Best Practice: Directory of Accessibility for Disabled People

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CITY: DUBLIN   **POLICY AREAS: SOCIAL SERVICES; TECHNOLOGY**

BEST PRACTICE

Since 2008, the online **Access Guide** of Dublin, found at www.accessdublin.ie, has been maintained by the Access Unit at the Department of Planning and Economic Development of Dublin City Council. The online Access Guide contains information for people with disabilities about the level of access they will encounter at particular venues across Dublin. Dublin City Council is now collaborating with three other Dublin local authorities (Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown, South Dublin, and Fingal County Councils) in further developing the Access Guide. Each administrative authority will be responsible for adding accessible information for their particular area.

ISSUE

People with disabilities, parents with young children, and older people may face difficulties in accessing venues such as restaurants, pubs, hotels, cinemas, and shopping centers. The online access guide provides information for people to plan daily activities and trips based on the ease of access to particular places and amenities.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In developing the Access Guide, the city focused on the following goals:
- Give people with disabilities the confidence and freedom to choose where they want to go based on information regarding accessibility.
- Create awareness and understanding of access issues among private sector establishments, leading to greater accessibility facilitated by business owners.
- Help to promote the City of Dublin and the greater Dublin region to the disabled tourism industry.
- Increase the number of businesses on the directory by twofold to make the directory a more robust resource for the target audience.

IMPLEMENTATION

Background
Ireland's Disability Act (2005) requires that Dublin City Council ensures that all of its services and facilities are fully accessible by 2015. This includes roads, footpaths, pedestrian crossings, parks, heritage sites, and public buildings.

In this context, the City Council commissioned an audit of its roads, parks, buildings and services. The results and recommendations from these audits were incorporated into an implementation plan that was produced in consultation with people with disabilities. Resident feedback continues to be of high value to the City Council in terms of developing all policies and programs.

The Access Guide for Dublin, was produced in 2008 by the Access Unit in conjunction with the Information Systems Department and Storm Technology, which was used to facilitate citizen feedback and input. Thousands of audit reports that highlight the results and the remedial works necessary to make the city universally accessible were uploaded and discussion forums were developed to enable citizens to view and comment on these audits. City Council employees are registered as members to answer queries and respond to comments.

Barcelona Declaration: Initiating the Access Business Directory
In 1999, the City Council signed onto the Barcelona Declaration, a commitment by the City to improve the lives of people with disabilities working, living, and visiting the city. It was not until 2007 when the Access Unit was formed that the city of Dublin began to initiate plans for the Access Guide. Although Dublin City Council has the power to amend their own public roads, parks and buildings, this power does not extend to private businesses in the city. Thus, the City Council needed to find ways to creatively approach and engage the business community. The City Council teamed up with a company called

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Disabled Go to produce the online Access Guide for Dublin. The accessible information in the directory is provided in text and symbol format with accompanying images.

Development of the Access Guide for Dublin
Initially, 1,000 commercial and business premises were assessed by Disabled Go surveyors regarding their accessibility for people with disabilities and these results were made available via the Disabled Go website www.disabledgo.com. The City Council then transferred this content and made it available via www.accessdublin.ie. The 1,000 businesses assessed for the directory were chosen by people with disabilities and disability organizations through a series of consultations.

Redevelopment of the Access Guide for Dublin
In order to further develop the Access Guide, the City Council decided mid-2009 to develop its own software to display the information regarding accessibility.

The City Council then began plans to extend and expand the Access Guide by commissioning its own team of surveyors and designing custom software for tablet personal computers (PCs), enabling surveyors to carry out the audits as professionally and thoroughly as possible. These steps were taken in partnership with the Information Systems Department in Dublin City Council and Storm Technology, a web design company. The audit software consists of a series of templates that each contains questions in relation to the accessibility of a venue. It is notable that many of the people who carried out the audits in the field were recruited from the ranks of the many unemployed architects and surveyors in Dublin.

Author Maeve Binchy holds a sign typically posted in front of an Access Business Directory participating business.

The development of the custom software along with the newly designed access website has enabled the City Council to display its own data and opened the door to rolling out online accessibility directory for all citizens with access issues.

Future Plans
Three other Dublin local authorities in conjunction with Dublin City Council are currently in the process of recruiting interns to assist with the carrying out of access audits of venues in Dublin. The success rate of our commissioned team of surveyors proved to be quite slow. Understandably, businesses found it difficult to pay for such a service in the current economic climate, resulting in a poor take up of the service. The four local authorities have now agreed to offer this service free of charge to businesses who wish to advertise their accessible features. We have worked with a local scheme called Jobbridge which allows organisations like ourselves to recruit people (students and/or professionals) that are out of work and claiming social welfare to take part in a 9 month programme that would increase their experience and expertise in certain fields, while obtaining extra money in addition to their weekly benefits.

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Photo of accessibility signs placed at Civic Offices, Dublin City Council.

COST

The first year investment in the project was €55,000 ($68,000 USD) to cover the cost of auditing over 1,000 businesses in Dublin and posting the information on the website.

Then €54,000 ($66,500 USD) was invested to develop software to carry out the audits with Dublin's own surveyors, and to design the online Access Business Directory.

Although Dublin City Council intends to offer the service to join the Access Guide for Dublin for free there will be certain on-going costs to incur.

> Access Audit and Marketing Training every 9 months: approximately €4,000 ($5,115 USD)
> Travel, lunch and mobile phone expenses: €250 ($319 USD) per month
> Equipment: camera, measuring tape, stationary: approximately €300 ($384 USD)

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The online Access Guide has provided the elderly and many people with disabilities a valuable online resource which they can use from the comfort of their own home.

