

Getting in early

Martin McConaghy discusses the introduction of RIBA's Access Consultancy Services Schedule and the use of access and inclusive design specialists for construction projects

With the enactment of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) and the increasing pressure to improve accessibility within the built environment, the National Register of Access Consultants was introduced to provide a resource for organisations to obtain competent advice on accessibility and the DDA.

Additionally, RICS introduced the Inclusive Environments Consultants Scheme for the accreditation of specialists in this field. Today, both of these schemes provide a register of professionals who meet stringent criteria for competence and professionalism.

Over the past 15 years, many specialists have operated in the field of access audits, assessing existing environments. However, it is now more common for them to work alongside design teams to provide technical advice to clients on the implications of design decisions.

Changing demands relating to inclusive design and accessibility – such as the recent BS8300:2009, the Equality Act 2010 and the potential amendments to Approved Document M of the Building Regulations – will only increase the focus on these issues in construction projects.

The introduction of RIBA's Access Consultancy Services Schedule in June 2010, as part of its new 2010 agreements suite, is set to increase the uptake of specialist services and, for the first time, provides a specific scope of services.

The most important outcome of the Schedule's introduction is that there is now a defined role to be fulfilled, either by the same people who are the designers (if competent) or by a specialist

Schedule scope

The RIBA Access Consultancy Services Schedule provides a range of activities that may be required from a specialist for new or existing building projects ranging in size and complexity. It can be included or excluded from the other services covered by the RIBA agreements.

Arguably, the most important outcome of its introduction is that there is now a defined role to be fulfilled, either by the same people who are the designers (if competent) or by a specialist. This marks a stark contrast with the historical situation where many projects were implemented without this level of input – it now requires clients to make a conscious decision: do we want the work done or not and should we use the design team or an independent? Clearly for designers, the work outlined is over and above what is commonly delivered and therefore additional fees would be payable regardless of who undertakes the role.

The basic scope of works starts at RIBA stage A (Appraisal) and requires work in every RIBA stage up to and including L (Post Practical

Completion). The schedule can be adapted to suit different project requirements but the scope may include:

- an accessibility audit of existing premises
- advising the client and establishing their Access Policy
- informing the project brief, including key objectives and constraints
- reviewing the design throughout its development, providing work stage reports and updating the Access Action Plan/Strategy
- potential involvement in discussions regarding access in relation to statutory applications
- undertaking a post-occupancy review.

While the scope provides a relatively broad approach for the delivery of access consultancy services, it does not advise on the tools and content of documents to be used in the delivery of this service, or indeed a delivery methodology.

Delivery tools

A good practice approach to this issue was established in the Disability Rights Commission's *Access Statements: Achieving an inclusive environment by ensuring continuity throughout the planning, design and management of buildings and spaces* issued in 2006. This document gives detailed guidance on the process of the 'evolving Access Statement' as a tool to aid design and inform decision-making, including direction on content and scope.

A good quality Access Statement aims to:

- establish access as part of the project agenda
- communicate what the design does/does not provide for
- facilitate and document objective reviews of the design
- form the basis of operational management plans relating to access
- provide an audit trail to help demonstrate an organisation's efforts to comply with their duties under discrimination legislation.

Due to the variety and complexity of projects, the level of detail and content of an Access Statement will vary but, broadly, there are four key types. See Figure 1 and explanation below.

Strategic Access Statement

These aim to set out the client's acceptance of their legal obligations and their policy on meeting those obligations. Typically, this document will identify the client's aspirations – be they inclusive design and best practice or the statutory minimum to meet the Building Regulations. It is also useful to establish the delivery methodology and communication lines at this stage. This work needs to be done in the early RIBA stages, A/B, so that it can form part of the brief and project objectives.

Access Statements in Design

During the design phase there will be a need for review at pre-agreed stages to monitor compliance against aspirations, provide guidance and communicate any 'exceptions' which need to be accepted, while capturing and documenting any implications of the designs for agreement with the client.

