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Steps Towards Accessibility: A Critical Analysis of Transport Services for Wheelchair Users in Cork City

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Abstract

This article offers a critical analysis of the accessibility provided for wheelchair users to transport services in Cork city in the 21st century. It seeks to determine whether wheelchair users are treated as equal citizens in society regarding physical access to city buses, coaches, trains and taxis, as well as the general infrastructure needed to support access to these modes of transport, such as roads and footpaths. Legislation and policies in the area of disability are examined, including a reflection on how the perception of disability in society influences the creation of policy. Semi-structured interviews with service providers were conducted to determine if the provisions for wheelchair users as outlined in policies are a reality in practice and also to discover if they go far enough in achieving equality. The research indicated that there was a dearth of information regarding accessibility to transport. Furthermore, the research analyses how policy is implemented by directly engaging with service providers, who play a part in changing transport facilities. Overall, transport services are being improved through the inclusion of wheelchair users in policy making. Therefore, the necessary infrastructure can be developed, so that wheelchair users can participate fully in society and this increases equality between them and the general public.

Keywords: Disability; wheelchair user; transport; accessibility

Introduction

Anti-discrimination legislation seeks to address the rights of wheelchair users as citizens of a country, by challenging factors which cause exclusion. People with disabilities can be excluded physically or socially, as a fear of the unknown can generate negative attitudes among other members of the community. Therefore, policy should address not just the needs of individuals but also enable them to participate fully in their communities according to Barnes (1977 cited in Langan 1998). There is a difference in wheelchair users' social and health care needs. If the difficulty with a physical impairment is the improper functioning of a person's body then the solution is to adapt their body, to aid it in working in a 'normal' way. However, it is society which needs to change to accommodate people with disabilities. Living in an urban area dictates that for the majority of people, travelling from one place to another is facilitated through using various readily available modes of transport. We need to question however whether this is the same for somebody who is a wheelchair user. If the problems

‘experienced by disabled people in moving about the communities in which they live are understood as deriving from the fact that the physical environment is designed on the assumption that everyone is perfectly capable of stepping up onto a platform to get on a bus, then the solution lies in the way in which the environment is designed’ (Barnes, 1997: 96).

People with disabilities have the same expectations when making a journey as other members of the public. “They expect to be able to leave the house, get to the station or stop from which they are catching the bus, ... or train, board the vehicle, travel in reasonable safety and comfort, alight from the vehicle and get to their destination without any difficulties” (NDA, 2005:1). If any of these stages present a barrier then the journey becomes unnecessarily difficult or impossible. These barriers can cause the user to reject public transport as a means of travel and therefore, reduce their self confidence, mobility and standard of living. Barriers in the transport system cause the main problem to accessibility, not the impairment itself. For example, stairs, heavy or narrow doors and a lack of adequate space are considered the main obstacle to access

for wheelchair users. In order to avoid obstacle all designs should comply with acceptable standards, and should be approved by the relevant body before being implemented.

Theorising Disability

Theories around disability have moved from ones informed largely by medical intervention to ones which see society as the cause of the discrimination faced by wheelchair users. According to the social model of disability, 'impairment' is the lack of the physical function, whereas disability comes from the built environment being designed for only able-bodied people: those who do not fit into this category become excluded and unable to function independently in society. Buildings and transport that provide for the whole population through universal design can make accessibility easier for everyone, not just wheelchair users. The way in which society views people with disabilities affects the subsequent policies that are formed and therefore, it is useful to look at the different models of disability. The individual model of disability 'locates the "problem" of disability within the individual and [...] sees the causes of this problem as stemming from the functional limitations or psychological losses which are assumed to arise from disability' (Oliver, 1996:32). The social model of disability rejects this notion and instead places the blame within society for not providing appropriate services or ensuring that the needs of people with disabilities are met in its organisation (Oliver, 1996). The social model defines disability as 'all the things that impose restrictions on disabled people; ranging from individual prejudice to institutional discrimination, from inaccessible public buildings to unusable transport systems, from segregated education to excluding work arrangements, and so on' (Ibid, 1996:33). People with disabilities, as a group, consequently suffer from discrimination in society.

