

Maidstone Borough Council

“Access to the Council’s Services for Disabled People”

Recreation and Community Services
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

2005 - 2006



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Executive Summary

The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report *Improving the life chances of disabled people* highlights that 'using the widest survey definition, it is estimated that there are about 11 million disabled adults in the UK – one in five of the total adult population – and 770,000 disabled children'¹. In light of the fact that disabled people are six times as likely as non-disabled people to be out of work², and therefore in need of support from society, it begins to become clear that there is a great need for public bodies such as Councils to make their services accessible to disabled people. Amongst other factors it was these kinds of statistics that were the drivers behind the legislative approach to putting an end to discrimination against disabled people undertaken in the last ten years.

From October 2004 'service providers' have been required to fully comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). This Act made it unlawful for a service provider to discriminate against persons on the grounds of disability. On paper, Maidstone Borough Council's approach to disability and to disabled people is relatively good. The Council has a local performance indicator that measures how accessible the Council's buildings are to disabled people. This indicates that 100% of the Council's buildings are compliant with the Act. Beyond national legislation the Council, primarily through its Social Inclusion Manager, undertakes a variety of other work with regard to disabled people and access. The Council's Social Inclusion Strategy sets out work to be undertaken and the Mobility Focus Group operates as a focal point in which organisations working with disabled people can provide feedback and act as consultees to the Council. Training on disability awareness is available to all staff members. The Council also produces a disabled shopping guide and an accessibility map for the Town Centre.

Nationally though many public services are not delivering for disabled people, and many people have real difficulties accessing basic services³. It has been our experience as Councillors that, despite compliance with the relevant legislation, access to the Council's services for disabled people is not as good as it could be. We have received representations from constituents expressing dissatisfaction with the likes of disabled parking provision in the Town, or difficulties obtaining services from the Council. As a result of such reports we, the Recreation and Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, decided to look closer at how the Council provides its services to disabled people. We wanted to look beyond the legislative box-ticking exercises and find out from the people with disabilities themselves what their experiences had been accessing the Council's services and find out from them where they thought the Council could make its improvements.

¹ Prime Minister's Strategy Unit; *Improving the life chances of disabled people – final report (Executive Summary)*; January 2005; p9.

² Evidence received in presentation from Social Inclusion Manager.

³ Social Exclusion Unit, ODPM; *Breaking the cycle – taking stock of progress and priorities for the future*; 2004.

Our principle findings are:

- **Focussing on disability**

In order to place disabled people at the heart of service provision the Council must embed access for disabled people at the heart of the organisation as both a corporate and strategic priority. If such an approach is embedded at the top of the hierarchy it can then be cascaded through the rest of the organisation. The employment of an Access Officer and the integration of access issues should be embedded into the Council's performance indicators and mystery shopping was considered integral to such an approach. The Mobility Focus Group should be re-named and formal reporting lines established to allow it to demonstrate where it has had an effect.

- **Training**

Even though disability awareness training is available to all staff, take-up of such training is low and has been declining. Our witnesses and other evidence received have all indicated that staff training is one of the key areas in which a real difference can be made. Such training should be provided by or include relevant local disabled organisations. There is a need for the Council to change the way it organises its disability awareness training to make it compulsory for all front-line staff with opportunities provided for staff to receive specialist training for particular disabilities. All staff should receive a basic level of both disability awareness and equality training.

- **Communications**

The communication of how the Council meets the needs of its disabled customers is essential to encourage people with disabilities to engage with the Council and an information leaflet that sets out such details should be produced. The Council should undertake a review of the ways in which it communicates with people with disabilities. The Council has accessibility guidelines for the production of its public documents but these do not appear to be widely used: this situation needs to be amended. All 'essential' or 'user' information should be provided automatically in alternative formats and details on the availability of information in alternative formats should be provided on all public documents and in a consistent place.

It is hoped that the recommendations that have resulted from our inquiry will provide a blueprint for the Council to refocus its efforts on how we provide our services to people with disabilities

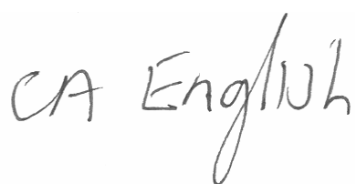
Chair's Introduction

This report is the outcome of considerable research by Members and Scrutiny Officers and is informed by a large volume of evidence concerning the operation of many of the Borough Council's services, both from internal witnesses and from members of the public and community groups.

Although the Borough Council has long had high aspirations in relation to access issues, and many noble policies, there had never been a considered attempt to look at these policies and aspirations in the round, or to assess their effectiveness in actually delivering improved access to services or promoting Social Inclusion. This review has attempted to take that broad perspective and look at a wide range of both services and those individuals and groups seeking to access these services.

As a result the report makes numerous recommendations which the Committee believes will make a significant difference to the quality of the services the Borough Council provides to people with disabilities and ease their ability to access these services.

This should be an aim which the Borough Council consider it to be a matter of fundamental principle to achieve, and these recommendations will help to facilitate this aim. The key to achieving the objective however is to recognise that this report and its recommendations, even if implemented in full, will constitute the beginning of a process and not the end of one. Much of the key work that the Council needs to do is medium or long term, and therefore the response of the Council to this report needs to take account of this.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Clive English". The letters are cursive and somewhat slanted to the right.

Councillor Clive English.

Chair, Recreation and Community Services Overview and Scrutiny
Committee 2005-06

Thanks:

The Committee would like to express its gratitude to all of the following who have assisted in some way in the production of this report.

Maidstone Borough Council:

Administrative Assistant to the Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager; Community Development and Social Inclusion Manager; Head of Regulatory Services; Head of Transportation and Environmental Services; Property, Procurement and Projects Manager; Training & Development Manager; and Web Manager; .

Organisations/Groups:

All Members of Maidstone Mobility Focus Group; Kent Association for the Blind; Kent Association for the Disabled; Kent County Council's Deaf Services Bureau; Maidstone Community Care Housing Ltd (MCCH); Maidstone MIND; Mencap (Maidstone); Sense (Maidstone); Town Centre Management; and West Kent NHS and Social Care Trust;

Individuals

Bernice Abbit, Mrs H Arthurs, Mr and Mrs Avis, Robert Baker, Maggie Brooks, Peter Budgen, John Bull, Wendy Carreras, Maureen Chappell, Merryl Chesher, Vicci Chittenden, Mr F. Costella, Angela Crooks, Mr R. W. Edwards, David Evans, Mr and Mrs Farrant, Mr R.J. Gash, Barry Ginley, Jeanne Henderson, Ann Lewis, Adam Luckhurst, Judy Mills, Mr Bill Moss, Steve Overton, Sarah Priest, Yvonne Savage, Kerry Turner, Pat Wilmshurst, Darren Wilson, Mrs M Woodger, Chrissie Yerlikaya, and Lee Young

Note on reading the report:

Letters written in bold, enclosed in brackets and written at the end of a paragraph, for example **(a)**, refer to a recommendation made by the Committee. The full list of recommendations, with the relevant paragraph number cross-referenced, can be found at the end of the report.

Terms of Reference

The Recreation and Community Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to conduct an inquiry into access to the Council's services for disabled people. The terms of reference for the inquiry, agreed by the Committee were as follows:

- Assess the practical difference made to disabled people accessing the Council's services following the implementation of the DDA;
- Analyse plans or strategies the Council has in place to improve access to its services for disabled people;
- Consider further steps the Council could take to improve the provision of its services to disabled people;
- Assess current levels of diversity/equality (disabled) training provided to all staff, with a particular focus on training for frontline staff;
- Assess the ways in which the Council publicises services for disabled people— both the Council's own services and those provided privately or by the voluntary and community sector;
- Analyse how the Council measures its performance in providing accessible services to disabled people and assesses levels of accessibility;
- Consider the levels of accessibility of non-face-to-face service provision at the Council (telephone/website);
- Consider examples of Beacon Authorities, best practice and Government and voluntary and community sector initiatives with regard to disabled access; and
- Assess ways in which the Council could extend its influence to encourage improvements in access for disabled people beyond the Council's direct service provision;

The present membership of the all-party Committee is as follows:

Councillor English (Chair) (Liberal Democrat)
Councillor K. Stevens (Vice-Chair) (Labour)

Councillor Butler (Conservative)
Councillor Cook (Labour)
Councillor Hinder (Conservative)
Councillor Joy (Liberal Democrat)
Councillor Mortimer (Liberal Democrat)
Councillor Naghi (Liberal Democrat)
Councillor Oldham (Conservative)
Councillor Mrs Parvin (Conservative)

Approach

1. From the beginning of this inquiry we were eager to take as inclusive an approach as possible. As such in the course of the inquiry we have held discussions with people with a range of disabilities. We have used the definition of a disabled person set out in the Disability Discrimination Act (1995):

A disabled person is someone who has a physical or mental impairment, which has an effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities

2. We have also adopted what is referred to as the 'social model' of disability. This means that we are of the view that, although a person may have an impairment that can be medically defined, it is the environment in which that person finds themselves that is disabling.

3. The Committee was also minded to consider ideas of equality. The Committee acknowledge that the term 'equality' and the idea of 'treating people equally' necessitates the creation of a level playing field. "Equality means being treated with an equal level of respect and equal access to employment, services, training etc. It is proportional treatment, according to needs, that leads to equal outcomes"⁴

4. In the course of our inquiry we have received evidence from people with mobility difficulties, visual impairments, the deaf and hard of hearing, people with mental health problems, people with learning disabilities and those who care for people with multiple disabilities. Alongside the evidence received in formal Committee meetings we have also adopted a number of other means of canvassing the views of people with disabilities. These have included:

- Conducting a mystery shopping exercise of those services most used by people with disabilities;
- Distributing a questionnaire that sought an assessment of the Council's current service provision for disabled people and suggestions as to what the Council could do to improve; and
- Attending the Mobility Focus Group both to keep the group up-to-date with progress on the review and to receive expert feedback and assistance.
- A visit to Maidstone Museum

5. We have also consulted numerous documents, government guides, best practice examples at other Councils and reference books which we have endeavoured to credit in this report.

⁴ IODA: *Diversity, Fairness and Equality Information Booklet*;

The Council's Current Approach to Disability

6. This section of the report sets out the key ways in which the Council currently approaches issues that relate to disability. It sets out the corporate policies in place, how the Council provides training to its staff on disability matters and how, through its planning function, the Council approaches access for disabled people.

7. The Council as a corporate body already undertakes quite a substantial amount of work with regard to disability and it is the Council's Social Inclusion Manager who takes the lead on such matters. The Council has a Corporate Equality Plan 2005-2008 which includes a range of actions and targets that relate to the provision of services to disabled people. This plan is monitored and evaluated annually by the Cabinet Member for Communications and External Affairs. Examples of targets in the plan include:

- To update and develop the guides and maps for disabled people in Maidstone in partnership with the voluntary, community and business sector (11.7)
- To maintain the two ticks award for disability (1.6)
- To establish a strategy and action plan for making play areas and open spaces accessible to people with mobility problems (10.4)⁵

8. The Social Inclusion Manager also highlighted to us that by December 2006 the Council will be required to have a separate Disability Equality Plan as part of its Corporate Equality Plan. This is as a result of the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act (2005). The Leader's 20/20 Vision document includes an ambition to make Maidstone an inclusive place in which to live. One of the priorities for the Council's Local Strategic Partnership relates to access. Its aim is to create a more inclusive community stating 'we must take account of the needs of all people including; disabled people, young people, older people, people on low incomes and those who live in the rural areas. Only by recognising diversity and planning services for all at an early stage will we move towards full inclusion'⁶

9. The Council is currently at Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government which is considered a key indicator and a national benchmark. This puts the Council in the top 5% of Councils nationally. The Council also recently completed a pilot national disability benchmarking exercise in which it performed in the upper quartile.