Access Statements for Statutory applications

Most of us are familiar with the use of planning-based Design and Access Statements and the Access Statements required for Building

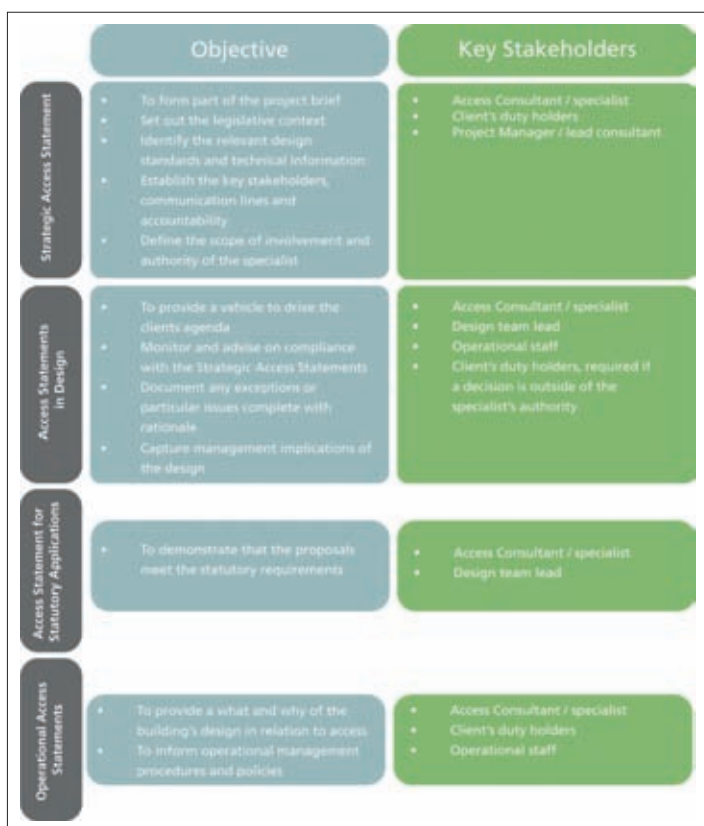


Figure 1 – The evolving Access Statement

Regulations. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to consider these separately to the other forms of Access Statement because they serve a different purpose. For example, Access Statements in Design are intended to be 'critical friends', whereas statements for Statutory Approvals are intended to demonstrate that the project meets the required standards.

Operational Access Statements

These aim to convey how and what the built design provides for, how it is intended to be used and what management policies and procedures need to be implemented to ensure an inclusive environment.

Communication and accountability of the specialists

Key to delivering successful access consultancy services is empowering the specialist to inform decision-making, and maintaining an ongoing dialogue with client representatives who are responsible for duties under equality and discrimination legislation. Simply reporting to a project team can lead to conflicts of expectation when the building is handed over, due in part to the different expectations of stakeholders. No two projects are the same and identifying the stakeholders and delivery model for the services is key to ensuring success.

This potential for conflict arises because of the relationship between the design of the property, client's obligations under discrimination legislation and the successful operational management of an inclusive environment. The key to adding value in the role of access consultancy is asking the right questions of the right people at the right time. For example, most design projects are based on current standards with little aspiration to go beyond, thereby limiting access for mobility scooters and large wheelchairs.

If you ask a client's duty holders, and particularly Disability Equality Duty Holders within the public sector, if they are unhappy with limited access they may request a higher standard. Incorporating such higher standards in the earliest of stages of a project is not particularly challenging; however, doing so once floor areas and budgets have been set is more challenging. In many respects, good access consultancy is about promoting informed decision making and communication.

A factor affecting the provision of access consultancy services is who the client actually is. Consultants can be appointed directly, ensuring that the specialist can go straight to the client with objective information about the risks and benefits of any particular decision. Some clients do not want to deal with a plethora of direct appointments. On the other hand, if the specialist is appointed by a design team there are potential conflicts which may arise when difficult decisions need to be made while balancing competing objectives.

For PMs, the increasing take-up of specialists will have implications on time, cost and risk, including:

- programmes needing to include time for specialist reviews and consultations
- additional professional fees needing to be accounted for and monitored
- additional risks likely to require managing, e.g. the absence of any particular design feature, or consultation with disability groups.

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Good access consultants can add value to projects by providing clarity, protecting the client and facilitating a more inclusive design.

Summary

The introduction of the RIBA Access Consultancy Services Schedule marks a milestone in the development of access consultancy by establishing the need for specialist advice on more projects. While the pertinent standards and legislative considerations will continue to change, the defining of a clear role can only assist in improving the quality of the built environment and delivering social and sustainability objectives.

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Related competencies include: M009, T013, T068