 This report provides an update progress of the study since the last meeting. It also raises potential topics for discussion with the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Disability Equality Duty Research Findings

Disability study file held in the office of the Director of Central Services.

Reports and Minutes of meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery)

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