10. A number of alterations have been made to Council buildings as a result of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). This has involved an approved 3 year programme of adaptations to buildings (2002-2005)

⁵ The Full Corporate Equality Plan 2004-07 can be accessed via the [digitalmaidstone](http://digitalmaidstone.com) website

⁶ Community Strategy for Maidstone Borough; 2003; p10

funded by a special budget for this purpose of approximately £500,000. Adaptations have included:

- Hearing loops in all reception areas;
- Text telephones which can be answered quickly by the Switchboard team;
- Lifts in each building;
- Setting up 'language line', by which customers can request to speak to a member of the Council in their original language and which provides a translation service;
- Changes to Disabled toilets; and
- Automatic doors leading into all Council buildings and entrances which does not rely upon stairs;

11. The Beacon Council Round 3 Report *Better Access and Mobility* highlights that 'the complexity of accessibility and the range of ways in which it can be influenced means that developing an effective monitoring and evaluation framework is essential in developing best practice and demonstrating success'. We would like to see a method of measuring and monitoring improvements to access as part of the implementation of the adopted recommendations of this report. Both mystery shopping and a questionnaire were methods used by the Committee as part of its inquiry. The use of local performance indicators and regular access audits would also be suggested. **(a)**

12. We also learnt that the Council produces a town centre shopping guide for people with disabilities and an accessibility map of the Town Centre. The production of the 2006 shopping guide was delayed due to budgetary constraints and also to wait for the town centre shops to settle down following the completion of the Fremlin Walk development. A strategy of delaying the reproduction of the accessibility map of the Town Centre has also been implemented to ensure the accuracy of the map once published.. During the last three years over 9000 copies of the shopping guide and accessibility map have been distributed. Despite this the Committee were surprised to learn from some witnesses that they were not aware of the existence of either the shopping guide or map. We were of the view that if the Council is to go to the expense of producing such documents, and we thoroughly endorse their continued production, that it is a waste to then not market its existence properly. We would endorse a marketing campaign to accompany the launch of the 2006-7 shopping guide and the re-printing of the town centre map. The Committee also felt that the production of revised versions of the shopping guide and accessibility map should not be delayed or abandoned for purely economic reasons. **(qq)**

13. The Council's website also provides well for people with disabilities in Maidstone. The site is 'Browse-Along' enabled, a speech programme that enables the contents of web-pages read out loud. In August 2005 the site was 70% AAA compliant and the accessibility pages provide details about which of the pages are not AAA compliant and when compliance can be expected.

Best Practice

London Borough of Lewisham: A Beacon for Access and Mobility

Lewisham was awarded Beacon status for accessible services for 2001/02. The Beacons advisory panel concluded that Lewisham had taken a holistic view of their customers' needs through effective and regular consultation and worked effectively with other agencies and external partners to deliver integrated seamless services.

One of the critical success factors identified at Lewisham was its inclusive community consultation and involvement. This led to the Council identifying different needs of its population in relation to accessible services including:

- Employment of two signers to provide services for AccessPoint [One-Stop-Shop] customers with hearing impairments
- Availability of large print forms for partially sighted people and in Braille for people with severe visual impairment upon request.

Lewisham also carries out regular mystery shopping and its Disability Task Group conducted one exercise which highlighted issues regarding accessibility. Lewisham's corporate objectives have since been changed to reflect the need to improve accessibility to services for their disabled customers

From the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) website, Beacons for Accessible Services (Round 2)

14. The accessibility and mobility web pages on the digitalmaidstone website provide the following information:

- the accessibility standards to which the website complies;
- details about how to access information relating to accessibility online;
- links to the mobility maps and guides produced by the Council including the Shopping Guide, accessibility map, guide to getting around Whatman Park and the locations of accessible toilets, car parks and dropped kerbs;
- useful links for people with disabilities such as the Disability Rights Commission, local and national organisations and social services.

15. The Council introduced a new content management system for its website in the summer of 2005 and this has contributed to its much-improved accessibility. We welcome this development and the attendance of the Council's Web Development Manager at meetings of the Mobility Focus Group to receive feedback on the website. However we are again concerned that the existence of such a source of information is not widely

publicised amongst people with disabilities and would like to see a marketing campaign to correct this. (qq)

Mobility Focus Group

16. The Council runs a Mobility Focus Group (MFG). This group was established to allow a wide range of disability organisations to be consulted with and to express their views to Cabinet members and Officers. It meets approximately every two months. The Chairman of the group, the relevant Cabinet portfolio holder, is the means by which the views of the group are communicated through the Council. In addition the group has been made a formal sub-group of the Local Strategic Partnership (two representatives of the group sit on the Local Strategic Partnership) and is the specialist consultative group for the Local Development Plan on disability planning issues. The terms of reference for the group are as follows:

To set up, develop and maintain a focus group on mobility, involving a cross-section of community groups, in order to:

- (a) act as a focal point on all mobility issues*
- (b) discuss and offer advice on Council plans*
- (c) put forward suggestions, concerns and proposals to the Council*
- (d) get Council feedback*

17. We have received evidence from a number of individuals that suggested that the MFG did not seem to have the power that its previous incarnation (the Disability Advisory Sub-Committee (DAG)) had. We heard evidence from witnesses who had sat on the DAG that it was previously responsible for considering planning applications that had been flagged to it by the Council's then Part-Time Access Officer (a post that has now been deleted) and would also consider other Council policies and strategies when flagged to it due to issues of accessibility. However, the Social Inclusion Manager indicated that the majority of planning applications did not go to the group nor were many of the council's plans and strategies discussed at it. The Disability Advisory Sub-Committee was a formally constituted Committee of the Council prior to the reorganisation of local government that took place following the Local Government Act 2000. In contrast the Mobility Focus Group appears very much a consultative focus group with no fixed constitution. Although the Mobility Focus Group is a valuable tool for canvassing the views of disabled organisations within Maidstone we feel that it could benefit from a more formal structure in which it could be used as a standard point for consultation and encourage greater involvement of disabled people in the work of the Council. We are also concerned that the title *Mobility Focus Group*, and the group's terms of reference, do not acknowledge or embrace the full range of disabilities. Considering the outcomes of the DRC report (below) and the concerns expressed by Members and

witnesses regarding the MFG we recommend that a review of the group be undertaken. (c)

Best Practice

"Local groups of disabled people are often still perceived as a cheap or free source of advice and not as a valued community asset. Sometimes the enthusiasm and energy of individuals wanes in the face of constant struggle to meet demands...and feeling under-valued"

"There is broad consensus from national and umbrella organisations about what makes a successful local access group. It is the combination of an enthusiastic membership with appropriate training and resources, which engages the active involvement of local people. In turn, the local access group needs appropriate support comprising input from the local access officer; a room to meet and transport support for members; administrative support; involvement with a network / forum. If these essential ingredients are in place then the outcome is an impact on local decision making, for example, planning"

"In looking at what needs to be in place in order to ensure the improved and continued success of local access groups, national and umbrella organisations summarise this by suggesting that there needs to be:

- Recognition for local access group involvement within the planning and development control processes;*
- A sustainable network with adequate information and support, possibly similar to Age Concern England;*
- Capacity within the group to actually do things;*
- Responsive, flexible and sympathetic funding and support packages from a dedicated source (local or national)".*

Disability Rights Commission; Towards Access Standards: The Work of Local Access Groups in England and Wales; 2004

Training

18. As part of the Committee's inquiry we received evidence from the Council's Learning and Development Manager. Prior to the Officer taking up her post staff training that related to disability had been organised by the Social Inclusion Manager. The organisation of training was centralised in 2005 and is now handled by the Human Resources department. In recent years the number of staff members coming forward to take disability awareness training had reduced significantly and that, for example, in the period between January and March 2005 only the deaf awareness workshop had been run. From September 2005 the Learning and Development Manager had put in place a range of more broad-based attitude changing programmes for managers and staff that focussed on valuing diversity and a programme that focussed on welcoming customers with special requirements. A specialist disabilities programme had also

been established that would be organised when sufficient members of staff had signed up to it. The Learning and Development Manager indicated that her approach was to change the attitudes of people at work, but emphasised that such work needed to be accompanied by development in the organisation as a whole to enable people to apply their new skills.

19. We also learnt that the Learning and Development Manager had introduced a new system of appraisals. The focus of the new system was for staff to identify their objectives and establish a training plan to enable them to achieve those objectives. The corporate training programme would then be based on the training needs of staff identified through the appraisal process.

However it was acknowledged that equalities and diversity training did not emerge as staff priorities from

The most effective [disability equality or awareness] training programme always involves disabled people
Resource Disability Portfolio Guide 3;

this process. We felt that it would always be unlikely that a member of staff would sit down with their manager and highlight that they felt they had a problem with handling customers with disabilities. We recommend that all staff be required to undertake disability awareness and equality training, and would suggest that appraisals are updated to include evidence of an employees understanding of equality and diversity issues and highlight any further training that may be required. (q)

Planning

We [the Local Strategic Partnership] will:

- Ensure that plans for new developments focus at an early stage on good access for everyone;
- Comment on plans for new development and encourage individuals and local organisations to do the same

The Community Strategy for Maidstone.

20. The Committee received evidence from the Head of Regulatory Services who is responsible for the planning function at the Council. He explained to the Committee the national and local requirements for the consideration of access issues with regard to new buildings and developments. All new buildings are required to comply with the following standards and regulations:

- British Standard (BS)8300: 2001 Design of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people;
- Building Regulations Approved Document M: Access to and use of buildings 2004⁷

⁷ Resource Disability Portfolio Guide 9; *Accessible Environments*; 2004; p9.

21. Part M of the building regulations stipulates that reasonable provision shall be made for people to gain access to and use of a building's facilities. Developers are required to provide an access statement to Building Inspectors that sets out how the building will comply with Part M and it is for the Inspector to decide whether or not the requirements of Part M have been met.

If inclusivity and accessibility are considered at the design stage of a new building... it will not make it more expensive than any other design solutions and aesthetic quality need not be compromised
Resource Disability Portfolio Guide 9; Accessible Environments; 2004; p14.

22. We also learnt that, contrary to popular belief, the Council did have a Supplementary Planning Guidance document that related to access for people with disabilities. This is a document that sets out requirements, beyond those of building regulations, of the Council for developers to adhere to, in this case with regard to access. However this was a document that was effectively lying dormant and was not used as part of the planning application process. Evidence we received both from the Social Inclusion Manager, the Mobility Focus Group and individuals suggested that Supplementary Planning Guidance, and its enforcement, was perhaps one of the single most effective ways in which the Council could bring about positive benefits for people with disabilities. The Head of Regulatory Services indicated that it was his intention to bring this document up-to-date in light of the new planning laws that were being implemented, the local development framework. A Supplementary Planning Document (the replacement for Supplementary Planning Guidance) relating to access for people with disabilities would be brought forward in mid-2006 as part of the development of the Local Development Framework Document. The Committee were assured that the Local Development Framework was also more robust than the previous planning system so enforcement of any Supplementary Planning Documents would be easier. We welcomed this development and received assurances that the Committee would be consulted when this document was developed and going through the approval process. We would also recommend that the Mobility Focus Group is involved in this process. **(t)(u)**

New Council Offices

23. In December 2007 the Council will relocate from its current offices to offices in the town-centre. The mystery shopping exercise, meetings of the mobility focus group and responses to the questionnaire have all referred at some point to difficulties with accessing the Council's buildings. As part of the office move a purpose built customer reception area will be built on King Street close to the Bus Station. The Committee consider the office move to be a huge opportunity to make the Council's accommodation conform to the highest possible accessibility standards. The Committee welcome the appointment of an access consultant to the

project by the Mall Corporation (which will be undertaken following planning approval) following the recommendation of the Mobility Focus Group to do so. The Committee recommend that such close partnership working between Council Officers, the Architects, the access consultant (when appointed) and the Mobility Focus Group continue. **(n)**

Evidence Received by the Committee from its external witnesses

24. This section of the report sets out evidence that the Committee has received, primarily in its formal evidence sessions. The evidence has been collated under broad headings that relate to the particular impairment.