In 2010-2011, 40 new businesses signed up to the Access Guide for Dublin

In 2010-2011, the Access Guide received approximately 70,000 "genuine visitors," or visitors who have viewed beyond the homepage, with views from countries as far away as the USA, Mexico and Australia.

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A number of businesses on the directory have reported access improvements to their facilities and services since joining.

The Access Unit has collected the following data:
- 28% of the venues edited their online listing and have provided more visitor information and accurate contact details.
- 23% of the venues improved their non-structural physical access, which includes:
    - a provision of hearing assistance;
    - disability awareness training; and
    - use of email addresses as an alternative way of conducting business.
- Only 2% of the venues improved their physical access. The range of access improvements included:
    - provision of accessible toilets;
    - automatic doors; and
    - provision of designated parking bays.

TIMELINE

2007-2008	Development and launch of www.accessdublin.ie
September 2008	Access Guide for Dublin City is launched as part of www.accessdublin.ie
April-May 2009	Promotion and Awareness Campaign (news articles and radio advertisements)
September 2009	Dublin City Council began the process of developing its own software
September 2009	Commissioned five local Access Surveyors to carry out future audits
December 2009 – December 2010	Phase 2 of Awareness Campaign (schools awareness pack, awareness DVDs, and news features)
March 2010	Formal collaboration of the three other Dublin local authorities to further develop the Access Guide
September 2010	Access Surveyors Trained on tablet PC's
September 2010	Completion of Access Guide redesign and software development
September 2010	Development of strategy for surveyors to assess other regions of Dublin
August 2011	Realization of slow progress from businesses and decision to offer it for free
December 2011	Application by Dublin local authorities to recruit interested Jobbridge Interns.
March 2012	Interview intern candidates for Access Auditor role
March 2012	Training of interns
April 2012	Roll out of strategy for interns

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December 2012   Renew process of recruiting next round of interns

LEGISLATION

The Disability Act of 2005 was designed to advance the participation of people with disabilities in society by improving the provision of specific services for the disabled and improving access to mainstream public services. Among other responsibilities, it places obligations on public bodies, such as Dublin City Council, to make their services and buildings accessible to all.

The Barcelona Declaration was first mooted in 1995 at a European conference, "The City and the Disabled." At that time, almost 150 city and municipal representatives signed or signaled their intention to sign the Declaration. Since then, 436 Municipal Authorities across Europe have agreed to this important convention on accessibility. Although it has no legal force, the Declaration obliges local authorities to promote disability awareness, develop a mechanism to disability proof policy, orchestrate a consultative process, provide people with disabilities with physical access and access to services, provide disability and equality training programs, develop monitoring, evaluate impact assessment procedure for policies and actions on disability issues.

LESSONS LEARNED

Rights to Symbols
The Access Guide for Dublin displays its information in symbol as well as text format. For example, a venue that has level access and an automatic or push button sliding door at its entrance will be awarded the wheelchair symbol. Most of the symbols used adhere to the British standard (i.e. the symbol for sign language or guide dog). However, certain information the Access Unit wanted to provide was not symbolized according to the British standards collection, which meant the Access Unit had to design its own. The Access Unit was assisted by the Information Systems Department during the design process.

Local Knowledge Base
Having a team of surveyors from the local area was found to be best practice in terms of developing the Access Guide for Dublin. Initially, a team travelling from abroad that had no local knowledge was used. Although their work was fruitful, it became clear that having local knowledge of the area as well as local contacts with businesses was vital.

Security Settings
The interns commissioned for the Access Guide will use tablet PC's that contain the access audit software to add a new venue to the Access Guide. When the surveyors carry out an audit, the information will be be automatically uploaded to the server, which is then reviewed by City Council staff before the information goes live. Since these surveyors are not employees of the City Council there was an issue with uploading it to the server. This delayed the project by a couple of months, but it is now resolved.

Signage
As part of the promotion and awareness campaign in relation to the Directory, the City Council produced a sign saying "Access Matters Here," which is distributed to all businesses that join the Directory. This sign is an indication that the business cares about the needs of its customers, and although it may not be fully accessible, it is willing to help people with disabilities partake in their services as frequently as possible. Through consultation with disability stakeholder groups, City Council found that such a symbol may cause confusion to the general public. The confusion is that a person may think a venue is fully accessible upon viewing the sign, which is not necessarily the case. Therefore, a new design has been produced in conjunction with the Innovation Academy in University College Dublin and Trinity College Dublin that encompasses the notion of "Access for All".

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<u>User Testing</u>
Making sure that the software is operable based on the needs of the Access Unit was very time consuming. Despite all of the meetings and documentation, each time the software was tested for usage new ways to improve the software were found. Although this process delayed the website launch, it was vital to ensure that it functioned perfectly after testing the software with the web designers.

TRANSFERABILITY

The Access Guide model is transferable. Dublin City Council decided at an early stage in the development that the Access Guide web based software and the tablet PC's based software should be developed for reuse elsewhere, thus ensuring that the newly developed system and concept can be taken on board and commenced by any local authority that wishes to do so. This concept fits neatly in with the notion of collaboration among local government in Ireland. Louth County Council has since expressed an interest in utilising such software.

At a recent project meeting in Brussels, attended by local authorities from the UK, Malta and Iceland, all expressed an interest in utilizing the software when the project is completed.

In addition, Dublin City Council is now part of an International Network of European Capital Cities on Disability, where ideas and best practices are shared and exchanged.

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Facts and figures in this report were provided by the highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners.