

# the knowledge

Learning from London

## Opening Doors Across London



This report reviews the work of The City Bridge Trust on 'Access to Buildings' for disabled people.

The second in a series of occasional papers from The City Bridge Trust, it may be downloaded from our website: [www.citybridgetrust.org.uk](http://www.citybridgetrust.org.uk)

## Introduction

Disability is a big issue in London. More than 1.4 million Londoners are disabled.<sup>1</sup> One in every four Londoners has a family member or close friend who is disabled.<sup>2</sup> The likelihood of becoming disabled increases with age: 8 per cent of Londoners between 16 and 24 are disabled, compared with 33 per cent of those between 55 and retirement.<sup>3</sup>

At one time, disabled people were treated very badly. They were pitied or scorned or treated as if they needed to be cured. No matter which of these views held sway, the consequence was always the same: disabled people were excluded from society and treated as second-class citizens.

In the past thirty years, there have been big advances. Disabled people have demanded – and achieved – more equality, though there is still a long way to go. It is now largely accepted that the biggest problem is the way that society treats disabled people, and in particular the barriers placed in the way of their participation in normal life. Such barriers may be physical, such as stairs without lifts, or organisational, such as information not available in large print, or personal, such as patronising attitudes and behaviours.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 has created a framework of rights for disabled people. Defining a disabled person as someone ‘with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on an individual’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities’, the Act states that people who supply goods and services cannot do so ‘less favourably’ to disabled people unless this can be justified on specific grounds (for example, if there is a genuine risk to health and safety).

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1 National Statistics Online, Census 2001, details at [www.statistics.gov.uk/census](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census)

2 Information provided by London First at [www.londonfirst.co.uk/improving\\_london/disability.asp?L2=19](http://www.londonfirst.co.uk/improving_london/disability.asp?L2=19)

3 Spence, Lorna (2007) *Disabled people and the labour market in London: Key Facts*, Analysis of the 2005 Annual Population Survey, DMAG Briefing 2007–05, Greater London Authority, London

## Enter The City Bridge Trust

The City Bridge Trust (then known as Bridge House Trust) opened its doors to grantseekers just as the Disability Discrimination Act was entered onto the statute book. In 1995, the Trust began a programme called 'Access for Disabled People'. Its aim was to reduce disadvantage experienced by disabled people by enabling independent living and removing barriers that prevent their full participation in society. One component of this programme was 'Access to Buildings', which was designed to improve access to voluntary and community sector buildings and to increase good practice in access awareness, information and design.

The idea was to open doors to disabled people across London. Some of the early thinking about the programme was to help voluntary and community organisations to comply with the new Act. But, as time has gone on, the programme has moved towards helping people to develop the best possible practice in their buildings, for example, through the funding of access audits and support agencies, such as the Centre for Accessible Environments. Such practice is not just a question of physical access; it is about attitudes too. There is little point in developing a state of the art facility unless disabled people feel comfortable and welcome.

Since 1995, The City Bridge Trust has given 322 grants totalling just under £17m to help voluntary and community organisations to refurbish their buildings so that they could become accessible for disabled people. What has this taught us about access to buildings? How can we do what we do better? What more can we do? These questions prompted us to pause and take stock of our programme. We decided to get outside help to answer these questions and asked CENTRIS, an independent charity, to evaluate our approach. They looked in detail at 22 grants. Here we tell the story of what we learned.

## Key Findings

All the organisations in the study reported significant improvements in access to their buildings. In most cases, disabled users now have access equal with non-disabled people, and can participate with dignity in the activities. Some of the organisations received awards for their access design.

There were four main positive outcomes from the grants:

1. People said that the improvements had led to a transformation of their organisation and they were really proud of their new building. The building had become the 'jewel in the crown' or helped to create a 'wow factor'.
2. Disabled people could take part in the life of the organisation in a way that was impossible before. Buildings were accessible, welcoming and created dignity for disabled people.
3. If you get access right for disabled people, it is right for everyone. In a building with good access, everyone feels better and more comfortable, and this builds the reputation of the organisation with the community and with funders.
4. Non-disabled people found the process of refurbishment a learning experience and it raised their awareness of the importance of planning for disability in everything an organisation does. People learned that disability is not just about physical barriers, but about attitudes and behaviour too.

However, two other less positive findings confirmed our suspicions of the challenges a building project can present. First, the evaluators reported that many organisations did not keep good records of the use of their buildings by disabled people and that it was therefore sometimes difficult to assess the value of the grants. Secondly, although the outcomes of the grants were usually positive, the process of refurbishment was always stressful and sometimes 'a nightmare'. There were eight commonly occurring problems, and the failure to solve these adequately sometimes made the buildings less accessible than the organisations had hoped when they began to refurbishment.

