

Access Inquiry Focus Group 1: 11th November 2021

Facilitated by SPECTRUM, to hear the views of Disabled People

“What contributes to good accessibility of the built environment and public spaces”

Introduction to this report

This are the views of the Disabled People present at the focus group, the only editing that has been done, is to structure the feedback into areas of common theme and repartition; no editing has been done to place a value judgement on individual comments made, if comments are made about a subject in a future focus group, then those comments will appear in the report for that specific focus group..

All comments are anonymised to encourage free speaking

[Were SPECTRUM provides context, these comments are shown like this]

Examples or specific suggestions are shown like this

Introduction to the focus group

Ian Loynes & Mark Pirnie worked together to promote these focus groups to as many Disabled People as possible, covering all impairment groups

All focus groups will be held on Zoom, with Disabled People encouraged to write to SPECTRUM to voice their comments if they were unable to attend the meeting for any reason. That way we capture the views of people who did not have access to the internet.

Meetings are subtitled and people have access to a live transcript to aid accessibility.

Ian and Mark introduced the session, the subject matter and the background to the Scrutiny Panel’s inquiry; as well as the accessibility options available.

Part 1: Good examples of access in Southampton: Pg 2

Part 2: Areas where access should be improved: Pg 3

PART 1: Comments on GOOD examples of access were invited:

- There are plenty of good examples of good access, particularly in retail areas – simply because they have a financial incentive to encourage Disabled People to spend their money *[It is estimated that 15% of the UK population, or 37,000+ in Southampton are Disabled People – no business can afford to not encourage that amount of people to spend their money]*
- **Audio Loop Systems** (whilst only installed/operational in a very small percentage of shops and public buildings) really make all the difference to hearing impaired people *[Audio loop systems enable people with hearing aids to hear what's being said]*
- **More space allowed since the Pandemic.** Now, if you go into a cafe or something, because before they have only given a small space between the tables. And that for me was a major access problem. It's great for me now that they are more spaced out - probably annoying for the restaurant or whatever because it says less tables,
- **Retail allowing assistance dogs.** Most shops routinely allow assistance dogs and shops make a lot of effort, which is really great they see someone when using an assistance dog (nine times out of 10)
- **The City Centre is good generally, not so in other retail areas.** Getting around the centre is fairly easy. But when you get out into the suburbs, eg Shirley and Portswood, just being able to get around is really difficult.

...continued...

Part 2: Comments on examples of access that NEED IMPROVING were invited:

Homes:

- All houses built from now should be built to be accessible, not just a small percentage for Disabled and Older People. This should happen for two main reasons:
 1. Disabled and Older People want to visit their friends and family and neighbours just as much as everyone else
 2. If all homes had a basic level of accessibility built in, it would be less costly to adapt as people grow older or become Disabled

[SPECTRUM Clarity: There's no real evidence that it costs more to build accessible homes when they are built at scale]

Improve Access Awareness of Southampton City Council Planning Department and Building Control

- Guidance is routinely Ignored & treated as legally ignorable - The mantra of “Approved documents are guidance only and do not have to be followed” is repeated across the industry and within the Planning Dept

For Instance:Part M Guidance says: “Wheelchair accessible unisex toilets should not be used for baby changing.” In West Quay North, opened about 2000, all the accessible toilets complied. In West Quay South, opened in 2016, none of the accessible toilets complied.

- Often we find no access or bad access in new buildings and access being reduced when buildings are modified. I've talked to the council, architects, planning officers but nothing ever improves.
- By law, access considerations should be put in place, and planning officers should ensure to access rights are preserved – but they don't
- SCC's Buildings control is a major contributor to the lack of access across the city. Architect shouldn't put barriers into their plans in the first place,

and building control should monitor this before they grant permission –
But that don't

- The Law and guidance is being routinely ignored or left for individuals to make it make a complaint about it.
- Wheelchair users, people with sticks, crutches, needing loop systems – the needs of all Disabled People should be put in place when a new build takes place or existing building is modified. But they don't do it, and planning officers don't appear to police access requirements.
- There used to be an Access Officer Role, and there used to be a relationship with the Access Group [*Group of Disabled People*] to vet plans before they were approved, but both of these have been stopped

