STRIVING FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT: LEARNING STRATEGY ADOPTED BY POLICY IMPLEMENTERS AT LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND

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The research will explore views on inclusive design policy implementation and learning strategy used in practice by Local Authorities' planning, building control and policy departments in England. It reports emerging research findings. The research aim was developed from an extensive literature review, and informed by a pilot study with relevant Local Authority departments. The pilot study highlighted gaps within the process of policy implementation, a lack of awareness of the process and flaws in the design guidance policy. This has helped inform the development of a robust research design using both a survey and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire targeted key employees within Local Authorities designed to establish how employees learn about inclusive design policy and to determine their views on current approaches of inclusive design policy implementation adopted by their Local Authorities. The questionnaire produces 117 responses. Interestingly approximately 9 out of 129 Local Authorities approached claimed that they were unable to participate either because an inclusive design policy was not adopted or they were faced with a high workload and thus unable to take part. An emerging finding is a lack of understanding of inclusive design problems, which may lead to problem with inclusive design policy implementation, and thus adversely affect how the built environment can be experienced. There is a strong indication from the survey respondents indicating that they are most likely to learn about inclusive design from policy guides produced by their Local Authorities and from their colleagues.

Keywords: implementation, inclusive-design, English local authority, policy, learning.

INTRODUCTION

The research is concerned with inclusive design within the built environment and its implementation through policy to ensure the built environment provides accessibility to a wide range of the population. It focuses on the exploration of a learning strategy of inclusive design policy adopted by local authorities. In addition general views on

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the current approach of inclusive design policy implementation held by the key players at Local Authorities are also examined and some of the findings are included in this paper.

Firstly, the paper provides a summary of the background as a way of introduction to the topic area and its importance, and that of inclusive design policy implementation. The background information is focused on the need for inclusive design in the built environment and the importance of its implementation through the use of policy. Thereafter, a summary of a preliminary study was included. Finally, the questionnaire results are discussed, focusing on an inclusive design learning strategy adopted by the Local Authorities and gathering the views of policy implementers on inclusive design strategy.

The findings suggest that policy implementers are most likely to learn about inclusive design policy from policy documentation and colleagues. Because interpretation and meaning are part of a learning strategy; it is vital for policy guides to be self-explanatory and for colleagues to have adequate knowledge. In addition policy implementers appear to be shifting inclusive design responsibilities from those based in planning/development control to those in building control departments.

BACKGROUND

In the UK during the Second World War, many veterans were returning wounded, which prompted the Government to draft the Disabled Persons (Employment) Act, 1944; to allow disabled veterans, but also non-veteran disabled people, to interact within the labour market (DPEA 1944). In addition, the 1970 Act was further introduced to positively influence accessibility within the built environment (Health 1970). Both of these statutory instruments and successive legislation has thus far failed to deliver inclusive design as planned.

Imrie (1999) stated that most non-disabled people see disabled people as minorities; therefore access related expenditure will need to be justified. The recent National Statistics Survey 2009/2010 (Howe 2010) indicated that over 40% of people aged 65 are disabled, with the figure rising as age increases. The UK is one of the countries where the population of over 65 years old is approaching 15% (Crews and Zavotka 2006). It is suggested that one of the implications of an aging population is an increase in health care expenditure of 300% by 2041 (Crawford, Barton *et al.* 2010). Thus if the disabled population is to have access to the built environment additional research funding will be required. With life expectancy set to rise in the 21st century, this population is rapidly becoming a non-silent minority. The interaction of disabled people with the built environment is vital to avoid unnecessary institutionalisation such as the provision of special homes, schools and other services, which differs from the rest of the population (Imrie 1999).

The physical built environment needs to play a key role in accommodating disabled people, rather than disabled people accommodating the built environment. It is often the case that disabled people avoid inaccessible venues, leading to isolation from their communities (Oliver and Barnes 1998). Alternatively, it can be argued that where the built environment accommodates the accessibility needs of the wider population, it will consequently prompt an increased population to use it effortlessly. Furthermore, it can be argued that any choices which can result in the built environment focusing on accommodating younger and more active groups is more likely to exclude disabled and elderly groups.

