

BEDFORD AND DISTRICT ACCESS GROUP

AGM Report – 2010/11

It is with great sadness that we report the passing of our late Chairman, David Walker – whom I know we shall miss for many years to come. In a letter to his family, we said:

‘The Committee members want you to know how much they admired and respected him. His wisdom, encouragement and good-humour put him at the very heart of our meetings. We all know how much he did for his community. There is much about Bedford’s improved access and facilities which is due to his persistent campaigning and lobbying. David was a great man and a true friend who will be greatly missed’

Committee Meetings

Since our last AGM in 2010, 8 Committee meetings had been held. Also, we have had special open meetings to focus on the Borough’s policy to have 100% accessible taxis by January 2012. And once again, we want to record our thanks to Bedford Borough Council for regularly providing us with a meeting room, free of charge.

Transport

- **Trains**

We have continued to press First Capital Connect for the provision of a disabled persons’ toilet at Bedford Station. Whilst there have been indications that the funding is now available, we have yet to see any action on the ground. On a more positive note, Committee members have been reporting that many more train carriages now have accessible facilities for wheelchair-users, and station staff continue to be very helpful.

- **Taxis**

The meeting with taxi proprietors and the Council’s Licensing Officer regarding accessible taxis was useful, if only to clarify everyone’s position on the Council’s policy. The trade representatives offered a further meeting for practical experiences of using their taxis, but despite our reminders they have not followed up their offer.

- Buses

It is fair to say that progress has been made, because Stagecoach now operate accessible buses on all town centre and most rural routes. In fact, the company now have only about 10 inaccessible buses.

- Car Parking

The one major change which we have seen is the limitation of Blue Badge parking around St Paul's Square to improve traffic flow.

Public Buildings

The Committee has been kept informed of proposed and actual improvements made to the Council's public buildings, despite a reduction in the budget for these works. The Council has also continued to make Access Improvement Grants to proprietors of small shops and voluntary organisations.

The most significant improvements to Council premises have been:

- The provision of an accessible changing room, changing bench and automatic entrance doors at Oasis Pool
- The unique provision of signage to help people with autism at Oasis Pool
- The opening of the town's first 'Changing Place' by the Mayor on 1st July at River Street car park
- A further 'Changing Place' is planned at Robinson Pool.

Once again, the Bedford constituency Polling Stations were access audited, and showed a slight improvement in accessibility.

In response to requests, we have contacted proprietors of several other public buildings where the accessibility or services to disabled people has been below the standard expected by the Equality Act.

In the year ended 31st March, the Council made 7 Access Improvement Grants totalling over £5,000 to applicants such as places of worship and community and village halls.

Highway Matters

Throughout the year Committee members have been encouraged to report highway difficulties directly to the Council's Highways Helpdesk.

Regarding 'A Boards on pavements', the Committee has insisted that the Council should undertake an Equality Analysis review of its tolerance policy. Whilst not achieving zero tolerance, the Council has decided to tighten up, so that the 'tolerance' width between obstructions and the pavement edge is increased to 2 metres – meaning that in many town centre streets (e.g. Mill Street) 'A' Boards would not be permitted. Also, only one display or 'A' board will be allowed outside premises.

Consultation Groups

The Group has continued to be recognised as a member of:

- the Bedford Diversity Network
- the Bedford Partnership Board's Social Inclusion Theme Group.
- the Partnership Board's 'Physical Disability and Sensory Impairment' Theme Group which has continued to be a key forum for the Access Group to influence policy and practice in the Borough.

This report would be incomplete without mention of our disappointment at the closure of Liveability's Bedford office.

The future

This Report is, of course, as usual a general overview of the Group's main activities over the past 12 months. It does not record all the many suggestions made, experiences shared and actions undertaken by committee members. We are sure that our late Chairman, David Walker, would have wanted to thank the Committee for their continued support. No doubt, Bedford and District Access Group will continue to play an important part in helping to make Bedford a better place to live in, work in and to visit.