

Disability and the built environment



Leeds is a bursting metropolis with an extensive and diverse range of shops and department stores. " This has been a direct response of the Leeds Retail Initiative, set up in 1994 so as to promote city centre shopping" (Colin, 1997). There is a wide range of shopping facilities, from small boutiques to large department stores such as GAP and Next outlets, have all added to the ever expanding Leeds retail base. The Victoria Quarter has several existing connected arcades, such as the Queen's Arcade, located off Briggate Street.

Other popular shopping attractions include Leeds Kirk gate Market, Leeds Shopping Plaza, St Johns, Merion centre, and other shopping centers outside the CBD, such as the Crown point and The White Rose. Considering the build town centre there are many issues and aspects of general life which should be taken to custom-fit all shopper's personal needs regardless of their physical or mental wellbeing. One of the biggest issues affecting a number of people is Disability. This project looks at just how shopping centers have dealt with providing access, warm, welcoming and enjoyable visit for the disabled members of our community.

The Government has done a lot for disabled people in policies to cater for them. The two main policies that the Government has set up in 1995 the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), which has had some amendments such as the Phase 2 in 1999, which requires employers to make reasonable adjustments for disabled staff and Phase 3 which was passed in 2004, this requires businesses and shops to make physical adjustments to the buildings so as to remove any potential barriers for access to disabled people, and wheelchair bound individuals.

These policies were set up to ensure that everyone is treated fairly and to help both disabled workers and shoppers so that they are not discriminated against for some reason. These policies are integrated into businesses as either the Government's policy on the matter or the business constructs its own policy to show that they take the matter very seriously. The ease of access for disabled shoppers in most shopping centers in Leeds City Centre is very up to date and reliable.

Lifts, shop assistants and disabled toilets allow disabled people to go where they want and still travel in ease. However, there are many facilities which are not provided in most shopping centers in the city such as baby changing room facilities, smoking area, children's play area, First aid, push chair hire, and many more. These facilities if provided may be one of the reasons why success of out of town shopping centers has been.

Facilities such as children's play area allow all parents, in particular the disabled parents to carry on doing the shopping whilst children enjoy themselves. Hypothesis: Leeds city Centre has many facilities and good access for disabled people even though it is a much old town and built in the era when disability was not widely accepted. However, outlook on disability has changed since then; therefore Leeds will be more suited for disabled people as the newest centre has taken disabled members into account.

This also reflects on the town's attitude towards disability which are divided into two main groups, Group A, medical and social model. People who agree with the medical model of disability believe that disability is a problem and it is something that should be cured. Examples of people that fall under this

category are doctors. The other group is the Group B, Social model which suggests responsibility lies within our society and that we should adapt our ways to meet the needs of people that may have impairments.

Generally speaking most people lean towards the second group as disability is something beyond our control. Employers and retail shop owners should be accepting of this and make changes to their shops to enable disabled and wheel chair bound shoppers to have a greater access to the shops like everyone else. Methods The Participatory Observation Technique (a qualitative approach) was used to assess the accessibility of Leeds City centre by wheel chair bound people.

In order to carry this research out I had to travel to the Leeds city centre to observe major retail centers in the city, such as Victoria Quarter, Leeds Shopping Plaza, St Johns, Merion Centre and other individual shops. I had to walk around shops spending not more than 5 minutes in an individual shop. Because of the huge number of shops within a shopping centre I had to adopt on random selection of shops, paying particular attention to the main entrance doors, then shop floor layout, walking spaces between shelves, then Lifts, disabled toilets, handrails, and height of counters.

This approach is much more suitable for this research for the very simple reasons firstly that it is cheap and affordable, there are no extra costs except for travelling to the city by bus, however because of flexibility and simplicity of the approach I could carry it out leisurely on my way to or from university or at any time as much as a person would I would have liked depending on my own free time. And also considering that it was carried out in Leeds City

Centre where I live and familiar with the surroundings, it was much more appropriate because I knew all retail shops and city centre in general.