Inclusive design implementation

To improve inclusive design policy implementation, the UK Government has introduced various access/inclusive design policies over the last 40 years, including an accessible housing policy in the early 1970's (Health 1970). After the introduction of the policy the Government passed legislation and allocated resources for its implementation (Barrett and Fudge 1981). Policy statements and circulars act to govern policy rules and objectives which in turn provide measurable performance indicators. The UK Government has effectively made discrimination illegal through the Disability Discrimination Act 1995/2005 (DDA 1995) recently incorporated within the Equality Act 2010 (ODPM 2010), and the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (Government 1990), Planning Policy Statements 1 (PPS1) (ODPM 2005) and the Building Regulations 2000/2004 (ODPM 2004).

In order to examine the effectiveness of the policy implementation strategy, there are two useful areas to consider. Firstly, as Drucker (1999) commented that if policy objectives are only for good intentions, they are worthless. Secondly, performance objectives and purposeful actions are taken, when one knows what is needed to be done and more importantly how to go about doing it. We argue that one will know through learning. In order to examine these two areas it is vital to look at these policies implementation strategy adopted by Local Authorities.

The introduction of policy does not guarantee its implementation, nor does it guarantee that the policy intention will be clearly understood by policy implementers. In addition the policy implementer's effort to follow the policy is also regarded as one of the key contributions towards implementation (Sabatier and Mazmanian 1980). However, for individuals to perform their tasks they should understand what is expected of them and how to interpret it in order to fulfil their responsibilities (Martin 2005). There are several ways of policy learning through direct experience, debate and through indirect learning such as learning from other people and organisation's experience (Levitt and March 1988). Learning is regarded as a way of gaining new understanding such as the viability of policy introduction and policy implementation strategy. Tracing successful conditions through broader evaluation can strengthen learning (Levitt and March 1988; May 1992).

It is the Local Authorities' statutory obligation to design and implement a policy to integrate disabled people within their communities rather than segregating people into for example residential care homes (Barnes 2000). It is suggested that under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 that disabled people who are discriminated against have a right to legal redress (DDA 1995). Recent research (Roulstone and Barnes 2005) shows that only 16% to 20% of all the DDA related cases are heard at tribunal. This is mainly because most disabled people are unaware of the process of taking cases of discrimination to court, with those who are aware being unconvinced there will be a positive outcome and finding the task daunting, costly and stressful (Gor 1999; Jaeger 2006). Moreover most disabled people are impaired and/or illness which will inevitably reduce their ability to defend their legal rights (Morris 2001). Therefore, it is unreasonable to assume that inclusive design can be implemented through the actions of disabled people challenging service providers alone.

Although it can be argued that there is an improvement in disability awareness amongst policy implementers involved in the building design process, the progress appears to be relatively slow. The degree of knowledge and resourcefulness of Local

Authority officers are part of the critical ingredients in responding to disabled people's access needs (Imrie 1999).

BACKGROUND TO THE WORK TO DATE

In order to help shape the research and gain an initial understanding of the disability policy landscape, a series of preliminary semi-structured interviews were conducted within eight Local Authorities in England. These provided initial data and allow a series of research questions to be developed. Each interview lasted for about one and half hours. The interviewees were eight professionals, mostly Access specialist professionals employed by some Local Authorities to assist with inclusive design implementation.

The purpose of these interviews was to understand the approach to and constraints impacting upon inclusive design policy implementation. This preliminary study concluded that there were many technical and practical guides available; however their implementation was obscured. This was caused by a lack of ownership, monitoring and knowledge amongst those responsible for policy implementation. This appears to be a major problem with the policy implementation process.

It was also evident that Access officers are finding the task of policy implementation increasingly difficult under the current workload. Inconsistencies have dominated inclusive design implementation across Local Authorities and even between one officer's policy interpretation and another's. In addition to these findings, research carried out in Sweden highlighted the barriers in achieving inclusive design as due to a lack of time, limited budget, lack of knowledge and lack of evidence on the profitability of inclusive design products (Björk 2009). The research described in this paper is taking a different stance, investigating the learning strategy adopted by Local Authorities to improve their understanding of the implementation of inclusive design policy. Focus on key players active in policy implementation and exploring their views on inclusive design implementation as applied through their practical experience offer the prospect of some novel findings. This paper aims to describe where professionals engaged in inclusive design policy implementation are likely to learn about this policy and what their views are on the inclusive design policy adopted by their Local Authorities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper is focussed on the learning approaches adopted by Local Authority employees as they work to implement inclusive design policy.

