

Universal Design: Barrier-free Environments

European good practice in inclusive design



Following a two-year Grundtvig partnership between disability and access organisations from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Spain and the UK, a new online resource collating good practice and shared learning was launched in May 2013, showcasing valuable initiatives towards barrier-free environments from each of the partners. CAE, proudly represented the UK in this partnership project, contributed expertise on inclusive design and access to the built environment, capitalising on the country's extensive experience and actively strengthening European networks in the field. Here, Foteini Galanopoulou, Project Manager, shares with us the vision of the project and the best practice discoveries.

A vision for accessibility: a given, not a utopia

When the partners came together to discuss and shape the project, they all shared a fundamental vision about accessibility: to make it a given, not a utopia. Their drive was to remove barriers faced not only by many disabled people, but also by older citizens, parents with children or effectively anyone engaging with society. The key to materialising the vision was to identify and share solutions for user-friendly and inclusive environments by involving all sectors of the community in the process.

Each partner organisation had a wealth of experience and knowledge in the field focusing on different aspects, from advocating for disability rights and campaigning, raising awareness, to providing consultancy and developing access tools. Sharing this knowledge and learning with each other resided at the heart of the two-year Lifelong Learning project.

The activities focused on conducting two-day visits to each partner's cities, meeting with local authorities and organisations, presenting the legal and regulatory framework and examining good practice examples. The visits would conclude

in sharing useful 'do's and don'ts' and be followed by a summary of the learning that each partner took back to their respective country.

The partners

Five not-for-profit organisations formed the partnership, including:

- Lithuanian Association of People with Disabilities – the project lead
- Latvian Multiple Sclerosis Association
- The Estonian Union of Persons with Mobility Impairment
- The League of Rheumatology Affected Patients and Persons with Disabilities of the Tarragona Region
- Centre for Accessible Environments

Focus on good practice

A two-fold approach was applied in capturing the learning and developing a platform to share it effectively:

Focus on specific sectors to present case studies for and explore at site visits:

- culture and heritage
- employment
- transport
- tourism infrastructure
- education

In conjunction with; Observations and recommendations about further areas of interest:

- access campaigns and awards
- access mapping
- public realm
- retail
- other service providers

Examples of good practice and creative access solutions in heritage seemed to be of paramount importance. Visits included archaeological sites and towns, medieval castles in the countryside, and renovated museums and churches in busy urban settings. Emphasis was placed on external and internal design of listed buildings, modernised solutions applied, outdoor circulation routes, facilities and management systems.

The CAE team was particularly impressed with the following adaptations in listed buildings and heritage sites:

- the glazed passenger lift in the Museum of the Riga Stock Exchange (Latvia), that has been renovated and beautifully integrated into the buildings' layout. The lift can accommodate 15 people and at least three wheelchair users at the same time
- the access features in the Money Museum in Vilnius (Lithuania), where displays could be scrolled up and down, were complemented by height-adjustable magnifiers which allowed visitors to view different currencies on display. Sign language description was also available for selected points of interest, while the museum provided a free audio guide in five languages
- the accessible entrances and surfaces in archaeological sites in Tarragona (Spain), allowing all visitors to explore tunnels and find their way into the centre of these fascinating structures



Height-adjustable displays and magnifiers allow visitors to view different currencies



Free audio and sign language-assisted devices provide additional information



Accessible entrance at stadium in Tarragona

- the platform lift serving a subway crossing in the countryside, on the way to the Gutmana Cave in Turaida (Latvia), allowed for a safe and accessible crossing as there were no traffic lights or crossing points on the street



The platform lift at Turaida, Latvia

Alongside good practice in arts and heritage, the project participants observed many more notable applications of inclusive design in the built environment throughout (including education facilities) and service provision (such as public transport).