## Common Problems

These were:

1. Poor professional advice on access arrangements leading to unsafe buildings or a failure to meet regulations
2. Low quality of building work leading to unusable facilities, such as gradients that were too steep
3. Poor decisions made about fixtures and fittings leading to facilities that whilst highly attractive were unusable or unsafe for disabled people
4. Problems with equipment suppliers leading to facilities that could not be used by disabled people, such as stairlifts that could not be used by electric wheelchairs
5. Poor management of facilities so that disabled facilities were used for the wrong purpose, such as using accessible toilets as cupboards
6. Problems with maintaining access facilities so that facilities kept going wrong so disabled people could not use them
7. Signs were often non-existent, in the wrong place, or the wrong size or had colours that were unsuitable for people with sight impairment
8. External problems, such as street paving or cobbles that meant that disabled people could not get near the building.

We are already funding an Access Adviser within the Centre for Accessible Environments and a London Property Advice Manager at the Ethical Property Foundation. Following the recommendations of the evaluation, we are working to strengthen those relationships, help organisations to access good quality advice and information, as well as to learn from each other's experience. Other recommendations, such as considering making grants towards project management costs, are being fed into the consultation process of our Five Year Review.

## Top Tips for the Third Sector

It is important to recognise from the beginning that refurbishing a building to create access for disabled people is likely to be one of the most difficult things that an organisation will attempt to do. The process is invariably stressful and difficult. Never think 'this will be easy'. It won't.

Based on the experience of organisations in the study, a number of practical steps can improve the outcomes and reduce the stress.

**Plan.** As with any major activity, it is vital to think through who is going to do what, what it is going to cost, and how long it is going to take. In the case of a building refurbishment, there are many people involved, many things to think about, and lots of things that can go wrong. A resource plan is particularly important, and should include money to pay a project manager, meet all professional fees, pay for the hire of other facilities, and many other things. Disabled people need to be involved in drawing up the plan. As many risks as possible need to be identified, planned for, and costed.

**Allocate roles.** This means having a project manager together with some way to support and supervise the project manager. It is important to identify who else needs to be involved both internally (such as trustees) and externally (such as access auditors, architects, building contractors, regulators, local authorities, funders, etc.).

**Manage relationships actively.** It is vital to keep an eye on builders, architects and other professionals to ensure that they do the right thing on time while keeping a good rapport going with them. The evaluation found that conflict with professionals was a major source of things going wrong during the refurbishment.

**Become familiar with rules and regulations.** Don't assume that building regulations, rules about listed buildings and good practice in disability access are consistent with one another. They aren't. It is important to juggle to find the best course. Don't rely on one source of advice and be prepared to learn about the different regulations.

**Keep the service going.** This is a vital area to get right, since it is a prime source of stress. Remember that you will probably not be able to work in a building site and that other arrangements will need to be made. If you need to operate from another place, you will need to budget for this; if you stay where you are, you will work around the inevitable disruption, support staff who may find their working conditions difficult, and accept that you may have lower capacity than normal.

**Prepare to be surprised.** Things will go wrong and it is impossible to predict what. However, experience suggests that costs will always exceed estimates and that deadlines will rarely be honoured. Be realistic and flexible about this and have a contingency plan for as many things as you can think of.

**Get help.** Don't try to do this on your own. We are funding an 'Access and Sustainability Adviser' at the Centre for Accessible Environments, which is a leading authority on inclusive design and access to the built environment. We also fund the Ethical Property Foundation, which advises voluntary organisations on acquiring and managing their premises, including: lease negotiation, valuation, conveyancing, surveying, repairs and refurbishment.

We have published a longer version of *Opening Doors Across London*, which can be downloaded from our website or obtained in print from our office.

## Conclusion

Disability is everyone's business. What is good for disabled people is good for everyone. In the 21st century we enter an age where access for all, regardless of such human characteristics as age, race, gender and disability, is an important hallmark of a civilised capital city.

Buildings need to reflect that inclusive approach where everyone can get in and take part. The study shows that it is not just the physical aspects of the building that matter. The human side of buildings matter too – for the attitudes and behaviours of those who work inside will determine whether the building works or not.

Access for all is a vital feature in the future success of the city. This is not a new idea. Indeed, access lays at the heart of the history of The City Bridge Trust. Bridges across the Thames not only solved the issue of physical access across the river, but also contributed to a widening of horizons that centuries later has led to a world class city with a global outlook. Making our buildings accessible helps to make our city inclusive.

## Participating Organisations

We are grateful for the contributions and co-operation we received from:

The London Symphony Orchestra/St Luke's the UBS and LSO Music Education Centre, The Furzedown Project, The Roundhouse, Forum@Greenwich, Bromley Voluntary Sector Trust, Barnet and District Affiliated Synagogue Charitable Trust, a London Advice Centre, Migrants Resource Centre, The Attlee Foundation, Battersea Central Mission, The Good Shepherd Mission, London Muslim Centre, St Luke's Parochial Charities, The Unicorn Theatre, Burgh House Trust, South London Gallery, The Salvation Army, The Canal Museum Trust, Camden Arts Centre, Salmon Youth Centre, St. Faith's Community Hall, The Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) and The Ethical Property Foundation (EPF).

Published by The City Bridge Trust, City of London, PO Box 270, Guildhall, London EC2P 2EJ  
T: 020 7332 3710 E: [citybridgetrust@cityoflondon.gov.uk](mailto:citybridgetrust@cityoflondon.gov.uk)

Registered Charity: 1035628

