

Disabled People and Emergency Planning

By David McQuirk

Issues surrounding disabled people and emergency planning have not been high on the agenda for most planners due to other pressures, however current and impending legislation should change this.

Who are disabled people?

According to the latest figures, there are just under 10 million disabled people in the UK¹. This means that roughly 22% of the population of any given community currently have a disability as defined by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Of those disabled people of working age;

- 33% have mobility impairments,
- 4% have sensory impairments,
- 10% have mental health problems,
- 2% have learning difficulties,
- 52% have other disabilities including diabetes, HIV, Epilepsy, heart and lung conditions².

Relevant Legislation

There are a number of pieces of legislation that concern disability and emergency planning.

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004

The aspects of the act where there are likely to be implications for disabled people relate mostly to the duties imposed on Category one responders. These include the mapping of local risk and risk populations; warning, informing and advising the public; implementing business continuity arrangements.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 & 2005

The basic legal duty under part III of the Act is that the providers of goods and services to the public must make 'reasonable adjustments' to make those services accessible to disabled people. Obviously what is reasonable for one organisation may not be for another. To some extent

¹ Family Resources Survey 2002-03. Great Britain

² Labour Force Survey Autumn 2004

this is similar to the health and safety concept of what is reasonably practicable.

The DDA is being strengthened by the introduction of a 'Disability Equality Duty' for all public sector bodies. This will be similar to the existing duty on race brought in by the Race Relations Amendment Act and will place a duty on all public bodies or those carrying out public functions to include measures to promote equality for disabled people across all their policies.

The Human Rights Act 1998

A number of elements of the Human Rights Act affect emergency planning and disability. These include the right to life and the right to private and family life. Plans that treat disabled people less favourably in situations like triage or split up disabled and non-disabled members of families may breach the act.

What does this all mean?

Put simply, the above means that there are a number of statutory reasons for the requirements of disabled people to be included in emergency plans. Including them in plans will also mean that when issues relating to disabled people occur whilst responding, measures will already be in place to deal with them and mitigate any potential harm.

Practical issues

Planning

When producing emergency plans, provision must be made for disabled people. In order to do this, a good picture of the distribution and mix of the disabled population within an area should be obtained. This is far easier said than done, as not all of the information is easy to come by. Useful starting points are local groups of disabled people but it should be remembered that these may tend to be single impairment specific. Requesting disabled people to contact the emergency planning unit through articles in local authority and other publications may also be useful.

Exercising

When exercising a plan, particularly in a tabletop environment, it is very easy to make assumptions about dealing with disabled people. This can be overcome in several ways. The simplest is to invite disabled people to take part in live exercises. Nothing is more realistic than someone who is genuinely deaf or a wheelchair user. If there are health and safety issues in using disabled players, getting a disabled person to write a role

for someone else to play can be the next best thing provided that the player is skilled and responsible enough.

Having disabled people script characters/groups for command post and tabletop exercises is another way to promote realism. For tabletop exercises it is useful to have accurate timings for transporting disabled people when playing in real time as these can often be underestimated.

Responding

Two key elements come to the fore when responding. Contacting at risk people and supporting evacuated people.

It is important to remember that not all disabled people living in the community are known to social services and relying on them to produce a definitive list will result in some people being 'missed'. There is no easy way to contact everyone, so the response should include provision for this. It is also important to remember that some of the services that the plan depends on to assist disabled people may have had their own operations disrupted by the event.

Most disabled people will come into contact with any response at a Rest or Reception Centre. Most of the venues for these should already be accessible as they are public buildings, however not all will be and it is best to be aware of any venue's limitations before it is used. Provision for alternative methods of communication should be available. Spoken announcements will be of no use to anyone hearing impaired and conversely notices posted will be inaccessible to those people with visual impairments. In rest centre boxes, it is advisable to have large print versions of any forms, documentation and information that will be distributed. Signage should be clear, unambiguous, and contrast well with its background. Pictorial signage is very useful for people with learning disabilities and people not literate in English. The symbols in BS8501:2002 have been developed in conjunction with people with learning disabilities. Rest Centre staff should be properly trained as there have been instances where people with disabilities that give them slurred speech and unsteady gait have been turned away and directed to hospitals³.

Overall, the key thing to remember is consult and involve disabled people, and develop networks with other planners so that you can share good practice and discuss and resolve issues together.

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³ Lathrop D. (1994), Disaster in *Mainstream* November 1994
<http://www.accessiblesociety.org/topics/independentliving/disaster.htm>