Mental Illness

25. It is estimated that 'roughly a quarter of the adult population will, at some point in their lives, experience mental distress'⁸. The Committee received evidence from representatives of Maidstone Community Care Housing's (MCCH) Club Connects and also from Maidstone MIND. Our witnesses outlined the varied nature and seriousness of mental illnesses and how people with mental illnesses are not necessarily consistently ill to the same extent. MCCH supports its clients to increase their self-esteem and confidence with the aim to get clients into employment.

26. We discovered that one of the key barriers to accessing the Council's services for people with mental illnesses was a 'fear-factor'. For people with mental illnesses there can be a huge amount of fear associated with the arrival of an official looking envelope on their doorstep. Such communications from the Council can often be hugely important, relating to such things as the receipt of benefits or Council Tax arrears. However for people with mental illnesses, particularly if receipt of such a letter occurred during a time when the illness was going through a serious phase, such letters could go unanswered for weeks resulting in serious consequences. The Committee were concerned that such situations be avoided at all costs and discussed with the witnesses potential solutions to the problem. The following suggestions were made:

- The Council could establish a database of its service users which would identify, at the point of sending such letters, that the customer had a mental illness. Having flagged-up the existence of the condition Council staff could then take alternative action if the letter is unanswered. **(e)**
- Benefits forms could include a question such as 'Do you have a disability, including mental health, physical disability...?'. It was felt that such a statement should explicitly state 'including mental health' as people with a mental illness would not often classify themselves as 'disabled'. **(f)**
- The Council could enable customers to appoint an advocate if appropriate. If this was done the advocate could be notified that, for example, a Council Tax arrears letter had been sent and ensure that a response was forthcoming. **(g)**

⁸ Mainstreaming Mental Health: An Introduction for Councillors; *Democratic Health Network*; 2005; p3.

We felt that all of these suggestions could be easily implemented by the Council and that such steps would allow the Council to better cater its services to people with mental illnesses.

27. The Committee learnt that this 'fear-factor' did not just apply to letters but to accessing the Council's buildings as well. Mental illnesses can also affect people's self esteem and as such the thought of entering a Council building could be very intimidating. The Department of Health's Equality and Human Rights Group document *Guidance on developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies* highlights that 'one of the central experiences of mental ill-health is a sense of being insignificant, powerless and out of touch'⁹. The staff at MCCH encourage their clients to be as honest as possible about their illnesses but despite this we did not feel that it should necessarily be incumbent on the person with the mental illness to inform every member of staff that they came into contact with. It was suggested that a named-staff member, perhaps who had undertaken specialist training with regard to mental illnesses, could be appointed from within the relevant departments or from amongst the front-line staff for people with mental illnesses to have as a first-point of contact. We believe that the reassurance that could be gained from knowing that there is someone who understands your situation and has the patience and time to deal with you would go a long way to overcoming this fear factor. **(o)**

28. Both Maidstone MIND and MCCH offered their services in a training capacity. We recommend that training opportunities be taken up with local organisations working in the field of mental health. **(r)**

Learning Disabilities

29. It is understood that there are over one million people country wide who have learning disabilities¹⁰. We had a further witness session from MCCH, the second time from representatives of Club Connects, a service provided by MCCH that provides adults

People with learning disabilities need information about every area of life. Being able to access information is an important part of playing a full part in society

**Learning Disabilities Research Initiative (Department of Health);
Information for All Guidance; 2004**

and young people with learning and physical disabilities and mental health problems with a range of day, vocational, social and leisure opportunities. Some of the suggestions that had arisen from the Committee's previous discussions regarding mental health were also applicable to people with learning disabilities. The Council can also be an intimidating institution to people with learning disabilities. Our witnesses emphasised that staff training was key to improving access for people with learning disabilities.

⁹ Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies; Department of Health: The Equality and Human Rights Group; 2004.

¹⁰ Ibid. p35

30. With regard to training a number of points were raised:

- The importance of politeness and patience when dealing with customers with mental health problems or learning disabilities¹¹;
- That a designated person trained to a higher level in dealing with customers with learning disabilities and mental health problems should be provided. It was felt that if a customer with a learning disability or mental health problem had a named person to ask for at Council offices the levels of fear and intimidation would be reduced;
- The importance of involving people with learning disabilities and mental health problems in staff training, including through attendance at services such as Club Connect. It was noted that Kent Police currently undertook such training.

We are eager to see these points picked up and highlight Kent Police's use of the services available at MCCH in their training as an example of local best practice. Our witnesses emphasised their willingness to be involved in such training with the Council. **(o) (q) (r)**

Staff attitudes have a profound effect on people with learning disabilities. Staff training must therefore be improved to help meet the needs. Providers of disability awareness training should seek greater input from organisations which represent people with hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities. This could include involving people with learning disabilities in the training so they can meet members of staff.

House of Commons' Transport Committee; *Disabled People's Access to Transport: A Year's worth of improvements?*; 2005

31. For people with learning disabilities physically accessing the Council's services we were also provided with some useful information. Our witnesses acknowledged the existence and importance of private interview rooms as instrumental in reducing levels of intimidation. It was also suggested that Council staff could in certain situations visit customers in their own homes or in familiar environments. Although we acknowledge this as a positive idea we are also aware that this could have potential consequences from a staffing and health and safety perspective. However we are aware, not least from the mystery shopping exercise we undertook, that this is already practised by some sections of the Council. **(h)**

32. We learnt from our witnesses that Council communications can frequently be very hard for people with learning disabilities to understand. The avoidance of jargon was flagged by many of our witnesses, not just

¹¹ This point is also emphasised by the Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies document which emphasises that people should be given time and respect, that their sentences should not be finished for them and that staff should not be patronising in language or tone.

those representing people with learning disabilities¹². We know that the Council assisted Maidstone Housing Trust to produce a leaflet for people with learning disabilities at the time of housing transfer and we were encouraged by our witnesses to undertake such work as a matter of course for the Council's more important communications. We felt that, the RNIB's recommendation that 'essential' or 'user' information be produced as a matter of course in alternative formats (see below), be expanded to include the use of suitable formats for people with learning disabilities. The Department of Health's Equality and Human Rights Group guidance document points out 'often people with learning disabilities cannot read and understand print, so there is a need for a user-friendly method of making your point'¹³. As with so many of the recommendations within this report, when you make things accessible for people with disabilities you are actually making them more easily accessible for everyone. We acknowledge the offer by the representatives of MCCCH to assist the Council in producing documents accessible to people with learning disabilities. (jj) (kk)

Making your information easier can be better for all the people you want to reach. Readers prefer plain language. Making easy information can save you time and money. Staff can spend a lot of time sorting out mistakes when information is not clear

Learning Disabilities Research Initiative (Department of Health); *Information for All Guidance*; 2004

33. We also heard that the ability to appoint advocates would also be of great assistance to people with learning disabilities. Some of the forms and documents that the Council issues, such as housing benefits forms, are subject to legal requirements for how the information is set out, and accessibility is not at the top of the list of requirements. However we felt that where local solutions to such issues could not be found the appointment of advocates would be essential. Complex information could then be copied to the advocate to flag the need for action. Again the question of establishing a database flagging the existence of a learning disability in a household was raised and endorsed by the Committee. (e) (g)

Mobility Difficulties

34. We received evidence from people with mobility impairments from many sources. The Committee conducted a witness session with a resident of the Borough who is a wheelchair user, held a meeting with a representative of the Disabled Person's Liaison Committee and received valuable information from Kent Association for Disabled People. We also

¹² Kent Association for the Disabled highlighted this as an issue in their comments on the draft heads of this report and it is also acknowledged as good practice in the Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies document.

¹³ Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies; Department of Health: *The Equality and Human Rights Group*; 2004; p35.

received a number of telephone calls and responses to our questionnaire from people with mobility difficulties. From a Kent perspective Maidstone is considered an accessible town when compared to many other towns in the area¹⁴. The disabled shopping guide and accessibility map were flagged as examples of best practice and such documents have attracted the attention of access groups elsewhere in Kent because of this. However it is notable that for residents of the Borough who have mobility difficulties it is felt that there remain a number of significant barriers.

35. Chief amongst the concerns of people with mobility difficulties was the provision of accessible parking. The Council has met the national target of providing 6% accessible public parking spaces of total spaces. However, it was felt that this statistic was something of a misnomer as we received evidence that, although the 6% figure was admirable, the more important factor was the location of such parking spaces. During this report's gestation period there was considerable press coverage surrounding this issue, particularly with regard to the removal of several accessible parking bays on Earl Street as part of the redevelopment of the area as a result of the Fremlin's Walk development.

36. One contributor to the inquiry reported that he returned to the Town Centre on four occasions to attempt to purchase his wife's Christmas present and had finally had to give up as he was unable to find an accessible parking space close enough to the Town Centre for him to be able to walk to the shops. The Blue Badge scheme was (formerly the orange badge scheme) 'devised to help with very severe walking difficulties. It enables those people to park their vehicles close enough to their destination to enable them to work, fulfil their domestic responsibilities and enjoy leisure pursuits'¹⁵. If there are insufficient accessible bays close to the Town Centre the whole purpose of the blue badge scheme is null and void. If we are to make our Town Centre as accessible as possible to all residents of the borough then the problem of the location of accessible parking bays must be tackled. The Committee were in favour of a review of accessible parking bays being conducted to allow a proper assessment of provision and use. **(y)**

37. We were disappointed to hear at the Mobility Focus Group from the Cabinet Member for Environment and Transportation that he was more likely to place further loading bays in Earl Street than return accessible parking spaces to the location. We acknowledge the difficulties faced in such locations with the need for deliveries to be made to shops. However it appears that there has been a gradual increase in the number of loading restrictions placed around the Town Centre, preventing people with blue badges from parking on yellow lines. The Earl Street spaces are in an excellent position to access the centre of the town and the Committee recommend that the removed spaces be replaced. We also recommend that the Council undertakes a review of its accessible parking provision

¹⁴ Oral feedback at Mobility Focus Group from Kent Association for Disabled People.

¹⁵ Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee; *Review of the Orange Badge Scheme*; p7

with the emphasis on the location of the spaces rather than the number. (y) (z)

38. We undertook as part of our research a largely unscientific assessment of accessible parking provision in the Town Centre. On a Friday lunchtime we drove to every car park highlighted on the Town Centre accessibility map and noted the number of accessible spaces and their occupancy rate. As can be seen from fig.1 just under half of the accessible spaces were available. However, when one considers the locations of these spaces it becomes clear that those closest to the Town Centre were nearly all occupied. (y)

Fig. 1

| Location | Spaces | Availability |
|-----------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| County Hall | 4 | 4 |
| Lucerne Street | 1 | 1 |
| Maidstone East Station | 4 | 4 |
| Station Road | 5 | 1 |
| Brewer Street (Lower) | 2 | 0 |
| Brewer Street (Upper) | 4 | 0 |
| Wheeler Street | 5 | 0 |
| Union Street (Upper) | 3 | 2 |
| Union Street (Lower) | 2 | 2 |
| St Faith's Street | 3 | 2 |
| Hazlitt Theatre | 3 | 0 |
| Wyke Manor Road | 14 | 0 |
| King Street Multi-storey | 16 | 1 |
| King Street | 3 | 0 |
| Brooks Place | 1 | 0 |
| Medway Street | 2 | 2 |
| High St (Royal Star Arcade) | 6 | 2 |
| High St (TIC) | 3 | 0 |
| Sainsbury's | 12 | 2 |
| Mill St | 2 | 1 |
| Palace Av | 2 | 0 |
| Mill Street | 7 | 3 |
| Mill Street (Archbishop's) | 3 | 2 |
| College Road | 4 | 2 |
| Mote Road | 6 | 3 |
| Barker Road | 4 | 4 |
| Lockmeadow | 18 | 17 |
| Mote Park Leisure Centre | 20 | 16 |
| Total | 159 | 71 |

39. The Committee was pleased to see that there have been recent positive steps with regard to accessible parking provision. At the February meeting of the Mobility Focus Group it was announced that the accessible parking spaces in the Town Centre were to become 24 hour. This has

been the subject of significant lobbying from the likes of the Mobility Focus Group and residents of the borough with mobility difficulties and we were surprised to learn at the beginning of our inquiry that accessible bays were not 24 hour. However, this is positive news and the Committee welcome the Cabinet Member's decision.