The medical model of disability focuses on restoring people who are disabled to as close to 'normal' as possible, while the social model maintains that

'it is society that has to change not individuals and this change will come about as part of a process of political empowerment of disabled people as

a group and not through social policies and programmes delivered by establishment politicians and policy makers, nor through individualised treatments and interventions provided by the medical and para-medical professions' (Ibid, 1996:37).

Crow (1996) states that the social model can overemphasise the role of the environment in constructing disability so that the 'pain and inconvenience that an impairment can cause an individual' is ignored (cited in Butler and Parr, 1999: 4). This model also needs to take consider the differences between people, such as those based on gender, class, 'race' and age, to be fully inclusive of every person with a disability in society. However, Oliver emphasises that 'the social model is not an attempt to deal with the restrictions of impairment but the social barriers of disability' (1996:38).

Access to Transport: Policy and Practice

A review of available materials indicate that a dearth of research on current policy and its implementation in the provision of transport services, from the viewpoint of the service providers, who have both the power and the ability to stimulate change in their transport area. This article aims to address this gap in the literature through research which involved interviewing service providers on company policy to discover to what extent government and disability policies were included, as well as the level of policy implementation. This gave service providers the chance to reflect on their policies and the degree to which it inspires change and promotes equality.

There is also little information surrounding transport issues and the way in which they affect wheelchair users. The closest research to this topic was found in Fitzgerald (2006), which deals with information collected from the Census 2002 and a special survey commissioned by the NDA in 2004 and carried out by TNS-MRBI, and Thapar et al (2003) whose study deals with accessibility issues to buildings in Boston. In fact, the only statistics that that could be gathered regarding the number of wheelchair users in Cork that need to avail of the transport system was from the CSO

year. This, however, only gives the figures for the number of people with a physical disability, which gives no insight into the number of wheelchair users included in this category. The figures are illustrated in the following two tables and also show that there was a drop in the number of people with physical disabilities living in Cork between 2002 and 2006.

Table A: No. of people living in Cork with a Physical Disability in 2002

	Cork (City and County)	Cork city
Total Population	447,829	123,062
Population with a Physical Disability	20,625	7,603
People with a physical disability as a % of the total population	4.6%	6.13%

Central Statistics Office (2002)

Table B: No. of people living in Cork with a Physical Disability in 2006

	Cork (City and County)	Cork city
Total Population	481,295	119,418
Population with a Physical Disability	20,524	7,084
People with a physical disability as a % of the total population	4.26%	5.93%

Central Statistics Office (2006)

Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were used with a number of service providers, in order to examine the level of equality which has been achieved for wheelchair users. Semi-structured interviews are where the ‘main questions and script are fixed, but interviewers are able to improvise follow-up questions and to explore meanings and areas of interest that emerge’ (Arksey and Knight, 1999:7). The research focused on Cork city, and there may be parts of the country where access to transport is better or worse and these are not documented in the research. However, the limitations inherent in this localised study were minimised by analysing policies, both national and service-specific, to broaden the perspective and the breadth of the research. The

interviews were flexible as they followed ‘the course that emerge[d] through the interview’ (Sarantakos, 2005: 270): in other words, the interviewees were facilitated in discussing the topic and their input, rather than that of the researcher, directed the course of the discussion. Interviews were conducted with employees working in the area of transport in Cork city. The research focus was on trains, buses, coaches, taxis and the infrastructure needed to support these, such as roads and footpaths. Research also included analysis on the effectiveness of services using previous research on wheelchair users and their experiences, rather than by interviewing wheelchair users themselves. The conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the changes may be therefore slightly biased. The researcher sought to counter this bias through carefully structured questions and the author tried to remain open-minded in discussion with the interviewees.

A representative in each of the transport services researched was interviewed including employees of Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and the Commission for Taxi Regulation. The aim of the interviews was to examine company policy, to discover what changes have occurred to the transport system and to assess if these changes go far enough in achieving equality of access for wheelchair users on public transport. An interview with the City Council was also conducted to examine how infrastructure is adapted to support the transport services in providing equality of access to wheelchair users.

Government policy and legislation were analysed to discover the rights of wheelchair users in society and the responsibility of service providers to provide wheelchair access. Literature was used to highlight the different models and perspectives of disability, to make well rounded future policy recommendations. A major part of the research involved analysing policies within the organisations of the service providers included in the research. This allowed knowledge of the provisions they make for wheelchair users to be attained, so that their implementation could be asked about during the interview, in order to establish a well informed and conclusive assessment of the accessibility of the service.