This research was designed to examine the extent of the inclusive design learning strategy adopted by Local Authorities, and the suitable method for collection of the data was a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was administered to target a large sample population of access policy implementers across England. The time and resource together with a clear choice of research questions merit that the survey approach was a suitable option for the purpose. Furthermore, research can benefit from data generalisation when the findings are replicated on many different sample populations (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004).

Focusing upon the questionnaire which forms part of the main empirical work; the sampling template of Schofield (2006) was used to obtain consistency and to minimise bias amongst the responses. This aided the identification of a relevant sample population deemed to be suitable for this study. The wording for the questionnaire was

carefully chosen to secure the maximum accuracy for the candidates interpretation and response (Dillman 2000).

Local Authority employees are the key players responsible for enabling the building of inclusively designed developments in their local communities. They also oversee the implementation of the inclusive design policy, promote inclusive design in their local areas and eradicate/minimise discrimination (ODPM 2005).

The researcher was also aware of the limitations of pre-design/categorised questions and that they may not reflect some local constituencies' understanding of basic concepts, therefore open-end questions were also included within the questionnaire. Open-end question gave flexibility to allow the respondents to give their views at the end of the questionnaire and to describe any additional information related to inclusive design policy implementation with which they were familiar, about half of the respondents participated in the open-end question.

SURVEY APPROACH

The researcher obtained the Local Authorities' contact details through their websites. Thereafter Local Authorities were contacted with a request to speak to a senior professional based in either planning/development control, building control or policy departments to whom the project was briefly introduced. They were asked to confirm their interest in participating in the research. Following confirmation the questionnaire link and a brief description of the questionnaire were sent to them. The senior persons were requested to distribute the questionnaire to 4-6 professionals based in those departments. About 129 Local Authorities randomly selected across England were contacted and 120 Local authorities confirmed their participation. There were 117 responses and it took one month to complete the questionnaire.

SURVEY RESULTS

Table 1, The question asked the respondents is as follow

Please rate how you learn about inclusive design. (Please answer all 4 boxes)					
Answer Options	All of the time	Most of the time	Some of the time	Seldom	Never
Access specialists	13	16	33	27	14
Senior staff	8	13	46	28	8
Colleagues	8	32	50	11	4
Policy guides	19	54	28	7	0

The questionnaire results show that policy implementers are most likely to learn inclusive design requirements from policy guides; there is also a significant amount of respondents who learn from colleagues most of the time; refer to Table 1 and Figure 1. It can be argued that learning from written policy documents, will give the policy implementer a factual source in case of any challenge in any decisions made. The respondents revealed that they seldom learn from senior staff and access specialists. It must be noted that, Access specialists are employed only by a few Local Authorities and the data does not allow the identification of Local Authorities with Access Officers.