40. We heard both from individual residents and from those responsible for the care of clients with mobility impairments (see below) that height restriction bars on car-parks can also be a serious barrier to access to the Town Centre. Vehicles that have been adapted to accommodate wheelchairs are often significantly taller than the standard 6'6" restriction placed on many of the Town Centre Car Parks, thus restricting those using such vehicles to 'on-street' accessible bays. We acknowledge the reasons for the existence of such barriers but believe that their existence, coupled with the fact that we have learnt that the on-street accessible spaces in the Town Centre are often the first to fill up, should motivate the Council to increase its efforts to provide sufficient accessible bays on-street and in the right locations. **(y)**

41. The inaccessibility of local public transport was also highlighted, particularly with regard to bus services serving rural parts of the Borough and the accessibility of train stations. There has already been significant work undertaken to raise kerbs at bus stops in the Town Centre but the Park and Ride service remains the only fully accessible mode of public transport in the borough. It was also noted that certain train stations, for example Lenham, were not accessible to the disabled. Members also considered the definitions of accessibility used by public transport providers. Maidstone East station was considered 'accessible' but passengers wishing to change from platforms 2 and 3 to platform 1 are required to leave the station completely to make the change. Members did not consider such a requirement to qualify the station as being 'accessible' to people with disabilities. It was noted that, particularly with the appointment of a new franchisee (GoVia) for the provision of rail services in the area and the redevelopment of Maidstone East Station an opportunity existed to lobby to make accessibility a top priority. The Committee felt that the Council could be proud of the Park & Ride bus service but felt that it highlighted the absence of such provision elsewhere in the borough. Opportunities for lobbying for improvements existed through the Council's position on the Quality Bus Partnership, the Community Rail Partnership and through direct lobbying of the rail companies and Members felt that such opportunities should be maximised. **(aa) (bb) (cc) (dd) (ee)**

42. We also heard evidence with regard to buildings and accessibility. The role that supplementary planning guidance could play is key to making new developments in the borough properly accessible. We were pleased therefore to hear of the development of a supplementary planning document as part of the local development framework process¹⁶. However it was felt by a number of our witnesses that, no matter whether or not such a document existed, what was planned and what was built

¹⁶ See paragraph 24 above.

often did not necessarily match. A suggested solution to this problem would be the appointment of an Access Officer. We learnt that the Council previously had a part-time Access Officer but that this post was subsumed into the Social Inclusion Manager's post following a reorganisation of the Council's internal structure. However we received strong representations with regard to the appointment of a full-time Access Officer. Such a post-holder could take the lead on professionally assessing plans for future developments from an access perspective but also enforce planning obligations and conduct audits of access issues across the Council, like that suggested for accessible parking above. It was also suggested that such an officer could assist in the coordination of the provision of disability equality training. We acknowledge that some of the tasks undertaken by the Social Inclusion Officer include those of an Access Officer. However, if we as a Council are to take seriously the access needs of our residents then we recommend that the Council consider the appointment of a professional Access Officer, qualified to assess planning applications and audit the accessibility of our services. **(i)**

It is easier and cheaper for everyone if accessibility is built in to services from their design and inception, rather than being added in expensively later. If this is to happen, management needs to be aware of accessibility issues, and those responsible for designing buildings, vehicles and infrastructure should be trained to ensure that their designs do not inadvertently exclude disabled people.

House of Commons' Transport Committee on Disabled People's Access to Transport; 6th Report; Nov 2003-March 2004; 31.

43. A significant amount of comments and complaints were made concerning accessible toilets in the Town Centre. Such provision is largely inconsistent and can frequently consist solely of widened doors and often inconveniently placed handles. If we are to encourage people with mobility impairments to come to the Town Centre then providing accessible toilets is essential. We suggest that the Council undertake a full audit of its accessible toilet provision with a view to improvement work being undertaken in consultation with people with disabilities. **(gg)**

44. The Committee received evidence from witnesses with mobility impairments that suggested the Council should introduce disability equality training alongside the current *awareness'* training. Awareness training tends to focus on practical knowledge to incorporate into service provision and can improve the confidence of staff when providing services to disabled people. Disability equality training tends to explore the social model of disability in more depth and can positively demonstrate what an organisation needs to do to change attitudes to disabled people and remove barriers to access for them¹⁷. Such training it was suggested should be provided by qualified disability equality trainers. We heard evidence that our staff were not sufficiently trained on disability equality issues even when they could be considered aware. **(q)**

¹⁷ Resource Disability Portfolio Guide 3: *Training for Equality*; 2003; pp9-10.

Visual Impairment

45. We received a substantial amount of assistance from Kent Association for the Blind (KAB) in the course of our inquiry both in the form of a witness session , through representations made at the Mobility Focus Group, in providing mystery shoppers and in a meeting with our councillors to assess the accessibility of council publications.

46. The Committee heard that the key barriers to access for visually impaired people were physical access and access to information. KAB operate a talking newspaper with a circulation of 6,000 throughout Kent and, despite a popular misconception, only 4% of visually impaired people use Braille. The Department of Health Equality and Human rights Group document highlights that there are 'at least 1.7 million people in the country unable to read standard print, many visually impaired people will not be able to understand information unless it is made available in other formats'¹⁸.

Best Practice

The Local Government Management Board's *Clear Access: Visually impaired people's access to Local Government* guide raises some useful recommendations as well as providing general guidance about access for visually impaired people. Amongst its key recommendations are that:

- Visually impaired service users should be consulted on all aspects of service provision to the public, through a locally-established mechanism
- Councils should adopt a strategic training programme designed to increase the level of visual awareness of all front line staff
- All council publications should follow print guidelines designed to enhance the accessibility of text to people with moderate visual impairments and others with reading difficulties
- Council information should be available to Talking Newspapers and other groups which serve visually impaired people
- Individual communications with service users, tenants and voters should be in the recipient's chosen format and appropriate records should be kept
- Council buildings should be subject to an access audit with the needs of visually impaired people in mind

Local Government Management Board *Clear Access: Visually impaired people's access to Local Government; 1996*

¹⁸ Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies; Department of Health: *The Equality and Human Rights Group*; 2004; p28

47. With regard to access to information we held a meeting with representatives of KAB to assess the accessibility of recent Council publications. The Council has a set of guidelines for good practice in written documentation for visually impaired people developed in association with KAB (who also produce their own accessible information guidelines). However this appears to be a little known document around the Council. The majority of departments in the Council are responsible at some point or the other for sending out documentation to the public and we are therefore concerned that this document appears to be little used. We recommend that its existence is highlighted to all managers and cascaded through their teams. **(II)**

48. Through our assessment of Council documents we learnt a number of things. Firstly a distinction needs to be drawn between 'essential or citizen' information and other communications by the Council. Some of the most inaccessible documents were those that were advertising the Council's campaigns against dropping fast-food litter or cigarette butts. Taking these two examples there was printing at angles over images without clear colour contrast between the text and the pictures. The rear of these leaflets frequently contained large amounts of print, often in small type-faces and with poor contrast between the type and the background. There were similar problems with graffiti campaign flyers and with the Hazlitt Theatres brochure. There were no details of how to access the information in alternative formats on any of the above examples. Although the Hazlitt Theatre brochure did provide the Council's website on its rear cover this was in very small print. However, these documents can not, except perhaps the Hazlitt guide, be considered to be either 'essential or citizen' and we acknowledge the need to make such communications eye-catching for them to have their desired impact. Despite this we do feel that the Council would benefit from making explicit accessibility requirements to both printers and designers when creating such communications. It was a general comment that nearly every communication contained far more words than was necessary. A reduction in the amount of wording on publications would assist both the visually impaired and people with learning disabilities. **(jj) (mm)**

Best Practice

Delivering all your communications in plain language is the single most important step you can take towards making your information accessible to the widest possible audience.

Wendy Gregory; *The Informability Manual: Making Information more accessible in the light of the Disability Discrimination Act; 1996; HMSO; p48*

49. We also considered some 'essential or citizen' information as part of our meeting. The comments made on these documents are more significant:

| Document | Comments |
|---|--|
| Council Satisfaction Survey | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Font size too small but sufficient space to increase font size if tick-boxes made smaller • Tick box edges weak • Generally quite a good document and would be excellent if improvements made |
| A-Z Guide to our services 2006/07 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor contrast (including information on availability of alternative formats which was not in a particularly large font) • website information provided as blue type on blue background |
| How to petition your local council | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overprinting • Is space for larger print but this is not used. • No details of the availability of alternative formats |
| Recycle for Maidstone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The contrast in the document was described as 'appalling' despite the high quality of the information • Table of recycling locations too small • No details of alternative formats although the web address was clearly printed. |
| Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit Appeals | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contrast good, although black type would have been better. • No alternative format information. • Font size too small • Application to appeal form too small (especially the disclaimer) |
| Maidstone 20/20 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glossy documents much harder to read with magnifiers. • No information about alternative formats • It was suggested that an increase in the font size by 1pt. would have achieved a great improvement. • Contrast very poor in places |
| Strategic Plan 2005-08 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor contrast • Glossy • Print too small • No information about alternative formats • Address and website information on rear cover very small. |
| Council Notices of Meetings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print too small • It was suggested that Notices be printed in a much bolder print and a larger font, especially as these are placed on notice boards. (oo) |

50. We were obviously disappointed that so many of the Council's important documents were not easily accessible to visually impaired people. It appeared that consideration of these documents' accessibility to visually impaired people had not been made. Greater consideration must be given to the needs of visually impaired people in the production of citizen or essential information and such information should be

produced in an accessible manner from the outset. We do not believe visually impaired people should be put out of their way to access this information. We were also disappointed at the inconsistent inclusion of information about the availability of alternative formats. All such information should provide a clear indication of how it can be accessed in alternative formats and this information should be provided in a consistent position on all documents so that a visually impaired person knows where to look. Having the Head of Communications sign-off all such publications for accessibility was suggested as one solution to this problem. **(ii) (kk) (nn)**

51. KAB were eager to help the Council both in improving the accessibility of its written communications but also in communicating the services and events available from the Council. We would like to see a closer working relationship with KAB and greater utilisation of the services, such as the talking newspaper, that are available through them. It was felt that the Council should provide a 'how we meet the needs of our disabled customers' document to improve the communication of the efforts the Council will undertake to accommodate people with special requirements. **(pp) (rr)**

52. We were pleased to hear that the Council's website was 'Browse-Aloud' (a speech enabling software) enabled. However concerns remain about the volume of documents produced in .pdf format on the Council's website and the accessibility of such documents. We understand that Acrobat 7 has enhanced accessibility options and we would like to see this programme rolled out across the Council and users trained in its accessibility applications. However, there remain concerns about the level of skill necessary to make an accessible .pdf document¹⁹. It is also recommended that the Council undertake an audit of its website from a visually impaired perspective and that RNIB 'See it Right' accreditation be sought. **(ss) (tt) (uu)**

Even if Acrobat 7 is available in an organisation, there is no guarantee that authors will take advantage of its accessibility features. When the RNIB wanted to publish its recent annual report as a PDF for the first time, the organisation's experts found it hard-going, although they managed it in the end.

The Guardian; *Make e-documents accessible to everyone*, says RNIB; 23/11/05

53. We also learnt about the hazards to visually impaired people of physical access such as streets with no hazards, crossings with the right types of pavings and buildings that are marked and lit clearly. Street furniture such as A-boards or pavement cafes create potential hazards for visually impaired people. Members were informed that A-boards and street-café furniture were frequently discussed at Town Centre Management meetings. Although the responsibility of either Kent County

¹⁹ The Guardian; *Make e-documents accessible to everyone*, says RNIB; 23/11/05

Council (Highways) or the businesses themselves Members learnt that a code-of-practice for street-café furniture had been established following the development of Fremlin's Walk. We welcome the attempts made by the Council to introduce a café culture to Maidstone but would request that existent street cafes conform to the code of conduct and new street-café licensees be provided with a copy of the code. **(j) (k)**.