Key findings

The aim of this research was to discover if policies went far enough to achieve equality of access to public transport for wheelchair users. This was approached through an examination of literature, research and policies, as well as through semi-structured interviews with representatives from Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann, the Commission for Taxi Regulation and the City Council. These showed how the social model of disability has been applied to policies by seeking to change physical structures within society so that access is open to everyone. The research also sought to examine how these policies have been applied in practice. These conclusions are based on service providers' opinions, which may be biased as they might deem services and facilities to be more accessible than a wheelchair user would. This has been taken into account in the conclusion, by illustrating the facts rather than opinions.

Buses

Under the Sectoral Plan for Accessible Transport (2006), buses should have a pneumatic function where they can be lowered further, have an extendible ramp, a designated wheelchair space and bell pushes and grip bars at an accessible height for wheelchair users. Only vehicles which comply with these requirements should be in operation in Cork by 2012. According to the Area Manager in Bus Éireann, the process of buying these vehicles for the city routes began in 1997, currently 90% of the city fleet are wheelchair accessible and this figure is expected to be 100% by the end of 2008.

Coaches

According to the Sectoral Plan for Accessible Transport (2006), wheelchair accessible coaches are under construction across Europe, which will be looked at by the Public Transport Accessibility Committee (PTAC) in order to formulate a similar design for accessible coaches in Ireland. Once this happens, Bus Éireann will purchase these coaches for a number of trial runs. If successful, these coaches will be phased in to replace existing inaccessible vehicles, a process which is expected to be completed by

2015. According to the Area Manager, Bus Éireann received a number of wheelchair accessible coaches in January year. These are currently undergoing trial runs and a pilot scheme is expected to be in operation between Cork and Waterford later in 2008. These coaches offer access to wheelchair users by means of a lift which comes out from just behind the front wheel and lifts them into the coach, where four seats have been removed to accommodate them. Clamps and seatbelts are also provided in this space, which must be booked by the wheelchair user before the journey.

Trains

According to the Sectoral Plan for Accessible Transport (2006), all new trains must have one wheelchair space per carriage, all stations must have a ramp to facilitate access to the train and the Dublin to Cork line is the first to be upgraded, in accordance with the accessibility audit 2003. According to the Executive of the Travel Centre, all new rolling stock which has been bought by Iarnród Éireann is wheelchair accessible - the doors are wider, the toilets are adequate for use by wheelchair users and the wheelchair space in each carriage is reservable. Ramps are available and the Dublin to Cork line has been completely revamped, to include all the intermediate stations to ensure accessibility for wheelchair users. Platforms have also been repaired, to ensure there are no changes in level and have been extended to accommodate longer trains.

Stations

According to the Sectoral Plan for Accessible Transport (2006) and the NDA guidelines, 'Building for Everyone' (2002), all buildings to include bus and train stations should have automatic doors, an adequate lift to provide access to all floors of a building, adequate toilets for wheelchair users and sufficient signage, information, space, and counters not more than 750mm in height, to provide a barrier free journey from their home to their destination. The refurbished bus station in Cork was opened in 2005 and was funded by the government, on condition that it was wheelchair accessible and complied with the National Disability Authority (NDA) guidelines. Kent train station was redesigned two years ago, (year) to ensure that it was accessible

for wheelchair users. This included the installation of a lift to allow wheelchair users easy access to one of the main platforms. There are currently plans to redevelop part of the station again, and the funding they receive from the EU is dependent on the adaptations allowing for wheelchair accessibility. The NDA guidelines (2002) for buildings are outlined as follows. Entrance doors should be powered doors, and preferably be slide rather than swing, as these can be an obstacle. These doors should remain open for at least three seconds to allow those that move slowly time to pass through and if buttons are required to open them, they should be at an accessible operation point (NDA, 2002:101).

