

**DISABILITY ACCESS STUDY
(Report by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery))**

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This report sets out the origins, process and conclusions reached in the course of a study by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) on Disability Access.

1.2 To put the study into context, it has been estimated that approximately 12.5% of people nationally have some form of disability. These disabilities take a variety of forms. The recommendations at the end of this report have been designed to take this fact into account.

1.3 The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 aims to end the discrimination that many disabled people face. This Act has been significantly extended. In order to enhance inclusiveness, it now gives disabled people rights in the areas of:

- employment;
- education;
- access to goods, facilities and services, including larger private clubs and transport services;
- buying or renting land or property, including making it easier for disabled people to rent property and for tenants to make disability-related adaptations, and
- functions of public bodies, for example issuing of licences.

The Act requires public bodies to promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.

1.4 A number of individuals have assisted the Panel in the course of the study. They are as follows:

Mr G Morris – consultant
Representatives of the Cambridgeshire Parliament
Town and Parish Councils
Gerald Riley, Access Officer for Cambridgeshire County Council
Gerri Bird, Forum Manager for Disability Cambridgeshire (Directions Plus)
Mrs J Farrow - The Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations.

The Panel is grateful to everyone who has contributed to the study.

2. ORIGIN OF THE STUDY

2.1 The Panel originally discussed 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 looked at parking on pavements, the installation of dropped kerbs and access to buses as potential areas of investigation. It was decided initially to review the Council's existing policies in relation to disability equality and access and existing research carried out in this area

before the precise remit of the study was decided upon. Following this the Council's Disability Equality Scheme was endorsed by the Panel.

- 2.2 The research findings on which the Disability Equality Scheme was based were examined with the assistance of Mr G Morris, the consultant who undertook research for the Scheme. The aim was to identify possible avenues of study. In Mr Morris' view the principal challenges were improving public understanding of and attitudes towards those with disabilities. He also outlined the duties of facilities and service providers under the DDA.
- 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. In the course of the presentation 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 discussed with the Parliament the Council's consultation procedure, 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.
- 3.3 As has been said the provision of High Dependency Toilets was discussed. These are distinct from those provided for the disabled in that the latter are designed for lone wheelchair users, while the former are for assisted use. Such publicly available facilities are rare and indeed it is understood that, in England, they are found only in Bradford. It has been suggested to the Cabinet that the Papworth Trust might be approached on the question of demand for such a facility and whether the facility at Saxongate, Huntingdon might be made available for public use. The Cabinet endorsed the suggestion and the Papworth Trust have been formally approached. A reply has not yet been received. Progress will be reported in due course.

4. CONSULTATION WITH MEMBERS AND TOWN AND PARISH COUNCILS

4.1 The Panel consulted Town and Parish Councils along with all District Council Members on a range of matters arising from the study. A questionnaire was circulated and 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. The main concerns highlighted are as follows:

Buses

4.3 Many authorities reported on the infrequency and irregularity of public transport. It was observed that the type of bus provided was ill-equipped to cater for the needs of disabled passengers. The lack of transport generally and access to suitable vehicles such as buses were mentioned by most respondents, reflecting in particular the needs of the rural parishes. It was concluded 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 limit an individual's mobility.

4.4 Concerns have been registered regarding the hours in which holders of disabled bus passes can use their passes. 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. Recommendations on bus passes appear in Section 10 of this report.

Information

4.5 It was reported 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 to improve awareness of disability access also was raised.

Funding

4.6 Funding and financial support was a common theme. It often appeared to be 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. Although direct provision of grant aid is not exclusively the Council's responsibility, the Panel is of the view that more could be done to provide information and assistance with completing applications for funding. This has been taken up in a separate study by the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Service Delivery) on grant aid.

Parking

4.7 Dedicated parking, greater penalties for anti-social parking in disabled (accessible) bays and adjustments to roads and paving

were highlighted as 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 those areas. (See Sections 7 and 12).

5. CAMBRIDGESHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

5.1 The Panel received evidence from Gerald Riley, Access Officer for Cambridgeshire County Council, on the County Council's responsibilities under the DDA and on his role in ensuring the County Council complies 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 stated that dropped kerbs are designed to accommodate wheelchairs of a certain size but that problems now arise 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 take into account 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 of Town and Parish Councils and of Members. This information has been forwarded to the County Council either for action or identification of those areas that did not fall within its remit. In the case of the latter, Town and Parish Councils have been informed accordingly. Members also 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. This has been done and feedback has been received from the police on action taken.

5.4 Councillor R W J Eaton has carried out consultations within his Ward on disability access and the findings have been taken into account during the study. He has suggested that the County Council should liaise with disabled groups to identify the best location of dropped kerbs and problems with pavements together with measures to alleviate them. This suggestion has been referred to the Transport and Access Sub-Group of the Growth and Infrastructure Thematic Group established under the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership.

6. DIRECTIONS PLUS

6.1 Gerri Bird, Forum Manager for Disability Cambridgeshire (Directions Plus), attended a Panel meeting 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 is also 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 local to Regional Assembly levels.

