



Access for People with Disabilities

The purpose of this Advice Note is to give general guidance to intending developers, their professional advisors and agents. It is designed to provide advice on the planning criteria to be applied in regard to the provision of facilities for disabled people in the case of developments to which the public are to have access. It should be stressed that the note is not a specific statement of Departmental policy but rather one of advice and guidance.

Any legal views expressed in this note have no statutory force and should not be relied upon as an authoritative interpretation of the law.

1. Introduction

Historically the built environment has not been designed for the needs of people with disabilities, yet provisional results from a recent study would indicate that around 190,000 people in Northern Ireland have some form of disability. Disabilities can include a lack of mobility, sensory impairments, mental disabilities or others which are not so obvious, for example, heart disease or breathing difficulties. Many other people experience a temporary disability through accident or illness. A lack of accessibility can also present difficulties for the growing numbers of elderly people in our community and for people with prams. The Department of the Environment therefore attaches great importance to the removal, as far as is reasonable and practicable, of barriers to access to new and existing development. Many obstructions to access can be avoided by careful design or by simple alterations. This Advice Note provides basic guidelines for developers.

2. Legislative background

Section 4 of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 places an obligation on anyone undertaking the provision of a building to which the public are to be admitted, to make appropriate provision for the needs of persons with disabilities as regards the means of access, parking and sanitary convenience insofar as it is, in the circumstances both practicable and reasonable to do so. This requirement also applies to the conversion of an existing building. Section 8 of the Act places a similar obligation on any person undertaking the provision of a building for educational purposes, shops, offices and factories. Section 7 of the Act further provides that appropriate signposting of the facilities should be provided.

3. In line with requirements of Article 26 of the Planning Order (Northern Ireland) 1991, the Department when granting planning permission for buildings or premises which fall within the categories outlined above, draws the attention of the applicant to the provisions of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 relating to access to the buildings for persons with disabilities.

4. The Department also wishes to draw the attention of persons involved in the provision of buildings within the categories outlined in paragraph 2 above to the "Code of Practice for Access for the Disabled to Buildings" published by British Standards Institution [BS 5810: 1979] and to the Department of Education and Science Design Note 18 "Access for the Physically Disabled to Educational Buildings" 1984.

5. It should be noted that the 1978 Act is a separate statutory code not directly related to planning control and in addition to the question of access to buildings, it deals with matters such as the internal layout and design of buildings and the provision of facilities within buildings which are not matters for which the Town and Country Planning Service of the Department has primary responsibility. The suitability of the entrance details and the interior features of the development for the needs of the people with disabilities are matters which are controlled separately via the Building Regulations.

6. Planning guidelines

The provision of facilities for people with disabilities can raise issues which fall within the area of concern of the Planning Service. The arrangements for access to buildings are a planning matter and the suitability of the arrangements for use by the public, which includes people with disabilities raises issues of public amenity which are material planning considerations.

7. The Department intends, where appropriate, to include in future development plans a policy objective to seek, as far as is practicable, the development of a built environment accessible to people with disabilities.

8. As a general objective in the provision of accessible buildings developers should seek to ensure that a wheelchair can be erected and easily propelled from a parked car into the building. The concept of such a "wheelchair standard" providing level or ramped clearways with unobstructed routes of adequate width is conducive to suiting the needs of many people with various forms of impaired mobility.

9. In the case of planning applications for the development of buildings to which the public are to have access, the Department will consider the extent to which the provision of external facilities and access into the building for persons with disabilities is required. Where it is not clear from the application that such provision is being planned the Department will endeavour to clarify the matter in discussion with the applicant. Where appropriate conditions may be attached to the grant of planning permission to ensure the development has a suitable access.
10. Conditions on access for people with disabilities may equally be attached in appropriate cases to permissions which relate to more than one building, so that the means of access between buildings is covered by the permission - for example external changes in level in multi-level shopping centres. Such conditions may also cover the means of access to the building from other parts of the development, such as external car parks, to ensure they are suitable for people with disabilities. The Department may also consider it appropriate for conditions on access to be attached to permissions for the change of use of buildings involving no structural or physical operations, where the new use would be one for which the public has access and where provision for new works to meet the needs of people with disabilities would be reasonable, practicable and justified on planning grounds.

11. **Car parking Provision**

The Department recommends that where car parking provision is in excess of 50 spaces 4% should be reserved specifically for people with disabilities. In smaller car parks at least one space should be provided. Where possible reserved spaces should be provided within 50 metres of a point of entry to the development. A covered way should be considered where distances exceed 50 metres. Parking bays should be 3.6 metres wide [3.3 minimum] to allow transfer from car to a wheelchair. An economy of space can be achieved by combining such bays in pairs of 2.4 metres width with a common zone of transfer of 1.2 metres [10.9 metres minimum].

12. Reserved spaces should be clearly designated for use by people with disabilities and should be clearly signposted. The pedestrian route from the parking spaces to the point of entry should be clearly defined and well lit.
13. Pathways should be a minimum width of 1.2 metres and if possible 1.8 metres to allow wheelchairs to pass. A greater width may be required if large pedestrian flows are anticipated. Path edges should be clearly defined and slip resistant surfaces should be used. All pathways should be well lit. The use of colour contrasts can assist partially sighted people.
14. The pathway system should where possible be designed to avoid crossing vehicular routes within the site. Where this is not practicable use should be made of "dropped kerbs" and textured surfaces so that the crossing point is suitable for both wheelchair users and people with visual impairments.

15. **Changes in Level**

Ramps where used should have a gradient of approximately 1:20 (maximum 1:12). Where ramps are steep (greater than 1:20) steps should also be made available. Long ramps require a level landing at 10 metre intervals. A level platform of adequate size should be provided at the entrance to the building and at the top and bottom of all ramps. Steps should have a maximum riser of 0.15 metres and a minimum tread of 0.28 metres. Handrails should be provided to both sides of ramps and steps. Intermediate handrails are necessary where the ramp or steps are wider than 2 metres. Handrails should extend beyond the top and bottom of the steps or ramp and should be provided with a positive safe end.

16. **Street Furniture**

Street furniture should be located so that it does not obstruct pedestrian pathways. Where possible such furniture should be at least one metre in height (0.8 metres minimum), with good colour contrast.

17. **Further information**

Further information on the technical aspects of providing an accessible environment can be obtained from -

The Senior Access Officer
The N.I. Council on Disability
2 Annadale Avenue
BELFAST BT7 3JR

18. The following publications give additional information and may be of help to prospective developers:

Access Committee for England "Access for Disabled People: Design Guidance Notes for Developers" 1985.

Access Committee for England "Designing for People with Sensory Impairments" 1986.

N.I. Council on Disability "Access Guidelines for Developers" 1989.

British Standards Institution: "Code of Practice for Access for the Disabled to Buildings" BS 5810 1979.

Department of Education and Science Design Note 18 "Access for the Physically Disabled to Educational Buildings" 1984.