- the tactile name plates for each resident student in the dormitories of the Helen School in Tallinn (Estonia). The plates are placed on the wall next to each student's room, and include a large clear-print sign in Braille and their own distinctive tactile label such as a piece of wood or a button



An example of a tactile name plate with a button at the Tallinn Helen School in Estonia

- the accessible public bus network in Reus (Spain) where 13 routes are in operation to serve a city of 120,000 residents. Apart from the in-built function to lower the vehicle at bus stops for a ramp to open, the buses can accommodate up to four wheelchair users at the same time (reduced to two if accommodating powered-wheelchair users).



John Penton leads project participants on a tour of St Paul's Cathedral

During one of the project visits to London, we visited St Paul's Cathedral, where we were shown the innovative solutions applied both externally and internally – part of a complex restoration

project. The use of media and technology was also applied to increase access, such as, the virtual tour of the dome galleries, projected in a step-free room in the crypt. The programme also included a day visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum where the Museum's holistic approach to inclusion and access was presented in detail, such as, supporting disabled staff and building adaptations for both staff and visitors.

Sharing the learning online

Alongside the project activities, partners created a website to document the partnership, compile existing knowledge from their countries and develop a set of practical information and simple recommendations on how to implement inclusive environment solutions. Visitors to the website will find a combination of tools, resources, articles, publications and successful initiatives in partnering countries, which can be useful for research, starting a campaign, project planning or professional development.

The website is divided into three key sections;

- good practice case studies
- compendium of tools
- guides and recommendations

Although the partnership project activities have now been completed, the Universal Design: Barrier-Free Environments website continues to be shared locally and across European networks. It seeks to inspire and assist individuals, organisations and local authorities implement inclusive design solutions and develop their approach.

Further examples of good practice which were discovered throughout the project, include:

The Golden Crutch Award (Latvia)

Apeirons is an organisation of disabled people and their friends, based in Riga. They run The Golden Crutch Award, a successful annual campaign to raise awareness of environmental accessibility amongst politicians, architects and other stakeholders.

The Award was created in 2009 after members

of the organisation found out that the vast majority of buildings were inaccessible, despite the legal framework. Through the Awards, the organisation promotes the implementation of both the law and inclusive design from the start of a building project.

Essentially the campaign has led to increased interest in accessibility by architects and better monitoring systems for new or renovated buildings by local authorities.

For further details, visit the Apeirons website <http://tinyurl.com/Apeirons-English>

Pavement Mapping (Estonia)

Following a request from the city council, the Tallinn Union of People with Mobility

Impairment ran a mapping project to record access challenges in the public realm.

The team comprised of wheelchair users with experience of accessibility issues and professional mappers. The team used GPS devices, enhanced with tracking software to record routes and waypoints in an area of 100 kilometres worth of pavements and streets.

The data collected was edited using ESRI GIS professional software. An interactive map was then created, using colour-coding to identify different types of circulation routes:

- green: barrier-free
- yellow: accessible but assistance required
- red: not accessible

The map shows the location of street or pavement obstructions, or hazardous points (such as high kerbstones, damaged pavements, open rainwater canals), accompanied with a photo and a short text description. Accessible parking bays are also marked. The mapping project led to the successful refurbishment of one particular street – Tellinski Street. ●

For further details, visit the Pavement Mapping project website <http://tinyurl.com/Pavement-mapping-Estonia>

For further information about the partnership project, visit the project website

 www.universaldesigneu.info

Alternatively, contact Project Manager, Foteini Galanopoulou

 Email: projects@cae.org.uk

Alternatively, visit the project blog:

 www.cae.org.uk/udbe.html

For further information on the organisations taking part in this project, visit the partner websites

Lithuanian Association of People with Disabilities

 www.negalia.it

Latvian Multiple Sclerosis Association

 www.lmsa.lv

The Estonian Union of Persons with Mobility Impairment

 www.elil.ee

The League of Rheumatology Affected Patients and Persons with Disabilities of the Tarragona Region in Spain

 www.lalligaonline.org

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This article is dedicated to the memory of John Penton who led a very stimulating tour of St Paul's Cathedral to project participants.

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