Figure 3, From where do you learn about inclusive design policy
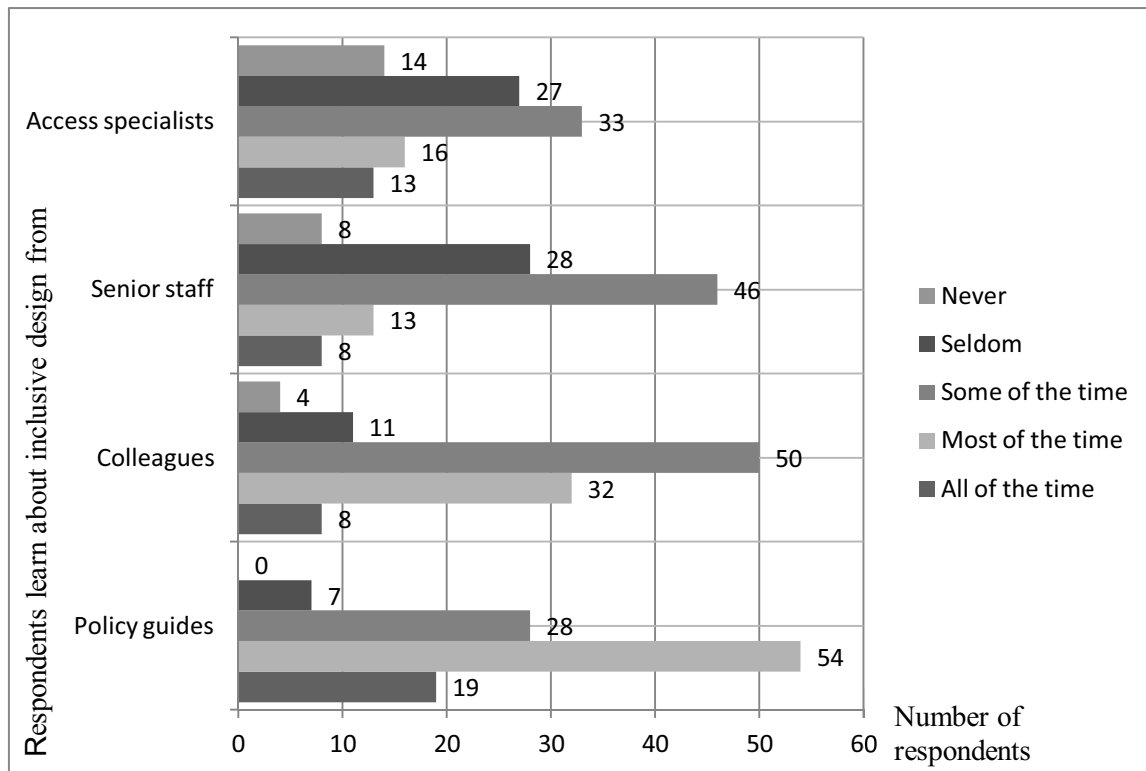
Besides a learning strategy adopted by Local Authorities, the respondents were asked to share their views on the current approach to inclusive design policy implementation in their perspective Local Authorities. The question asked was "*Anything else you would like to share regarding the current approach to inclusive design policy implementation in your Local Authorities?*"

Although most Local Authorities have adopted a common policy this seems to be nebulous. As one respondent stated "*Inclusive design seems to be a box to tick, rather than a criterion for assessing the success of a scheme. In general, the accessibility of a development, including its legibility and fitness for purpose, is a rather nebulous quality that many planners interpreting drawings submitted with applications find difficult to conceptualise.*" (By: planning/development control officer)

It was also noted that a responsibility/accountability strategy was unclear for the parties involved to act upon, those respondents who are based in planning/development control view inclusive design policy implementation as building control responsibility and vice vase. As one respondent stated:

"*Not really something that plays a significant part in the approval process for Building regulation purpose, our role is relatively straight forward in looking for part M compliance although the interpretation can vary significantly.*" (By: building control officer)

Furthermore the results show that in most cases planners see themselves as promoters and facilitators of inclusive design. As one of the planning respondents stated:

"*Inclusive design is generally promoted and facilitated through the planning process and most larger developers / building companies incorporate these in their standard*

builds however it is generally building regulations that enforce its implementation".(By: planning/development control officer)

The implementation of inclusive design policy is regarded as a Building Control job; however it should be noted that Building control enforcement of accessibility issues are based on the Building regulation (Part M). As stated by a number of respondents:

"Whilst inclusive design is important and access for all is essential, in planning terms it is sometimes ignored or not considered as important as it is mainly dealt with in Part 'M' Building Regulations. Access for all can also be compromised when dealing with listed buildings or retail/residential units that are raised above an adjacent public walkway."(By: Policy officer)

"While the Local Development Framework does include an inclusive design policy, there is often an expectation in practice that these issues will be dealt with at a later stage by Building Control, leading to problems where the Building Control plans are different from the approved planning permission, which might need to be regularised through a revised planning application. There is better communication now than there was in the past, as awareness improves."(By: policy officer)

"Overkill, dealt with by Part M of the building regulations" (By: planning/development control officer)

Results have also revealed that policy implementers are working under time restraints and limited knowledge; therefore they are unable to give a thorough scrutiny to designs submitted to them.