54. We learnt that KAB offer a rolling programme of training with the Council but there was a feeling that such programmes were not as well attended now as they used to be. KAB were also keen to see Councillors undertake training. **(s)**

Deaf and Hard of Hearing

55. We attended a social meeting organised by the Deaf Services Bureau (DSB) in January 2006 to gather information about how deaf and hard of hearing people access the Council's services and some of the barriers they may face. There are approximately 9 million deaf or hard of hearing people in this country²⁰. As is highlighted in one guidance document: 'Services must be able to cater for deaf people in relation to everyday meetings and enquiries...some people with hearing impairments from a young age may experience difficulty in accessing and understanding the written or printed word'²¹.

56. We learnt from our meeting about Council's that could be considered to be leading on the provision of services for deaf people. Devon County Council's website sets out a great deal of information about providing services to deaf people. It includes a guidance page for employees and members that sets out what can be done to make it easier for deaf people to access the Council's services. This information includes a link to an RNID/BDA quick reference guide on the DDA responsibilities of service providers to provide interpreters and how to do so. The site also includes a list of approved local interpreters, their qualifications and contact details and links to other websites. We believe that the Council could make greater use of its website along similar lines to the example of Devon providing information for both the deaf community and for staff. **(vv)**

57. We were also pleased to receive information about the use of video interpreting currently used by Westminster Council²². Although not considered a replacement for face-to-face interpreting the service has proved particularly useful for quick chats with customer service staff. Considering the length of time it can often take to book an interpreter (they sometimes need to be booked up to a month in advance) we would encourage the Council to look carefully at securing funding for such equipment, perhaps as part of the move to the new offices. The existence of such a service would encourage members of the deaf community to use

²⁰ Guidance on Developing Local Communication Support Services and Strategies; *Department of Health: The Equality and Human Rights Group*; 2004; p31

²¹ Ibid.

²² *One in Seven* June/July

the Council more. We were unsure just how widespread knowledge is amongst front-line staff about how to obtain an interpreter. (vv)

Best Practice

The Employers Organisation and Dialog (Diversity in Action in Local Government) have produced a good practice guide *Sound Practice: Deaf People's Access to Local Government*. Amongst the recommendations in the document, many of which Maidstone Borough Council already adheres to, are the following:

- A register of permanent and portable loop systems and infra red systems accessible to hearing aid users in the locality should be held by the council
- Permanent systems should be switched on whenever the room or facility is in use rather than waiting for a hearing impaired person to request them
- Minicom users should be consulted in order to find the optimum site(s) for placing council minicomms
- All staff should know how to send and receive calls by both minicom and Typetalk
- Staff should be encouraged to develop an interest in the study of BSL as a continuation of their Deaf Awareness Training – but not instead of it
- A system for booking a Sign Language Interpreter (SLI) for council functions, given appropriate notice, should be widely advertised within front-line services. SLIs should be provided for important public meetings and advertised as such. All SLI services should be advertised directly to the Deaf community
- The Council should keep a central register of SLIs available in the locality and their availability, especially if they have got local government experience
- A strategic system of deaf awareness training should be employed amongst Members and front-line officers
- Training should be ongoing to account for staff turnover
- All council members and officers should be made aware of the appropriate behaviour to adopt when meeting a deaf person

Employers Organisation/Dialog (Diversity in Action in Local Government); *Sound Practice: Deaf People's Access to Local Government*; 2001

58. We heard the view expressed that staff at the Council were not sufficiently trained to deal with the needs of deaf people. It was felt that there was a greater need for both disability awareness and deaf awareness training and that deaf people should be involved in any training of staff. A representative of the Deaf Services Bureau suggested that most Council and public service staff have a very limited knowledge of deaf awareness²³. We noted that one attendee at the club had previously experienced difficulties with accessing services at West Kent NHS and

²³ Written contribution of Deaf Services Bureau; 17 February 2006.

Social Care Trust. She was now working with the Trust to improve the way it provides its services to deaf people. **(r)**

59. We also heard suggestions that the Council should make better use of advertising boards to advertise the services provided by the Council. Many of those present did not seem clear about the different functions of Maidstone Borough Council and Kent County Council. It was also noted that the Deaf Services Bureau provided an advocacy service on behalf of its service users if they wished to contact the Council or other organisations. **(g) (pp)**

60. The Committee learnt from the interpreter that there are numerous different specialisms amongst BSL interpreters. Our interpreter at the social club meeting was a Maidstone resident and also a specialist in dramatic interpretation. We were disappointed to hear that she had contacted the Hazlitt Theatre to enquire about making her services available for certain performances but had not received any feedback. We think that the presence of a British Sign Language interpreter at Hazlitt performances, accompanied by the requisite publicity, would be a valuable addition to the theatre opening performances to the deaf community. **(l) (ww)**

Multiple Disabilities

61. We conducted a witness session with a representative of West Kent NHS and Social Care Trust who worked with people with profound learning disabilities, many of whom were also wheelchair users. We gained from this witness a particular insight into the needs both of people with multiple or profound disabilities and the views of their carers. It takes an extraordinary level of planning to undertake any activity with such a client group. The witness pointed out that she considered Maidstone to be poor in terms of its access. However this was a pattern that was repeated across the County. Particular barriers that were noted were the use of height restriction bars preventing mini-bus access and poor toilet facilities. With regard to accessible parking frequently the driver of the group's mini-bus would also have responsibilities for the care of a client. Due to a lack of parking on the street and the inability to enter normal car parks due to height restrictions the driver would need to drop the group off, find a parking space and then return to the group which in the driver's absence had been a carer down. We would like to see the Council undertake whatever work possible to improve the ability of such groups to get in and out of the Town easily. **(x)**

62. We also learnt that, for the profoundly disabled, there were no toilets that were considered fully/suitably accessible in Maidstone. People with multiple disabilities need more than a widened door and some handles to make a toilet accessible. Benches substantial enough to take the weight of an adult were necessary and sufficient room to fit two adults plus one. The witness indicated that, rather than bringing such problems to the attention of the Council, her team's approach would be to go somewhere else where they knew facilities were available. We believe that the

Council should provide at least one fully accessible toilet in the Town centre and recommend that the construction of such a facility be undertaken taking account of the needs of people with multiple disabilities. **(gg) (hh)**

63. We learnt that the witness was also unaware of the existence of a Social Inclusion Manager at Maidstone Borough Council. There is scope for much greater partnership working between the Council and the Trust. There is a multi-agency District Partnership Board that meets every two months that represents learning disabilities in Maidstone. We heard that this was a Board that had been attended in the past by the Social Inclusion Manager and the Committee are eager to see him begin to attend the Board regularly as a first step towards greater partnership working. This is considered particularly important because partnership boards look at where people are being denied local services and include representation by people with learning disabilities and family members of people with a learning disability²⁴. **(m)**

²⁴ British Institute of Learning Disabilities; *Factsheet no. 2: Partnership Boards*.

Other Evidence Collected by the Committee

Visit To Maidstone Museum

64. On 21 March 2005 Cllrs English, Hinder, Horne, Joy, Naghi and K Stevens visited the museum to discuss access with the Museums Manager. The Museum Manager took the party round some of the galleries to demonstrate some of the work that is being done, followed by a visit to three of the museum's stores to highlight what needs to be done with the museum's collections and what is being proposed.

Physical access

65. Given the nature of the building there are many parts where the building restricts the options available. One example is the current tea room and gift shop, which lacks plumbing therefore restricting the cafeteria options. Mr Lace informed Members that the estimated cost of work undertaken to ensure DDA compliance was approximately £104,000.

Works being undertaken on physical access:

- A ramp is planned for the current entrance.
- A platform lift is to be installed to make the ground floor completely accessible.
- With changes to the way the museum collection is stored, and better use of the current loading bay, it is anticipated that the lift will be available for public use.
- Chairs are located at various points throughout the museum.

Storage of the collection

66. The Museum Manager outlined proposals to change the way the Museum stores its collection which should improve access to all of the museum's artefacts and not just those on display. Mr Lace showed Members some of the problems of their current storage, namely poor use of space in some stores, and the knock on effects of this, for example the use of potential public gallery space for storage rather than exhibitions. Mr Lace outlined plans to introduce wheelie racking in one of the main stores to increase the space being used for storage and to allow the public access to the stores if they are interested in certain artefacts at an estimated cost of around £500,000. These changes would be coupled with cataloguing of the items and photography, culminating in an on-line catalogue which the public could access on the museum's website therefore making the museum's collection accessible to anybody. It would also result in members of the public being able to request viewings of museum artefacts which currently is not possible. It is estimated that that the main elements of the cataloguing could be done within two years and cataloguing the entire collection would take somewhere in the region of 10 years.

67. Members were also shown Chillington house and the storage conditions there, which were pretty bad. Currently no access to these stores would be possible and it is only through changes to the main stores in the museum that these problems could be tackled.

Galleries

68. . Paintings are also to be photographed, catalogued and put on the internet. One suggestion for further improvements was the introduction of a facility for members of the public to order prints of items held by the museum, similar to schemes being run by other museums. Such a scheme could also be used to raise income for the museum.

Conclusion

69. Different types of access are clearly being considered by the museum at the moment: physical access; access to the collection currently in the stores; and ways to improve engagement with the exhibitions. Members

The Museum, Libraries and Archives Council produces a self-assessment toolkit to encourage positive developments in relation to access for disabled people. The checklist allows users to conduct an audit, identify evidence and areas of development, develop and implement plans for areas of improvement and then monitor and evaluate progress against improvement plans.

were impressed by the improvements that have been made and were pleased to learn that the museum is developing a more outward focus in terms of allowing volunteers access to artefacts, benefiting both volunteers and the museum. Placing the collection online was seen as particularly beneficial and the opportunity to use technology to improve access for those with disabilities, such as sight or hearing impairments, was recognised. We would recommend that the Museum utilise the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council's *Access for All Self-Assessment Toolkit* to assist it in considering accessibility issues for people with disabilities. **(aaa)**

Questionnaire

70. At the beginning of the inquiry we drafted a questionnaire as a method of gathering additional information from disabled people about their experiences of accessing the Council's services. The questionnaire sought views on the services provided by the Council and also suggestions as to how the Council could improve its services. The questionnaire was distributed upon request following local publicity, via the Town's Shopmobility scheme and through local organisations for disabled people. We received 17 responses to the questionnaire and, although we can make no claims about the sample being representative the responses are nonetheless of interest. We would like to view the questionnaire as a first attempt to assess how people with disabilities feel about the accessibility of Council services and would like to see such a questionnaire improved and distributed regularly with the full backing of the Council as a means of

assessing the effectiveness of improvements to access for disabled people.

71. More effective and useful for the Committee's purposes than the statistical output of the questionnaire were the views expressed under the comments and suggestions sections of the questionnaire.