Car Parking at the Civic Centre should be maintained at all times [*Included in this report because it is part of the built environment*]

- Currently, if there's an event going on they close the Civic Centre car parks, which is really quite annoying because it's the most accessible one that I can use and I know other people can use, and I don't see that they need to close them, i.e. when there's a cycling event in town, and they closed the Civic Centre car park.
- I'd like to see that we can keep the parking spaces outside the Civic Centre at all times– These are the best spaces in the City that I can use [*wheelchair user*] because it's not like end to end parking where people block you in, resulting in inability to access your vehicle.

Improving Accessibility of public and retail spaces:

Maintenance and staff training of accessible provision and equipment

- Disabled People are often let down, because access provision or equipment is not maintained, or staff do not know how to use it. Maintenance and staff training is an essential aspect to good access.

Audio Loop Systems

- A group of people [letsloopsouthampton.co.uk], for about three years now, have been trying to get audio loop systems fitted in premises in Southampton. All together we have done an audit on about 300 premises, covering Shirley, Portswood, and the City Centre, and of these only 4% have actually got loop systems installed, which is absolutely ridiculous because I [*hearing impaired person*] don't go into shops because I have to contend with music playing. And I'm a lip reader. And if there's no loop system on just then I'm completely unable to communicate.
- That's the same for 23,000 deaf and hard of hearing people who live in Southampton. They avoid the shops in Southampton because they just can't manage in the shops out there. It works well in the odd occasion when that a working loop system is installed, and staff know how to use it, that's fantastic. The majority of banks, building societies all have loop systems.
- If done, you will find there's a lot more deaf and hard of hearing people will go into those because they can hear, they can listen to what the people in the shop or whatever is saying, and it gives them the confidence to go into those places, and knowing that they're going to be listened to and they can hear back and reply back.
 - Example given: A lady was in tears she was, she left a shop, because they had a loop system but the staff didn't know how to turn it on! Now if you go into that shop and it's turned on, it's fantastic you find people spend their money, which is what it's all about going shopping and the retailer and the person both benefit.
- LetsLoopSouthampton even has a grant fund of £30,000 to meet the cost of installing a loop system (they cost about £200) so there isn't even a financial case for not doing the right thing

Pavements, kerbs and street furniture

- In pelican crossings: Adequate time allowed for slower walking people, or those with thought impairments, and slower start and moving people at electronically controlled road crossings.
- Street furniture, seating & A Board. During the Pandemic, rules were relaxed, which enabled some of the pubs restaurants to spit out onto the pavement. Often no consideration to Disabled People needing space to use the pavement is thought of.
- We really need to tighten up the use of these spaces to get through to monitor pubs and restaurants abuse.

For Example: Yates use most of the pavement and opposite to a bus stop. So, and that makes it really difficult for me going out anywhere.

- Paving needs to be maintained to make sure it's not a trip hazard for people with walking difficulties. Some paving ridges which encourage correct usage by cyclists are then a real problem to Disabled People – but we were not consulted before they went in.
- Paving with cobble may look authentic, but you try wheeling on in in a wheelchair, or walking on it with crutches or walking difficulties generally, or you're in pain - It's an absolute nightmare.
- Plenty of choice of comfortable seating with backrests, and armrests (to aid sitting down, continual support and standing up or transferring to a wheelchair or scooter). NOT “artistically designed” lumps of stone or concrete, but instead having integrated spaces within any rows for wheelchair and scooter users, and those who cannot sit, or prefer to stand to socialise with others.
- Road/Pavement design: There needs to be a colour differentiation between the colour of the road compared to the pavement, they sort of blend in now. And I know that one of my friends, found himself walking in the middle of the road, he has a visual impairment, until somebody walks up to him and said, Do you realize you're walking in the middle of the road! He didn't because there was no color contrast or anything.

