

# Minding the Gap

There's still a long way to go before we can say we have a fully accessible environment, as Catherine Heffernan's experience with a buggy in a city centre illustrates.

**D**o you remember the television programme, 'Room 101'? Paul Merton's celebrity guest would list their pet hates and Paul would decide whether or not to put them into Room 101.

I used to struggle to come up with a list that I thought the world could do without. That is, until I found myself pushing a buggy around a city. I now have much to be grumpy about and it all has to do with accessibility. All city planners and architects should be made push a pram around to see how difficult it really is to get around.

There are pedestrian crossings where the designed slope for wheelchairs is an inch too high so the wheel gets stuck; many buses have movable floors to enable wheelchairs and prams to get on and off but often there is a gap between the bus floor and pavement; property developers often remove pavements to do work and replace them with footpaths that are too high to access. And that's just outside.

Inside, shops and restaurants can be just bad. There are so-called wheelchair toilets with baby-

changing facilities that are so small that you couldn't swing a baby in them let alone navigate a four wheel wheelchair. Many GP surgeries and shops insert wheelchair lifts which either you can't operate until you shout for someone or you get in and it won't go as it needs someone on the outside to slam the door shut. This isn't too bad if you're pushing a pram, but what if you're in a wheelchair. What do you do then?


The World Health Organisation estimates that between 7 and 10 per cent of the world population has a disability. By disability, I mean a wide range of different people with different impairments which limit their daily activities, such as mental, mobility and speech limitations, deafness and visual impairments. About two per cent of the working age UK population becomes disabled every year and 78 per cent of disabled people acquire their impairment aged 16 or older. This is a sizable population and encompasses two of society's most vulnerable groups: older people and young people with disabilities. About 2.45 million older people have social care needs and 1.2

million of them receive publicly provided social care services.

As a society, we don't make it easy for people with disabilities. Just because someone has a visual, mental or physical disability does not mean that they should be expected to adapt to fit our way of life. We should be making a much greater effort to make the use and enjoyment of urban and rural places open to everyone.

Encouragement should come from local government, health services and other institutions. Government bodies are in a much better position to provide social support in overcoming barriers and accessing resources. They are in a position to review how social care services are delivered and how they can accommodate the recreational and social needs of people with disability. Studies have shown that wheelchair users and people with visual impairment wish to retain their independence when shopping. Councils can help this by providing shopmobility (that is, the free loan of wheelchairs and electric scooters for people visiting city centres) and have blue badge parking. They can also educate shops to adapt their layout to make it easier for people to move around. Moreover, local government has the power to ensure that physical structures are fit for purpose for disabled needs.

It isn't just the negotiation of outdoor spaces that affects people with disability, housing is a major problem. There is evidence that mobility problems are the most common reason for requesting medical priority for rehousing, yet such applicants are the least likely to be rehoused. This is because there is a shortage of accommodation without stairs and with adaptations. Additionally, many people, especially older people, would prefer to remain at home but have the house altered to suit their needs.

On the whole, the UK is good for providing support for disabled people through the social and health services and through voluntary groups. However, we could go that one step further and instigate foresight in the design of our cities and towns and in the provision of housing. Next time you leave your home or the town hall, imagine you had a disability. Would you still be able to go about your daily routine? 



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