Passenger lifts providing for easy access between storeys of buildings should be 1800mm x1800mm to allow a wheelchair user to enter and exit easily. The doors should have a clear opening of 800mm, there should be a handrail on all three sides that is 900mm off the floor, and controls should be no more than 120mm or no less than 900mm above ground level or less than 500mm from the corners. 'The inclusion of a lift or lifts to all floors within a building, provided in conjunction with ... adequate circulation areas and the omission of changes of level within floors, will mean that everyone can access all parts of a building smoothly and independently' (NDA, 2002: 105).

Wheelchair accessible toilets should be large enough to accommodate both the wheelchair and the user (1700x 1500mm). Other requirements include that the door opens inwards, handrails are provided, the flush handles are levers, the floors are slip resistant, the locks are easy to use and the soap dispensers, and the sink and toilet are at the required level for use by a wheelchair user. They should allow the user to manoeuvre within the cubicle and have enough room approaching the toilet so they can enter and close the door behind them with ease, through the use of a pull handle, which is in easy reach highlighted by the NDA (2002).

The layout of all transport terminals should be logical and simple, the booking and information counters should be 750mm in height, all signs should be clearly displayed

showing all the adequate information and services, transfer timings should be planned to facilitate wheelchair users and waiting areas should be spacious to allow wheelchair users to manoeuvre and be seated in according to the NDA (2002).

Taxis

Under the Road Traffic Act 1998, taxis should have wide doors, strong ramps, adequate seatbelts and clamps and enough room for three other people as well as the wheelchair user cited on taxi.ie (2006). According to the Sectoral Plan for Accessible Transport, dispatch operators should be licensed to make them accountable, there should be a proper complaints system established and a database listing all of the accessible vehicles available. Lowering the VRT on accessible vehicles to make them more affordable and the employment of enforcement officers in 2006, to ensure that companies with wheelchair accessible licenses provide this service, should ensure that the number of wheelchair accessible vehicles to standard taxis increases to 1:5 as hoped for by the Commission for Taxi Regulation, according to the Accessible Taxi Group cited in the National Review of Vehicle Standards in Taxis, Hackneys and Limousines (2005). Local Authorities should also provide accessible taxi ranks, by ensuring that enough space is provided so that ramps will not obstruct footpaths. The Technical Advisor with the Commission for Taxi Regulation stated that the process of licensing dispatch operators has been started, and standards for accessibility, and safety and legislative guidelines are also expected to come into operation between 2008 and 2009. The Commission has done an audit of taxi ranks to highlight issues in terms of accessibility; however, it is the responsibility of the local authority to upgrade these ranks based on this information. The proposal to reduce VRT on accessible vehicles is with the Minister for Transport and is awaiting his approval. The complaints system has been established and in 2007 nineteen people with disabilities used this service. The Recast Framework Directive also ensures that vehicles come under stricter regulation as it 'defines the rules for type approval of vehicles across the EC' (STATUS, 2007:1), so that vehicles will be under stricter regulations than before.

Roads and Footpaths

The NDA guidelines (2002) give requirements for footpaths, the placing of fixed structures on footpaths such as bollards, and pedestrian crossings which must be dished according to certain standards. Footpaths should be 1800mm wide to facilitate wheelchair users. ‘The minimum clearance between a building and a bollard or lamp standard on any footpath should be 1200mm’ (NDA, 2002:67). Cross falls should be a maximum of 1:50 otherwise after a rainfall puddles and dirt can accumulate and cause the surface to become slippery. Gaps on the footpath such as drainage channel should be no more than 12mm and should run ‘perpendicular to the direction of movement. This will prevent wheels getting caught in the gaps’ (NDA, 2002:68).

At crossing points footpaths should be dished to allow for ease of access for wheelchair users. Dishing should not be placed near corners, should be flushed with the road and should be kept clear from obstructions, such as traffic, by placing a double yellow line at a dished crossing. The dished surface should be 1200mm and 900mm wide. ‘The gradient of the ramp should ideally be 1:20, and not exceed 1:12’ (NDA, 2002:70). This surface should also be kept well drained and gullies should not be placed near the crossing. The local authorities are responsible for the upkeep of the roads and footpaths.

At drop off points there should be no obstructions such as gullies or manholes, where people are getting out of vehicles, as these can provide difficulty for wheelchair users. Drop off points should be level and have a firm surface. These points should also be placed near entrances and have a canopy which is 2500mm high to provide protection from the weather. ‘Drop off points should not obstruct circulation areas’ (NDA, 2002: 84), such as footpaths unless they are 2000mm wide at that point.

