

# Embedding accessibility in the city of Gent

## Background

A federal law on accessibility has existed in Belgium since 1975, however most Flemish municipalities either did not know about this law, or didn't act upon it. A number of improvements have been made since. In 2003, improvements were made to laws regarding access to work and services for disabled people, this in turn led to decrees on proportional labour. Since 2010, the situation has further improved with a regulation on physical access. From now on, building permits have to be checked for compliance by an accredited advisory body.

In common with some other Flemish towns, Gent has a medieval centre with narrow cobbled streets, and historic buildings. For individuals who are elderly or disabled, this can lead to inadequate accommodation for their needs.

Until 2008, due to a lack of formal commitment (policy), actions to improve accessibility in the city tended to be done on an ad-hoc basis.



## The approach to embedding accessibility

In Gent's context, the goal of realising full accessibility was seen as an intrinsic part of economic and social progress for all. In order to realise this goal, it became apparent that any policy should be structurally embedded within the organisation. This led to the policy 'Gent Accessible to all 40 measures for a more accessible Gent'

To begin the process, introducing the concepts of accessibility and diversity was approached in a bottom-up manner. In most cases, the response was positive. However when conflicting priorities occur, accessibility is generally not a priority for other sectors and services. Another difficulty is that the policy has no formal commitment from other organisations in the city.

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Project staff found that introducing full accessibility as a concept - designing buildings and services to eliminate all barriers, is relatively new to most. In many cases, only certain groups of individuals or purely physical access were considered. Additional problems were encountered through the Belgian structure of governance; layers of government, and divisions between domains means that cross-cutting work is unusual practice.



## Accessibility Officer

An accessibility officer was employed to develop the work of 'Gent accessible for all...' This was deemed the most appropriate way to create a point of access and to ensure a consistent and experienced approach. The department for Population and Welfare was the host department for the officer, although it was stressed that the officer worked for the whole city administration. The accessibility officer employed had a background in architecture with a lot of experience working in the public sector. The main aim was to provide technical support alongside the consultants within the Disabled Persons Unit.

The starting point for the work was "total accessibility and design for all" with a priority to improve readable access and public spaces. The accessibility officer was given a small budget to carry out screenings and training activities. Local citizens were invited to access reports and raise issues for the accessibility officer to investigate.

The regulation on urban accessibility came into force in March 2010. This had a favourable impact upon the work, by making certain accessibility considerations necessary in new and renovated buildings. However, the scope of the regulation is less than ideal as elements such as signage and design are only recommendations, and not enforceable.

## The impact so far

A number of positive benefits to the activities have already been felt. Increasing numbers of requests for advice have been received regarding the construction and renovation of public buildings and urban renewal projects. (108 by June 2011)

Awareness of this initiative and of other similar initiatives in other cities and countries is rising.

- A common vision has been established with other services
- More involvement in more aspects of construction projects and less occurrences of accessibility requirements being considered late in the development
- There is good awareness of the accessibility officer by the public who is receiving more enquiries

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## The Future

The position of accessibility officer has been shown to be beneficial to the process of embedding accessibility. However, the small team is now operating at full capacity. There are some areas in which this can be improved (freeing up time by streamlining urban development processes) but ideally a minimum of two full time equivalent staff and the support of a wider team would allow the scope of the work to be wider. There are still numerous services and departments which would benefit from the expertise and assistance.

The work of the team is only just starting, and embedding accessibility in an organisation can be a costly process and compromises need to be reached. Whilst change is happening slowly, improving awareness of the issues with services, government officials, and professionals (engineers, architects etc) is an important step and one which will reap results in the future.