The technique is very much hands on, allowing individual to " get inside" a particular situation and experience and observe first hand so as to have a more clearer understanding of the subject matter. This method was also used because, " Observation is a preferred method for answering questions about intangible phenomena that are difficult for insiders to explain or articulate because these phenomena are taken for granted". (Denise, 2007).

In other words regardless of the physical adjustment made to shops, I had to pay particular attention to the way the adjustments were made, whether for genuine reasons or just to cover up and do the minimum adjustments just to stay within law requirements. This is certainly an appropriate method because level of adjustment within shops to cater for wheel chair access reflects the shop owner's attitude towards disabled people. Then categorising them into above mentioned groups.

However there are problems as well to this approach firstly its " observer bias and observer influence". (Denise, 2007) In other words observer may lose objectivity of observations because of his/her own emotions and views on subject matter. Also researchers in their member role may fail to attend to scientifically relevant aspects of the situation or may develop a myopic view on issues of importance. (Denise, 2007), however in order to prevent this I had to acquire opinions of another second person who is wheelchair bound in this way I had to compare my observations with another individual who has first hand everyday experience of the subject matter.

Another weakness of this approach is because it depends more on observational and interpersonal skills of the observer, success or failure in the project is therefore limited to individual's characteristics which are hard to achieve and not everyone has them. The other limitation was due to the large number of shops in the city centre its impossible to physically enter all the shops within the city so I adopted a random sampling strategy of previously identified shopping centres, well balanced and divided into subcategories of busy, average and quieter shops so as to get an average view of the city shops.

Findings In the research, it was noticed that considering the era in which the city was established, Leeds was surprisingly designed with disabled people in mind. Outside and within many shops there are paved surfaces allowing wheel chairs to be pushed easily. However, even though the Leeds Kirk gate market is easily accessible from any direction through wide automatic doors which are located on all sides of the building, and also regardless of the massive size of the building, most individual shops have limited or no space at all for wheelchair users to move around.

Most shopping complexes are big and have lifts and wide aisles allowing easy movement of wheel chairs. Disabled people visiting the Leeds for shopping will be more than happy and satisfied with facilities provided, streets are very much wheelchair friendly, traffic lights in most of the city have clearly marked crossings and voice instructions for the blind. However in most complexes and individual shops do not have any toilets at all except for St Johns Shopping centre.

Wide automatic doors are situated at every entrance; make it easy for wheelchair bound people to access other buildings and bus stops. There are lifts, stairs, and escalators in most stores and lots of space for wheelchairs, Leeds city centre is absolutely disabled people friendly, however scrolling screens displaying text with announcements could be put up in aid for the hearing impaired. Most individual shops were small and there was no possible way in which someone in a wheelchair could come and shop without knocking something over.

A lot of the counters/tills were at heights that people in wheelchairs cannot reach. Shopping centers such as the Victoria Quarter have gone out of their way to having a door man who has become some kind of icon and trademark of great customer service and hospitality of Leeds city centre. Wearing bright and colorful uniform always ready to help the old and disabled, staff is easily spotted by even visually impaired individuals and they open the doors for the old and wheelchair users.

Even though within most smaller shops outside shopping malls, there were small entrance doors which could not allow disabled access, however there was some minimum small adjustments done such as paving the doorways and generally speaking the built up environment is paved and well away from traffic. Also, there were some extra efforts to provide a good source of light in most shops, making it easy for the old and visually impaired.

Generally speaking, in most shops the staff members were very friendly and always willing to assist. Conclusion

In conclusion, Leeds is definitely a great city, well suited for all. Absence of traffic within the city allows more room for pedestrians and a cleaner environment. In general, it has been tailored to cater for the disabled; the lifts, the toilets, the big shops, the wide aisles, great customer service and wide doors, however it would be even better if most shopping malls had extra services such as to allow individual to hire free wheelchairs and public phones which are low and allow disabled access even some shops in the city are outdated and were built a long time ago.

However, there is still room for some redesigning and regeneration so as to provide for better access for all people. This would unquestionably require a large sum of money which may be the root of the problem but in order to follow the Disability Discrimination Act 2004, it is necessary for the town to undergo these changes; service providers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to make their services accessible for all.