At taxi ranks sufficient space should be provided for people to embark and disembark from vehicles so as to prevent ramps obstructing footpaths. Shelter should also be provided at these ranks according to the NDA (2002). In the Cork Area Strategic Plan (2001-2020) footpaths must be level with the buses to prevent the need for a ramp,

where possible, when a wheelchair user is boarding. The Barcelona Declaration (1995) also states that the built environment should be made accessible for wheelchair users so that they can participate fully in society. According to Senior Executive Engineer in the City Council, wheelchair users are taken into account when footpaths are being upgraded and dishing is done automatically. An audit of footpaths in the city was carried out in 2007, which listed all the necessary improvements on every road around the city, in order to make it accessible for wheelchair users. This audit details 103 issues which need to be addressed to make the city accessible for wheelchair users such as obstructions, footpath widths, trip hazards, and dishing at crossings. These issues are divided into four categories according to their level of importance. Category A is of top priority and must be completed first once the funding is received, including such issues as footpaths which are not dished and footpaths which are less than 1.2m wide, as these make footpaths inaccessible for wheelchair users. Certain things that are not desirable are classified as category B issues, such as footpaths being between 1.2 and 1.8m wide, as these do not completely hinder access. It is hoped that the Category A recommendations will be completed by 2015.

Service User Participation

The purpose of the Disability Movement is to allow people with disabilities the opportunity to advocate for themselves, so that their wants and needs are taken on board in the design of policies (Oliver, 1996). Bus Éireann have a good relationship with the Cork Access Group who are contacted whenever a new bus is on trial for their opinions and feedback on the service. This group also meets regularly with the City Council to discuss any access issues they may have, and also with regard to the progress in implementing the improvements being carried out under the accessibility audit 2007. The Commission for Taxi Regulation have an Advisory Council, which includes people with disabilities to give advice on taxi services. There is liaison between Iarnród Éireann and disability groups and members of the disabled community are involved with the Railway Safety Advisory Council to make safety recommendations on behalf of people with disabilities. All of these bodies carry out

customer service audits to gauge the customers' opinion on the quality of their services. This information has been received from service providers and therefore wheelchair users may have a different opinion on the extent to which they are involved in decision making.

Driver Training

The attitude of the driver is extremely important, as it effects how comfortable passengers feel in undertaking the journey. Driver knowledge of the safety equipment, handling issues and awareness of the possible difficulties faced by people with disabilities in travelling can be achieved through training. This training has been completed by staff in both Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann. The Commission for Taxi Regulation is currently setting up a driver skills programme, which they hope to have up and running by the end of 2008.

Regulation and Cost

All new vehicles purchased by Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann are wheelchair accessible. To receive any other vehicle would require a special order. However, taxi drivers can choose whether to drive a wheelchair accessible taxi or not. There is a disincentive in driving an accessible vehicle as the cost of purchasing and running the vehicle is a lot higher than for an ordinary taxi. There is no uniform design for accessible taxis across Europe.

Conclusion

Overall, equality is well on its way to being achieved on transport services for wheelchair users. While all the services have some way to go, it is clear that there is a concerted effort being made to include wheelchair users in policy making, which in turn is impacting on the services that are being provided. This can be seen in such policies as the Barcelona Declaration (1995), which states 'that disabled persons are entitled to receive attention for their individual and social needs in the context of the provisions for the general population, as well as to promote their development as persons, allowing them to interrelate with the rest of the population, respecting their



individual circumstances' (The Barcelona Declaration, 1995: 4). The issue of disability was ignored for many years but now it is being looked at in all areas. This is evident in the Cork Area Strategic Plan which highlights that

‘a central part of the Integrated Transport System philosophy is the improvement of access and accessibility for all. The provision of suitable facilities for all transport users, whatever their physical ability, will be mainstreamed within the planning design and operation of all transport services, particularly where these issues may not have been given prominence to date’ (Cork Area Strategic Plan, 2001-2020:49).

Funding is an issue affecting every area as without adequate financial resources, measures simply cannot be implemented. While full equality has not been achieved, there is room for optimism. If the current policies are implemented rigorously, wheelchair users will have the necessary infrastructure to participate fully in society.



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