Accessible Toilets:

- The accessible toilet provision is frankly, getting worse and often they are full of junk, or cleaning materials, or huge bins or badly maintained. If you can't use a toilet, you don't go there.
- Retail or public toilets are often poorly provided in many cafes, restaurants, particularly out in the suburbs again, a lot of them don't have accessible toilets.

For Example: I like to go out and have a pint. There are three bars, restaurants, bars or mini bars have been created over the last couple of years, and none of them, I can get into, because one like door has got to a step, there is no ramp provision. In one, I'm told it has an accessible toilet, but as a step to get into it, I've never seen it. And planning presumably have approve that.

- In West Quay South, not one of the toilets complied with the legislation. I took this up with, with the West key management and I was told that building control that part m *[the section of guidance covering access]* does not have to be complied with it is only guidance!. They blamed each tenant and I pointed out that under the equality act that the landlord is equally liable to ensure compliance. They did make some changes (at a lot of extra, unnecessary expense), but still not as good as it should be – and importantly, could have been.

Example of bad toilet design: folding doors, are very difficult to operate from a wheelchair and impossible to get in to rescue somebody if they fall down behind them. You'd physically going to have push them out the way or break the door down.

- Why Radar Keys?: Having Accessible toilets locked (with a Radar Key) makes it inaccessible if you don't have a key. Why lock accessible toilets when 'ordinary' toilets are not locked.
- Changing Places Toilets: These enable more space, a hoist, and a adult changing platform/bed. Compared to other Cities, Southampton has very few, and even those are not publicised. It should be a requirement that public spaces new builds have these sorts of toilets as a standard

But even though not many exist in Southampton, they are not used because people often don't know they exist. We need to raise awareness of where these are so that they get used and people know where to go.

- Toilets: springs on the doors, trying to get in a wheelchair, through this with a strong spring which is constantly, you know, doesn't give you even a second.
- And the other thing is the dryers which are on the opposite side of the room. So you've got wet hands on the walking sticks on the wheels of your chair. Try to get one side of the room to the other.
- Also mirrors are often too high.

Building in good access at the design phase of new builds:

- Lift Availability. I was shocked that even new buildings often don't have lifts. Or bands play on floors without lifts. A band was playing upstairs, but I couldn't go to it. So when they put on events, they don't check they don't check access.
- Lifts regularly maintained so they always arrive correctly aligned with floor level to avoid bumpy trip hazards, and to have audio and visual floor level announcements, and door opening and closing announcements allowing plenty of time for everyone to enter and exit.
- Contrasting colour décor to make doors etc. more distinguishable for visually impaired people and those who have dementia.

Bad example of design: some parts of West Quay South were designed specifically to avoid the consideration of Disabled People. Ramp gradients, if changed slightly then you don't have to have rest resting points for wheelchair users - it's almost a bit like a challenge for them to find a way to, to not comply!

- Bad Design: Shops that block the aisles with extra stuff make it very difficult to get around

- Bad Design: More and more café, pub, restaurants are using high tables and chairs or providing seating up a 'cosmetic' step which are completely inaccessible to many Disabled People

Policy considerations:

- All public meetings (Council, MPs) should be held in accessible premises. Then they all would be accessible to everyone – including Disabled People also. Time and again I've been to even MPs surgeries and not been able to use them because not accessible.
- There's enough public buildings are here that are accessible, and doing this would encourage the design of accessible venues as buildings that aren't accessible, would find they are losing money.

Suggestion: Accessibility Checklist provided by City Council written by Disabled People. Event organisers for any event in the City should be expected to use an accessibility checklist to follow to avoid regular access mistakes being made. Often, simple things that make all the difference. Cost is often not a factor

Suggestion: City of Culture 2025 should be used to promote Southampton as an accessible and welcoming City. A real opportunity for that City Council to lead by example

- Equality Impact Statements should be completed by people from the different equality groups themselves, not just done by an officer that may, or not, know the issues that these groups will experience.
- Getting it right will boost the economy of Southampton: With a population of 37,000 plus Disabled People, there's an enormous amount of money in their pockets and will spend that if places are accessible.

The End