72. On barriers encountered to accessing the Council's services:

- *On the whole access standard are quite high, however improvements could still be made for wheelchair access to the Council's services for disabled people swimming pool*
- *More accessible parking bays please (y)*
- *No problems at all – I wish other organisations were as efficient!*
- *Re Council Tax – Simple and straightforward information should be given by staff*
- *Empathy for other people and families who are less fortunate than staff needs to be injected. If they knew what we had to go through every day it would make them more considerate.*
- *Millennium Park access pathways are gravelled which makes it hard to push a wheelchair*
- *Toilets in Mote Park often locked*
- *Accessible parking bays only designed for cars and not minibuses (x)*
- *Disabled toilets have keys [RADAR], I wasn't made aware of how to get one. No facilities in toilets for disabled children, all aimed at adults. Space is very important for disabled toilets. (hh)*
- *Access at the Hazlitt Theatre for wheelchair users is minimal.*
- *Accessible parking in Maidstone is worse than ever (y)*
- *Poor communication of services (such as grants to fit ramps to a home) available to people with disabilities*
- *Dropped kerb provision is inconsistent*
- *More accessible parking bays are needed particularly at the top end of Week Street and at the Hazlitt Theatre (y)*
- *Gentlemen's toilet in Brenchley Gardens is too small for a mobility scooter*
- *It is difficult to access London House because there is no access to it with dropped kerbs. (ff)*
- *Tonbridge Road out-of-hours letter box is up a step.*

73. On ways the Council could improve access to its services for disabled people:

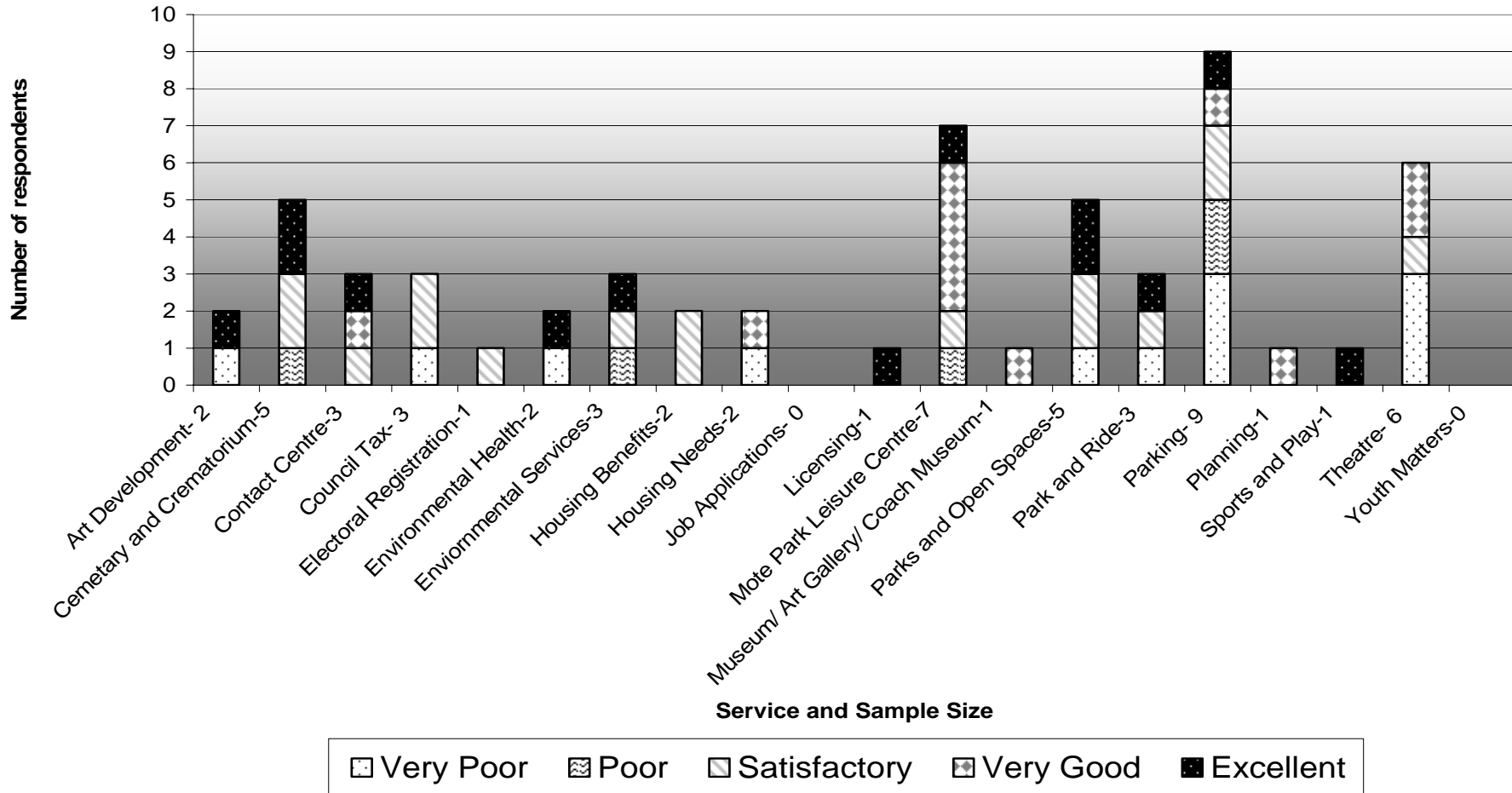
- *Make more ramps available*
- *Knock down the toilets and start again!*
- *Put dropped kerbs on all the kerbs in Rocky Hill*
- *Place handrails on slopes*
- *Put footpaths in order all over town*

- *Making our lives a bit more easy and a little bit more caring and understanding of our feelings. I am 91, I cannot ask for a lot but every little helps*
- *Listen to people with disabilities – involve them in planning from the beginning*
- *Visit people in mental health day centres to meet the people concerned and get to know them, staff and public attitudes can make people with mental illnesses' ability to access more of a trial*
- *More accessible parking spaces and enforcing the blue badge system better (x)*
- *Better access and staff awareness at the Leisure Centre and changing benches at the swimming pool.*
- *Publicising the availability of accessible parking bays better*
- *Tarmac all surfaces in parks*
- *Ensure staff attend the training courses the Council organises for them*
- *Talk to the disabled person as if they were not disabled and not over them to the person accompanying them*
- *Always involve disabled people at the consultation stage*
- *Listen to disabled people, they are the ones that know best.*
- *Raise staff awareness through training*

74. On any further points to add to the inquiry:

- *I am pleased you are consulting with disabled people*
- *Your disabled map is very good and being able to drive onto Week Street and Gabriels Hill is a godsend!*
- *Difficulty navigating over-stocked shops*
- *Training is important but treating people with disabilities as a person and giving them the same courtesy and respect as you would give anyone else*
- *I need somewhere to park my electric Chair*
- *Some towns have town-wide discount cards for disabled people, it is frustrating that I have to apply for a new discount card everywhere I go. (v)*
- *The King St entrance to the Chequers Centre is very difficult to access*
- *The main problem we encounter is badly parked cars...correct parking needs to be enforced*
- *Could shops in the town be given awards for accessibility? (w)*
- *Council Officers do not show an interest not understanding, they are rude and quite offensive and are very upsetting to people with mental illness.*

1b) Which of the Council's services have you accessed over the last year, and how would you rate the accessibility of service?



75. We were pleased with the number of responses received to the questionnaire and particularly with the suggestions made by respondents. The majority of the responses related either to staff training, communication or parking issues, topics which had already been picked up on by the Committee through its witness sessions. 52% of respondents to the questionnaire considered the Council's staff's disability awareness to be 'very good' or 'excellent', with only 24% saying it was 'poor' or 'very poor'. This evidence contrasts somewhat to that found during the mystery shopping exercise and during evidence sessions.

Mystery Shopping

76. The Committee also arranged a mystery shopping exercise as an additional means of gathering evidence. We decided to 'shop' those services that had proved to be most used by people with disabilities in the questionnaire. These were:

- Council Tax
- Housing Need
- Housing Benefits
- Mote Park Leisure Centre
- Hazlitt Theatre

The aim of the exercise was to find out how well prepared these services were and how well trained the Council's staff were to meet the needs of people with disabilities. All of our shoppers were either people with disabilities or those who work with people with disabilities and all were instructed to be up front about their impairment during the exercise.

Mote Park Leisure Centre

77. The Leisure Centre was 'shopped' by three shoppers, one with a visual impairment, another who was responsible for the care of a group with multiple disabilities and another who was the mother of a child who used a wheelchair/buggy. The results of the shop were relatively mixed. Two of our shoppers felt that the staff had been helpful but our visually impaired shopper experienced some difficulties and felt that the member of staff did not have the necessary understanding of the difficulties faced by a visually impaired person. The difficulties experienced by another of our shoppers (automatic doors not in use to prevent staff getting cold and access to the lifts) also indicate that the levels of disability awareness amongst staff are not as high as should be expected.

With regard to access to the services or information about them there were also mixed results. Our visually impaired shopper was provided with information leaflets in a standard format and came away from the tour feeling that the Centre was not somewhere she would feel confident returning too on her own. The approach to the centre for people with mobility difficulties was flat and navigation around the centre itself

considered quite easy (although there was a problem with dealing with fire-doors whilst using a wheelchair). The existence of a hoist at the swimming pool was welcomed. However, comments were made about the disabled changing facilities which it was felt would benefit from a bench suitable for larger people with disabilities. One shopper also commented that access from the changing rooms to the poolside was difficult with a wheelchair/buggy and necessitated returning to the reception.

78. From the three shops conducted at the Leisure Centre we can conclude that there is room for improvement both with regard to providing disability awareness and equality training to staff and the accessibility of the service. Improvements to lighting, the use of floor markings and installing a fully sized bench in the disabled changing rooms were all suggested as improvements by our shoppers. Overall the staff were considered to be helpful and there seemed to be no problems at all with the provision of accessible parking bays.

Council Tax

79. A visually impaired shopper conducted a telephone shop of the Council Tax service requesting a Council Tax relief form. The staff member immediately offered a large print form and also informed the shopper that a member of staff could be made available to assist in completing the form. The form was then hand-delivered and assistance offered again. The Committee felt that this was an example of excellent customer service and should serve as a beacon to other sections in the Council.

Hazlitt Theatre

80. The Hazlitt poses a number of problems as a venue for people with disabilities. From a mobility perspective there are only 3 accessible parking spaces and at the time of writing these bays were not 24 hour. The lift to the theatre itself is round the corner from the main entrance in a poorly lit alleyway. Upon exiting the lift our shopper was led through a passage (which appeared also to be used for storage) to the auditorium. In the theatre itself a wheelchair user would be sat in the corridor next to the standard seats and there is space for only 4 wheelchair users per performance. From a visually impaired perspective there were slightly fewer difficulties and our shopper was able to easily get information about potential problems with accessing the service and the availability of staff to assist. **(xx)**

81. All of our shoppers were impressed with the helpfulness and awareness of the Hazlitt staff. The majority of the problems experienced relate to the building itself but it was felt by our shoppers that improvements could still be made. The path from the main entrance to the lift was in need of lighting and was also considered to be uneven. Similarly the Committee felt that it was important that the passageway from the lift to the theatre was kept clear so as not to create the impression that the customer was being brought through a storage area. Members also felt that a wheelchair user should not be required to pay full-price for a ticket when through their attendance they are creating extra capacity for the venue. That the accessible parking bays outside the theatre will shortly become 24 hour was welcomed by the Committee. **(yy)**

Housing Need

82. The Housing Need service was mystery shopped by a visually impaired customer who requested an application form to go on the housing register. Our shopper felt that the staff member was helpful but did not fully appreciate the need for the shopper to preserve his independence and complete the forms himself. However the staff member did indicate that the shopper was welcome to visit the Council's offices to receive assistance in filling out the form. Part of the reason for such an offer being made is that there is no larger or alternative formats of the application form or guidance notes. The shopper received a bundle of documents from the Housing Services section including guidance leaflets which were 'printed in the worst possible combination of colours for a visually impaired person' and in a standard format. Our shopper felt that improvements could be made through making the forms available in alternative formats (tape and larger print) and also with regard to staff training to ensure that staff did not assume that the only option for completing the form was by visiting the Council.

Housing Benefits

83. The Housing Benefits section was shopped by a completely blind mystery shopper by telephone requesting information on the benefits application process. The application form requested was not available in alternative formats either larger print or Braille/tape. The shopper received a printed version of the housing benefits application form a couple of days after conducting the shop. No assistance was offered to the shopper by the staff member. This shop was probably the worst of all those conducted as part of the exercise with no access to the service and no assistance from staff.