- 6.2 Mrs Bird outlined the problems she has experienced with incorrectly installed dropped kerbs and her perception of the causes of abuse of Blue Badge parking permits. The main points are summarised in the sections below.

7. BLUE BADGES

- 7.1 The Panel has obtained 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. Mrs Bird stated that there is a need to introduce separate permits, which distinguish between those with temporary and permanent disabilities.

- 7.2 Having discussed the problems experienced by legitimate Blue Badge holders as a result of the abuses of the system, Members have noted the current position on the decriminalisation of parking. Although this is some way off yet, Members are of the view that now is the time to make representations that enforcement of Blue Badge parking should be formally recognised in any new arrangements. On a related matter Members recommend that the District Council should make clear that it undertakes enforcement of parking in disabled bays in the car parks it manages.

8. BLUE ROUTES

- 8.1 Councillor P K Ursell has suggested that there might be benefit in resurrecting Blue Routes, which assist those with disabilities in navigating their way round the District's towns. It was argued that they might have the benefit of influencing the County Council's pavement maintenance programme.

- 8.2 Despite extensive investigation, no trace of these routes has been found. As an alternative the Papworth Trust has been consulted on whether there are routes that exist which are regularly used by the disabled. However, the Trust has advised that it does not have such routes in the District. Even if blue routes had been found to have existed, it appears they are no longer in use. In addition, given that such guides would need to be regularly updated and that the need for them will be obviated if the recommendations of this study are implemented, it has been concluded that this suggestion should not be pursued.

9. ADVOCACY SERVICES

- 9.1 The Panel has discussed the provision of advocacy services around the District.

- 9.2 Mrs Bird confirmed that Disability Cambridgeshire already provides an advocacy service. The Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations provides a similar 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 / advice service at Council premises.
- 9.4 It has been concluded that such services might also help address demand for information and for details of available funding from other organisations. It is suggested that the Council should initiate discussions on the provision of comprehensive joint advocacy / advice services and act as a catalyst to identify other opportunities for joint working between these organisations.

10. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

- 10.1 With regard to public transport services, 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 have been forwarded to bus operators. Disappointingly, despite an initial enquiry on their policies in these respects and a subsequent reminder, no replies have been received. It has been suggested to the County Council that these points should be included in future contracts for bus services. These consultation findings also have been sent to bus companies operating in the District. Representations on these lines have also been made to the Local Government Association. Alternatively, the District Council's Licensing section is in the process of carrying out consultations on the needs of the disabled from the point of view of the taxi industry. Given the reluctance of bus companies to respond to the need that has been demonstrated, this need might be addressed via the Council's taxi licensing service.
- 10.2 In addition, a suggestion that those who care for individuals with disabilities should be provided with free bus travel has been referred to the County Council. Carers UK, which is running a national campaign on this issue, has been informed of the support that exists in Huntingdonshire for this initiative.
- 10.3 A suggestion by the Cambridgeshire Parliament that bus timetables near bus sheltered should be lowered to enable those in wheelchairs to read them has been passed to the County Council.

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. To reinforce this Mrs Bird has stressed 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. The Cambridgeshire Parliament has indicated that it would like to be included in the list of consultees as have the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations and the Papworth Trust. A full list of consultees has been passed to the Council's Policy and Research Department for use in future consultations.

12. OTHER MATTERS

- 12.1 The Panel has given consideration to a government initiative to introduce a countywide coalition of disabled people which has been discussed with the Hunts Forum of Voluntary Organisations. Similar functions were performed by the Huntingdonshire Coalition of Disabled People who used to offer a range of local advocacy services to its stakeholders. It also organised networking events for members and carers of disabled people, training sessions for local retailers and consultation with members. Furthermore, it acted as a general point of contact for the community. The Coalition has now disbanded and some of its work has been taken on by Shopmobility. The Panel welcomes the extension of this initiative to Huntingdonshire but has asked the County Council to incorporate existing organisations already working in this area into its activities in complying with this duty.
- 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 has been referred to the Growth and Infrastructure and Health and Wellbeing Thematic Groups of the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership.

14. CONCLUSION

This has been an extensive study, which has taken a wide range of evidence. As a study that predominantly focussed on the external environment, much of the interest and many of the recommendations concern other organisations. The result is that many of the actions have already been implemented by way of recommendations to those organisations. The recommendations are to:

- a) note progress in respect of High Dependency Toilets (para. 3.3);
- b) note the action taken to address defective or absent kerbs and unhelpful parking identified by Town and Parish Councils (para. 5.3);
- c) note that the suggestion that consultation should be held with disabled groups on the location of dropped kerbs and problems with pavements has been referred to the Growth and Infrastructure Thematic Group of the Huntingdonshire Strategic Partnership (para. 5.4);
- d) make representations that enforcement of Blue Badge parking should be formally recognised in any new arrangements for decriminalised parking (para. 7.2);
- e) make clear that the Council undertakes enforcement of parking in disabled bays in the car parks it manages (para. 7.2);

