

## Property Inspection Summary Report

**Purpose of Inspection:** To gain an insight into the issues relating to accessibility together with management policies relating to persons with a physical, mental or sensory impairment

**Attendees:** Cllr C Loftus, Cllr B Bryant & John Gannon. Various building managers were interviewed to ascertain the level of consideration given to disabled persons using the building.

**Date:** Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> August

The purpose of the visit was to establish future priorities relating to the removal of physical barriers and development of management policies.

The persons undertaking the visits included Cllr C Loftus, Cllr B Bryant and John Gannon of Property Services. The properties were randomly selected and were chosen for their different usages, however all were available/accessible to members of the public. We must note that the changing rooms at Widnes Recreation Ground does not offer public toilet facilities and are only used by individuals using the pitch facilities.

None of the occupants/building managers were informed of the visits in order that a true reflection of all accessibility issues, together with the daily use of the building, could be established.

### Properties Inspected

- Halton Lea Library
- Grangeway Community Centre
- Widnes Library
- Widnes Recreation Ground Changing Rooms

## 1.0 Key Findings and Areas of Potential Improvement

### 1.1 Physical Barriers

It was established that considerable building works have been undertaken in order to remove physical barriers and to improve escape in the event of an emergency. It was noted however that a number of works (identified as low priority) had not been completed.

There needs to be an ongoing review of the use, adaptation, change of use, reconfiguration etc of all council buildings in order that the creation of new physical barriers are avoided. During our inspection at Grangeway Community Centre it was apparent that an area of the building had been used as a secure teaching facility. This resulted in the introduction of heavy doors which lead to the disabled toilet facilities and therefore limits access. It was

also identified that fire exit routes had been congested following the internal alterations and storage of non-fixed items of furniture.

In addition it was noted that a number of areas were being used as temporary storage. The equipment being stored was identified as creating restrictions to circulation routes, emergency exits and disabled toilet facilities. If the facilities are to be used for storage purposes, the location of specific storage areas needs to be carefully considered. The practice of leaving equipment in the most convenient location for removal by contractors should not be tolerated.

It was established that the temporary change of use of a building e.g. Polling Station requires careful consideration in relation to accessibility. It is essential that separate access audits are undertaken and correct measures of removing physical barriers are adopted even though they are for a limited period, e.g. the use of approved ramping systems only, no temporary timber ramps. Such equipment could be subject to regular inspection and/or testing. It was suggested that an asset register indicating location and condition of the equipment needs to be developed.

## **1.2 Emergency Evacuation Procedures**

It was agreed that a system of monitoring visitors within council buildings needs to be developed and strictly adhered to. Persons with limited mobility need to be informed about safe refuge areas along with details of persons appointed to assist them during an emergency situation. A system to record visitors would accurately indicate the number of persons within a building together with the likely location of persons requiring assistance. Two way communication to fire marshals appointed to assist within refuge areas would provide a secondary means of identifying such persons.

During the visits it was identified that evacuation of disabled visitors was not in place. The preparation of a personal evacuation plan could only be produced for persons visiting a public building on a regular basis. Therefore methods for searching for persons requiring assistance needs to be established and practised during routine practice evacuations. Persons must be able to communicate these procedures in order to gain the confidence of individuals requiring assistance. In the event of panic it must be clearly communicated to individuals that specialist equipment, i.e. an evacuation chair, is available.

It is essential that trained fire marshals be appointed to 'buddy' persons with limited mobility in the event of an emergency. Sweeps of the building will ensure the identification of persons of limited mobility, however staff should also be aware of the people using the facilities should an emergency situation develop. Appointed helpers/buddies should deliver accurate instructions, have practical demonstrations and appropriate training to ensure a safe evacuation.

A two way method of communication should be available together with contact numbers in order that the number and location of persons within refuge areas can be relayed to the emergency services. It has been agreed with the fire officer that mobile telephones are acceptable as a means of

communication. Within the fire risk assessment/evacuation plan there should be a list of mobile contact numbers of colleagues, local fire stations and neighbouring businesses or organisations which could relay messages to the attending fire service.