Conclusions

84. The results of the exercise highlighted some examples of disability awareness that the Council can be rightly proud of. Particularly of note were the professionalism of the staff at the Hazlitt Theatre and in the Council Tax section. However there were also examples of poor awareness, a completely blind shopper was sent a printed Housing Benefits form after informing the staff member that he was blind and staff members at the leisure centre displayed little disability awareness with both our visually impaired shopper and our shopper who cared for daughter in a wheelchair.. For people with disabilities, being received by a member of staff who understands your needs is a hit-and-miss affair. We are of the view that the only way to correct this situation is by ensuring that all customer-facing staff, whether by telephone or face-to-face are trained to a minimum level in disability awareness and equality issues. Such training should not be a one-off affair and regular reminder training should also take place. It is the responsibility of managers to ensure that their staff undertake such training. **(p)**

85. With regard to the accessibility of the service itself there was also a mixed set of results. The availability of Housing Benefits and Housing Needs forms only in print format is regrettable and our shopper found the leisure centre to be very difficult to access physically with her disabled daughter, both entering the facility and once inside. The Leisure Centre also appeared to struggle for visually impaired people due to the poor lighting and random floor tiles. Access to the theatre is only available via poorly lit side entrance and then in a lift and through a corridor also used for storing boxes. Once inside the theatre a person in a wheelchair will be sat in the aisle and no more than four people in wheelchairs can be accommodated per performance. Many theatres have seats that can be removed to accommodate wheelchairs. It is also regrettable that, despite essentially creating extra capacity in the theatre people in wheelchairs and those accompanying them are expected to pay full ticket price for non-Hazlitt performances (the accompanying person goes half-price for Hazlitt performances). We would recommend that these situations be amended. **(xx) (yy) (zz)**

86. Aside from the recommendations with regard to training, the incorporation of disabled access into the Council's corporate mystery

shopping exercise and those arising from the shops themselves the Committee also wished to have the results of its exercise reported to the heads of the sections shopped.

Results of the Committee's Mystery Shopping Exercise

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|---|---|---|--|
| MOTE PARK LEISURE CENTRE (MULTIPLE) | | | |
| <p>Accessing Leisure Centre with group of people with multiple disabilities</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + lots of disabled parking bays near building + pavements are flat for wheelchair access on approach to the centre + easy access to all areas of interior + hoists available with a slope to access the pool + Gentleman's changing area spacious - Main road needs to be crossed on approach to the centre - Main path to front door steep | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Reception staff very helpful and aware of facilities offered to disabled people + Mystery Shopper informed that the centre provides for lots of groups of disabled people on a weekly basis + Staff offered to contact the Duty Manager if necessary + Staff 'very positive' about access for disabled people to the leisure centre. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrance should be signposted |
| MOTE PARK LEISURE CENTRE (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) | | | |
| <p>To find out if there were any special arrangements in place for a visually impaired person with a view to swimming and using the facilities/health suite</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Booklets and leaflets offered immediately + Short wait for tour - Leisure guide leaflet and price list in standard print - A friend had to stay with the mystery shopper due to various obstacles | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gentleman giving the tour failed to introduce himself and was 'obviously in a hurry' - Information extended by the gentleman giving the tour was general and aimed at the able bodied. - The member of staff giving | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved lighting in the stairways and fitness suite • visitors given more time by Members of staff • Floor markings could be different colours leading to activities • train up staff, particularly on the needs of disabled |

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|---|--|---|--|
| | <p>encountered during the tour, such as bad lighting and slippery surfaces</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mystery shopper would not feel 'at all confident attending the leisure centre alone'. | <p>the tour appeared 'oblivious to the problems faced by a visually impaired person'.</p> | <p>people</p> |
| MOTE PARK LEISURE CENTRE (MOBILITY) | | | |
| <p>Request to see facilities for the disabled</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Disabled toilets are available on every level and clearly marked. + Lifts available on all floors - Disabled toilets small - Access to lifts difficult; entry through a fire door is necessary to get to them - Automatic doors not in use (due to staff getting cold) so access via two very heavy doors marked 'theatre' (assistance not offered) - Swimming facilities currently being refurbished and larger female changing facilities not available. - Disabled cubicle has no | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Duty manager and staff helpful and pleasant | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrance to pool near the automatic shower would make access to the pool easier; visitors would require no assistance from staff. • A bench or a chair should be available in changing cubicles. • The automatic doors should be in use all the time |

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|--|--|---|--|
| | bench - Existing benches too small for larger disabled people - Access to poolside with buggy extremely difficult; the visitor, once changed, would have to return to reception to find a member of staff to open the gate to the poolside. - Only other entrance to pool is through an automatic shower. | | |
| COUNCIL TAX (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) | | | |
| Request an application form for Council Tax relief as a partially sighted person | + Young lady immediately offered to send out a large print form + Mystery shopper told that a member of staff would be able to help her fill out the form if she was unable to do so herself and to contact the office if this was the case | + The member of staff had a very pleasant manner and gave the impression that it would not be any trouble asking for more help + A member of staff called at the mystery shopper's house to hand deliver the form and offer help with filling it in; he also offered contact details should more assistance be required. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The mystery shopper commented that she 'could not have had a better response'. |
| HAZLITT THEATRE (MENTAL HEALTH/LEARNING DISABILITY) | | | |
| Access for two people in | + Information given | + Staff very helpful, offering | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Easier access to lifts |

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|---|---|--|---|
| <p>wheelchairs</p> <p>Availability of theatre staff to help if visitor was supporting two people with a learning disability</p> <p>Suitability of the seating in the auditorium for people with a physical disability</p> | <p>promptly and easily</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Shown a layout of the auditorium. + All requirements met. - Access to lift difficult | <p>detail and directions in a clear professional way.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Visitors not made to feel rushed, even though they were not buying tickets and there was a queue | |
| HAZLITT THEATRE (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) | | | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Very easy to get information about potential problems with visual impairment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + The staff were able to inform the visitor of availability of staff during a performance, lift access and numbers of steps in each area. + The visitor was informed about which seats would be best suited for a visually impaired person during a performance + The staff were extremely helpful, with a high level of visual impairment awareness; they offered a great amount of helpful information + There was 'willingness for | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No improvement necessary. Visitor extremely impressed |

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|---|--|--|--|
| | | staff to put themselves out to help'. | |
| HAZLITT THEATRE (MOBILITY) | | | |
| Asked after access for wheelchairs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Informed was lift but at side of building - Path to lift uneven and badly lit - From lift to auditorium have to pass through passage with boxes in it - Need to pass through auditorium to get to toilets and bar before show | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + If is a Hazlitt show carer goes for ½ price (though not if is an external performance) + Staff were polite and helpful at all times - No special area for wheelchair users to sit, placed in corridor essentially creating an extra seat but having to pay full price - Maximum of 4 wheelchairs per performance - No accessible parking available | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Placing disabled toilet by the stage door • remove storage from corridor between lift and auditorium • Improve lighting in Rose Street • Cut costs, especially as a wheelchair user is creating extra capacity • Improve accessible parking around theatre |
| HOUSING NEED (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) | | | |
| Request to go on housing register and whether forms were available in alternative formats | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Application sent immediately + Offer of assistance with forms made but only at the Council's offices - Informed what documents needed but told that | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Helpful - Staff did not appreciate shoppers desire to complete the forms himself, preserving his independence. When informed staff member | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff should be provided with information about sizes of font needed for visually impaired people to be able to read themselves. • Staff should not assume the only option is visiting |

| Request | Access to Information/ Service | Staff Awareness | Recommendations for Improvement |
|---|--|---|--|
| | <p>guidance notes would give details of why</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large print form and guidance notes not available - When form sent contrast of type against background made document totally inaccessible | <p>that his wife may not be available to help him at home offer to come to offices repeated and staff member losing patience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff seemed unaware of shoppers specific needs | <p>Council offices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make large print forms available • Cassette versions of forms should be available in the event of complete blindness |
| HOUSING BENEFITS (VISUAL IMPAIRMENT) | | | |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Informed could get information from internet, assumed that internet could be used - Information requested in Braille or tape but not available in any other format but print. - Print Housing Benefits application form sent to shopper. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff Member offered no assistance to shopper with completing the form – that he could get assistance elsewhere was assumed. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential to develop forms in alternative formats. • Increased staff awareness of both disability awareness and equality issues. |

CONCLUSION

Measures which help disabled people make life easier for everyone

87. We have received a substantial amount of evidence that suggests that there is a great deal of work that the Council could undertake to improve access to its services for disabled people. Many of these improvements are relatively low cost and simply require a refocusing on the needs of people with disabilities. To facilitate this we are in agreement with the recommendation of the Local Government Association and Disability Rights Commission's guidance document *Disability Equality in Local Government* which states that 'A corporate commitment to disability equality should be established and specific roles allocated. Chief officers and leading councillors should adopt the key roles in promoting disability equality among staff and the wider community and in overseeing the co-ordination and development of a council's disability equality strategy'²⁵. This document recommends the establishment of a working group of senior officers from across the council to coordinate the development and implementation of a disability equality strategy and action plan²⁶. Although we believe this process should be led by the Social Inclusion Manager to ensure consistency of provision and access across the Council, buy-in is necessary from all parts of the Council and throughout the internal hierarchy. Access should be incorporated into the Council's vision and priorities and accommodated within the development of all plans and strategies of the Council to ensure this top-down approach.

88. To further assist this re-focussing of the Council's service provision towards improving access we also believe an Access Officer should be employed as part of the Social Inclusion unit. Such an Officer would enable professional advice on the planning process and building control to be dispensed as well as assistance with training provision, audits and consultation. Such an Officer would free the Social Inclusion Manager to concentrate on implementing a strategic focus on access across the Council at a corporate level.

89. Through our research we have also learnt the value of consulting with people with disabilities. Time and again the Committee have been thanked for finally taking an interest in the needs of people with disabilities. This momentum can now be built upon and we recommend that a revised and empowered consultation group, along the lines of an enhanced Mobility Focus Group be consulted regularly to identify the barriers and needs of people with disabilities.

90. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report *Improving the life chances of disabled people* states:

²⁵ Local Government Association; *Disability Equality in Local Government (Executive Summary)*; p6

²⁶ Ibid. p2

Disabled people's experience of government support and services needs to change. Too often disabled people feel that they are fighting a system which is fragmented, complex and bureaucratic, and which does not put the needs of disabled people at the heart of service provision. Public service reform and investment has not yet benefited disabled people to the extent it should²⁷

91. We believe Maidstone Borough Council has the opportunity, through the recommendations contained within this report and the momentum it generates to place disabled people at the heart of service provision.

²⁷ Prime Minister's Strategy Unit ; *Improving the life chances of disabled people*; January 2005; p11

SCRUTINY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION ACTION AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN (SCRAIP)

Report Title: ACCESS TO THE COUNCIL'S SERVICES FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

Report of: RECREATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Report Approval: 21 MARCH 2006

Dates to report back to Committee:

| Update | Date | Completed? | Note |
|-----------------|--------------|------------|-----------------------------|
| 1 st | October 2006 | | 6 months after publication |
| 2 nd | April 2007 | | 12 months after publication |
| 3 rd | October 2007 | | |