DISCUSSION

Over sixty percent of respondents highlighted that they learn about inclusive design from policy guides all or most of the time. It is thus argued that clear policy guides will increase confidence and understanding amongst policy implementers to take decisions (Underwood 1981). As stated by one of the respondents

"Whilst we have policies regarding inclusive design, the main issue is the way in which they are worded, as they are very vague and do not necessarily relate to all development types. This in turn makes the issue less important in the decision making process as the policies are not strong enough to justify giving sufficient weight to the matter".(By: Policy officer)

The second most rated learning strategy as indicated by thirty-six percent of the respondents is learning from colleagues all or most of the time; this approach can be useful in organisations where explicit and tacit knowledge is recognised in the organisation (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka, Toyama *et al.* 2000). Besides, a learning strategy has meaning and an interpretation attached, and different policy implementers might interpret a different meaning to similar situations (Mowrer 1960). As argued by Sabatier (1988) that the importance of a policy-oriented learning framework will highlight the value of the policy and the associated problem and consequences. Learning is likely to equip professionals with a better understanding over time and experience is likely to help to improve this understanding (Sabatier 1988). Although it can be argued that senior staff has the advantage of experience from which the rest of the organisation can learn, the questionnaire results show that a large number (over sixty-five percent) of response seldom or some of the time learn from their senior colleagues. The authors support Pressman and Wildalvsky (1973) statement that " an individual who fails to learn from experience is forever lost in a chaotic world".

However, learning from experience requires a system in place to record past experiences (Nonaka 1994), this view will be explored in detail in the next phase of this research. There is an inconsistency in the respondents about learning from Access Specialists; similarly there is an inconsistency in Local Authorities employing Access Specialists or their job descriptions. As one respondent mentioned

"An Access Officer is no longer employed by the Council and Building Control rarely comments on applications, so there is a lack of expert advice on this issue at the current time". (Responded by: planning/development control officer)

Planning/development control deals with external aspects of the inclusive design i.e. in ensuring access to and around the building as well as egress of the building, while building control examines access issues in detail i.e. the size of the stairs, handrails and colour contrast. For the building control personnel to ensure physical features are designed to the required standard the provision of the space needs to be allocated at the early stages of design. However, due to the division of these departments the design might be given approval at the planning stages but prove difficult to satisfy the basic requirements of Part M. Part M defines some accessibility issues, but it is not a comprehensive extensive inclusive design standard.

Planner/development control officers view inclusive design as the responsibility of Building control officers. On the other hand Building control officers' views inclusive design implementation as a role of planning/development control. Limited knowledge and resourcefulness has been criticised in the field of accessibility for the past decades (Imrie 1999). It can be argued that limited knowledge of inclusive design may result in reduced confidence amongst policy implementers in Local Authorities to take action or make the right decision in inclusive design issues.

CONCLUSIONS

Policy implementers have adopted a wide range of learning approaches at their Local Authorities, with the majority of the respondents learning inclusive design policy from policy documents. Therefore policy documents should be very clearly worded.

The paper also argued that with Local Authorities reluctant to employ Access Specialists, learning from the past experience of their own professionals can help individuals to do better in the future. The lack of a past experience recording system in place can result in professionals having a poor or incomplete record of the level of inclusive design progress in their local environment or ways of learning from past good designs and/or poor designs. A further complication is that building control and planning/development control departments have different views, hence development assessments are subject to the individuals' knowledge or the prioritisation of inclusive design policy in a particular Local Authority or department. In addition these departments appear to work towards separate goals.

The shifting of the responsibilities between planning, building control and planning policy was highlighted as one of the possible contributing factors to poor inclusive design in the industry. The lack of clear definition of responsibilities and accountability of inclusive design amongst parties is likely to discourage professionals from acting effectively.

Due to the high work load faced by Local Authorities, some employees were unable to participate in the research. There was also an absence in questionnaire participation from Local Authorities who have not adopted an inclusive design policy.

The next phase of research will focus on evaluating the policy goals adopted by Local Authorities and comparing them to the UK government goals for inclusive design policy. The research will also further explore the understanding of inclusive design policy amongst policy implementers and the influences of the policy in the decision making strategy of inclusive design.

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