We identified that there were no evacuation chairs installed within any of the premises. Previous discussion with the Fire Officer has established that there needs to be a facility to evacuate a person with limited mobility in the event of smoke/fire threatening the refuge area. In order that evacuation chairs are used safely and effectively, specialised training needs to be undertaken and necessary procedures incorporated into emergency evacuation drills. It is essential that the person seated in the chair has complete confidence in the individual co-ordinating their evacuation.

It was established that due to possible vandalism and the relative low-rise nature of the council's public buildings, a centrally held evacuation chair would be preferable. It is advised that this should be stored on the top floor of the premises and moved to the required refuge area, if required. Again the control of this equipment needs to be appointed to a fire marshal who should be responsible for the equipment until the building is deemed fully clear of all persons.

During our visits it was noted that signage indicating the location of disabled refuge areas was only installed at Widnes Library and Learning Centre. The numbering of refuge areas should also be considered e.g. Refuge Area One (First Floor), Refuge Area Two (Second Floor) etc, this information should be visible on installed signage within the specified areas. Text should always be used in order to avoid the introduction of additional digits resulting from vandalism.

Personal evacuation plans should be developed for all members of staff who may have a physical, mental or sensory impairment. The focus of the plan should be to make the individual aware of the policy, procedures and facilities available in the event of an emergency evacuation of the building.

### **1.3 Disabled Toilet Facilities**

The monitoring of disabled toilet facilities needs to be clearly communicated to all staff members including flexible or temporary members in order that response times are not compromised. During our site inspections it was identified that the alarm should be relayed directly to a constantly staffed central location e.g. reception, CCTV room etc.

Pull cords within the toilets should not be tied up to assist in cleaning duties. Such actions will render the facilities worthless if required by an individual who could be lying on the floor.

Personal protection equipment should be available to all appointed persons for use in the event of an individual in need of assistance. Gloves, aprons etc

should be contained within a mobile kit which should accompany appointed helpers during an emergency situation.

The alarms within the toilet facilities need to be tested on a weekly basis in order to identify defective equipment.

#### **1.4 General First Aid/Appointed First Aiders**

There appeared to be a mixed response to the need to provide basic first aid to members of the public. Representatives from both library facilities stated that Risk Management had instructed that basic first aid should not be given to the general public and that the emergency services should be contacted immediately. We understand that the legislation relating to this area is currently being reviewed by government, therefore the council's policy could be subject to change.

#### **2.0 Issues Identified During Site Visits**

- 2.1** Identify refuge areas within buildings and incorporate these within the fire risk assessment,
- 2.2** Installation of evacuation chairs in appropriate locations (if deemed necessary),
- 2.3** Prioritising remaining works (identified within the original Access Audits as Priorities C, D, E.....M) associated with the removal of physical barriers,
- 2.4** Consider reviewing all refurbishment works, reconfiguration works with an accessibility officer/consultant,
- 2.5** Consider the instruction of a 'mystery' visitor to access council buildings and provide feedback regarding major issues relating to physical barriers and management policies e.g. toilet assistance response times,
- 2.6** Undertake access audits relating to temporary facilities including polling stations, storage areas within unused areas of buildings etc,
- 2.7** Develop a complaints handling procedure relating to individual requirements e.g. acknowledgment letter issued within 5 days, investigate and provide feedback within 4 weeks, action (if necessary) within 3 months,
- 2.8** Ensure only approved/compliant signage is erected, no paper/pen signs. This should also extend to all temporary equipment associated with removing physical barriers e.g. do not use timber constructed ramps,

**2.9** Ensure that all equipment is tested & maintained in accordance with manufacturer's instructions/recommendations,

**2.10** Extend the in-house testing regimes to include alarms within toilet facilities. This should be undertaken on a weekly basis. Testing results should be entered into the building's logbook and defects reported to Property Services helpdesk.