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| Council as a corporate body | | | | |
| (a) the Council incorporate the assessment of provision of services to disabled people into its local performance indicators as a method of measuring and monitoring improvements to access to the Council's services for disabled people Council's services (11; 17 (text box); 86) . | | | | |
| (b) the Council develop and implement a vision for access to its services through an amendment to its corporate priorities (17 (text box); 87) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| <p>(c) A review of the Mobility Focus Group be undertaken and for the review to include consideration of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) methods by which it could encourage greater participation and representation of disabled people and organisations in Maidstone; (ii) how the group could establish itself as a formal consultee with regards to the development of the Council's Plans and Strategies to ensure that the views of people with disabilities are heard; (iii) an amendment to the terms of reference to include all forms of disability rather than a focus on mobility; (iv) the establishment of formal lines of reporting; (v) an amendment to the title of the group; (vi) an analysis of the Disability Rights Commission; <i>Towards Access Standards: The Work of Local Access Groups in England and Wales</i>; 2004 (17) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (d) the Council incorporate the assessment of provision of services to disabled people into its mystery shopping exercise. (17 (text box)) | | | | |
| (e) a system be introduced, subject to data protection issues being resolved, whereby staff responsible for communicating with the public can be made aware of a customer's impairment and pursue alternative communication pathways (26; 33) | | | | |
| (f) Council forms specifically put the question 'Do you have a disability, including mental health, physical disability...?' to encourage the communication of special requirements to Council Officers and that this information be recorded in the database recommended in (e) above. (26) | | | | |
| (g) Formal guidelines for the appointment of and consultancy with advocates be introduced (26; 33; 59) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (h) the Council investigate the implications of customer service staff visiting customers with special requirements in their own homes/familiar environments to the customer and report back to this Committee (31) | | | | |
| (i) the Council appoint an Access Officer within the Social Inclusion Manager's team and that such an Officer have the professional ability to undertake assessments of plans, enforce planning obligations and lead on matters linked to access for disabled people in the Council and community (42) | | | | |
| (j) the Council use its partnership work, such as with Town Centre Management, Kent Highways and through the Social Inclusion Manager to maximise the opportunities to remove the use of A-boards on pavements in the Town Centre. (53) | | | | |
| (k) new street-café licensees be provided with the street-café code of conduct as a matter of course (53) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (l) the Council seek to secure funding for the introduction of a video interpreting service (60) | | | | |
| (m) the Social Inclusion Manager attend the District Partnership Board (63) | | | | |
| (n) the Council consult from a design stage onwards with representatives of local disabled organisations with regard to the accessibility of the new Council Offices. (23) | | | | |
| Training | | | | |
| (o) specialist mental illness/learning disability training be undertaken by a number of customer facing staff to enable selected officers to act as a 'first-point-of-contact' for customers with mental illnesses and learning disabilities. (27; 30) | | | | |
| (p) customer facing staff be required to undergo enhanced disability awareness and equality training (84) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (q) all staff be required to undergo disability awareness and equality training (19; 30; 44) | | | | |
| (r) disability awareness training to be provided in conjunction with and directly involving local disabled groups and people. (28; 30; 58) | | | | |
| (s) disability awareness training also be provided to all Members to better enable their community leadership role (54) | | | | |
| Planning | | | | |
| (t) the Committee be consulted on the draft forms of the access supplementary planning document (22) | | | | |
| (u) the Mobility Focus Group be consulted on the draft forms of the access supplementary planning document (22) | | | | |
| Access in the Town Centre | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (v) in consultation with local businesses the Council introduce a town-wide disability card for reduced entry fees to consolidate existing concessions (leisure centre/mote park/cinema etc) (74) | | | | |
| (w) the Council introduce a good access 'tick' scheme for businesses in the Town Centre (to be incorporated into the Town Centre Shopping Guide – businesses to benefit from the advertising they get via the guide as an incentive) to encourage businesses to be as accessible as possible (74) . | | | | |
| (x) Communication lines be opened with organisations that seek to bring groups of people with disabilities to the town with regard to steps the Council could take to make access (e.g. for mini-buses) better. (61) | | | | |
| Parking | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (y) the Council undergo a full review of accessible disabled parking provision in the Borough. Such a review to include an assessment of the location; physical accessibility of the bay itself; height restrictions and loading restrictions in and around the town centre. (36; 37; 38; 40) | | | | |
| (z) space be provided for the provision of additional accessible parking bays in Earl Street (37) | | | | |
| Public Transport | | | | |
| (aa) the Council champion the cause of its disabled residents through the Quality Bus Partnership (41) | | | | |
| (bb) the Council's representatives on the Community Rail Partnership be instructed to represent the access needs of residents on the Medway Valley Line (41) | | | | |
| (cc) representatives of the Council open dialogue with GoVia with regard to the accessibility of train services and stations in the Borough. (41) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (dd) the planning section ensure issues of access be fully addressed in the redevelopment of Maidstone East station (41) | | | | |
| (ee) the Council lobby for greater focus on access for disabled people to public transport services and terminals (41) | | | | |
| Kerbs | | | | |
| (ff) the lack of dropped kerbs around Council buildings (such as the Hazlitt Theatre, London House) be addressed (72) | | | | |
| Accessible Toilets | | | | |
| (gg) a full audit of accessible toilet provision be undertaken, with a view to improvement work be undertaken in consultation with people with disabilities. (43; 62) | | | | |
| (hh) a fully accessible toilet of sufficient size and quality for use by people with multiple disabilities be built in a central location in the town (62; 72) . | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| Communications | | | | |
| (ii) no Council publication be permitted to be published without a clear statement of the availability of the information in alternative formats and this statement be provided in a consistent place in all documentation (50) | | | | |
| (jj) all Council communications conform to the Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark standard and consideration be given to reducing the amount of wording in communications. (32; 48) | | | | |
| (kk) all essential or 'citizen' information be available from the outset in alternative formats (32; 50) | | | | |
| (ll) Managers responsible for producing 'essential or citizen' information be fully briefed with regard to the Council's accessible documents guidance and this be cascaded through their teams (47) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (mm) briefs provided to design companies for council publications include the accessibility standards to which the Council aspires (48) | | | | |
| (nn) proofs of proposed Council documents be signed off as accessible by the Head of Communications (50) | | | | |
| (oo) notices of meetings be printed in an increased font size (49) | | | | |
| (pp) an assessment of the ways in which the Council communicates its services to disabled people be undertaken (51; 59) | | | | |
| (qq) the production of documents such as the Town Centre Shopping Guide and improvements to the accessibility of the Council's website be accompanied by targeted marketing campaigns (12; 15) | | | | |
| (rr) a generic 'how we meet the needs of disabled customers' leaflet be produced (51) | | | | |
| IT | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|--|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (ss) Council documents be produced online using the highest specification of Acrobat and with regard to Acrobat's accessible documents guidelines. (52) | | | | |
| (tt) the Council undertake an accessibility audit on its website conducted by the RNIB (52) | | | | |
| (uu) the Council aspire to achieve 'see it right' accreditation from the RNIB for it's website. (52) | | | | |
| (vv) the Council develop both its internet and intranet pages to provide a quick reference guide to deaf services in the borough, including details with regard to Sign Language Interpreters and their availability (56; 57) | | | | |
| Hazlitt Theatre | | | | |
| (ww) the Hazlitt Theatre engage the services of a specialist Sign Language Interpreter (60) | | | | |
| (xx) Works be undertaken to the Hazlitt Theatre to improve the accessibility of the lift and to ensure the corridor between the lift and the theatre is kept clear. (80; 85) | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

| Recommendation | Cabinet Member | Response | Time-table | Lead Officer |
|---|----------------|----------|------------|--------------|
| (yy) the Hazlitt theatre undertake a review of its wheelchair-user ticketing policy for both Hazlitt and external productions. (81; 85) | | | | |
| Mote Park Leisure Centre | | | | |
| (zz) Work be undertaken to improve the lighting and signposting in the Leisure Centre with a view to improving its accessibility for people with visual impairments. (85) | | | | |
| Museum | | | | |
| (aaa) The Museum utilise the Museum, Libraries and Archives Council's <i>Access for All Self-Assessment Toolkit</i> to assist it in considering accessibility issues for people with disabilities | | | | |

Note: Numbers in **bold** refer to the paragraph in the main body of the report from which the recommendation has arisen.

Notes on the completion of SCRAIP

¹ Report recommendations are listed as found in the report.

¹ Insert in this box the Cabinet Member whose portfolio the recommendation falls within.

¹ The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box either the acceptance or rejection of the recommendation.

If the recommendation is rejected an explanation for its rejection should be provided. The 'timetable' and 'lead officer' boxes can be left blank

If the recommendation is accepted an explanation of the action to be taken to implement the recommendation should be recorded in this box. Please also complete the 'timetable' and 'lead officer' boxes.

¹ The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box when the action indicated in the previous box will be implemented.

¹ The Officer/Cabinet Member responsible for responding to the recommendation should indicate in this box the Officer responsible for the implementation of the action highlighted in the 'response' box.

Bibliography

Disability Rights Commission: *Shaping the future of equality discussion paper*

Prime Minister's Strategy Unit: *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People; Final Report*, January 2005.

Local Government Association Rough Guides: *Disability Discrimination Act 2005*.

Local Government Association/Disability Rights Commission: *Disability Equality in Local Government*, October 2003.

Valuing People Support Team: *The Story So Far...Valuing People; A New Strategy for Learning Disability for the 21st Century*.

Audit Commission Public Sector Briefing: *Services for Disabled Children; A review of services for disabled children and their families*.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council: *Access for All Self-Assessment Toolkit; Disability Access for Museums, Libraries and Archives*.

Office for National Statistics: *Disabled people in public sector employment 1998 to 2004*, May 2005.

Easyinfo: *Information for all Guidance*.

British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD): *Partnership Boards factsheet*

Transport Committee on Disabled People's Access to Transport 6th Report: Notes from meetings.

Merseyside Metropolitan Councils and Merseytravel: *Code of Practice on Access and Mobility*.

Northern Ireland Office: *Barriers to Access to Essential Services*

The Guardian: *Make e-documents accessible to everyone, says RNIB*, article published in Society Guardian, 23 November 2005.

Publicnet Briefing: *Public Sector urged to give serious thought to disability act*, Article outlining speech given by Anne McGuire, Minister for Disabled People, 23 September 2005.

Royal Academy Magazine: *What are Museums for?* Article discussing the view that access issues are taking precedence over art, Autumn 2004.

Opportunities: *Council takes a lead in equality for disabled people.*
Article on the efforts of Kent County Council and its Disability Equality Scheme.

Assorted articles and letters published in the Kent Messenger.

The Guardian: *Easy riders.* Article on accessible buses. Published in the Society Guardian, 29 June 2005.

Local Government News' 'Early Riser': *Council Takes a Lead in equality for disabled people.* Article along the same lines as 17 above.

Miscellaneous notes from telephone conversations from Members of the Public.

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council: *Re:source Disability Portfolio Guides:*

- o Training for Equality (no. 3)
- o Access on a Shoestring (no.8)
- o Accessible Environments (no. 9)
- o Employment at Every Level (no.12)

The MLA Council produced 12 guides. The Scrutiny Section holds the above four in hard copy, the remaining 8 are available as downloads from the MLA website.

Haringey Overview and Scrutiny Report: *Progress on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995* (available from the IDeA website)

Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions: *Beacon Council Research – Round 3 Theme Report; Better Access and Mobility*

London Borough of Lewisham, *ENGAGEMENT Case Study; Beacon for Accessible Services (Round 2)*

IDeA Knowledge: *London Borough of Lewisham; A Beacon for Access and Mobility*

Community Strategy for Maidstone: *Access to services and Inclusion priority*, adopted April 2003.

Web Resources

National Statistics Online – Disability
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nscl.asp?ID=6345>

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council – Disability
http://www.mla.gov.uk/action/learnacc/00access_03.asp

The Building Conservation Directory: *Disability Access Provisions for Historic Buildings*
<http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/accessbcd98/access.htm>

Eden District Council: *Supplementary Planning Document – An Accessible and Inclusive Environment*
http://www.eden.gov.uk/PDF/ca_env05_24mar_08app.pdf

Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: *Planning and Access for Disabled People; A Good Practice Guide.*
<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1144644>

Ribble Valley Borough Council: *Guidance on the Use of Part M of the Building Regulations*
http://www.ribblevalley.gov.uk/downloads/Approved_Document_M.pdf

Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee website:
<http://www.dptac.gov.uk/>

Royal National Institute for the Blind: *See it Right Pack.* Advice on designing, producing and planning for accessible information
http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/PublicWebsite/public_seeitright.hcsp

Reigate and Banstead District Council: *Town Centre Disabled Access Scrutiny Panel*
http://www.rnib.org.uk/xpedio/groups/public/documents/PublicWebsite/public_seeitright.hcsp

Eastleigh Borough Council: *Accessibility Awards*, a scheme introduced to encourage local retailers to make their shops accessible. <http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=407455>

Adobe: *Using Accessible PDF Documents with Acrobat Reader 7.0 – A guide for disabled people*
http://www.adobe.com/enterprise/accessibility/reader/pdfs/reader7_accessibility.pdf

Cabinet Office: *E-accessibility of Public Sector Services in the EU*
http://cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2005/051124_eaccessibility.asp

Disability Rights Commission: *Access Code of Practice* http://www.drc-gb.org/uploaded_files/documents/2008_223_drc_cop_rights_of_Access.doc#Chapter5