Climate and disability resource for local authority climate-resilient, energy-efficient housing and buildings planning

A resource to support local authorities to create sustainable climate-resilient, energy-efficient housing and buildings policy and projects that are equitable for Disabled people

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This document is part of a set of local authority resources developed by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership's Climate and Disability project and the Sensing Climate research project. The Climate and Disability programme is part of the Community Climate Action Project, coordinated by Bristol Climate & Nature Partnership and funded by the National Lottery's Climate Action Fund.

The resources are designed to support local authorities to understand the impact that climate and nature projects can have on their local communities of Disabled people. The resources feature recommended actions that can be taken to make projects inclusive and just for Disabled people. As well as department-specific resources, there are also supplementary resources on co-production and inclusive engagement. We welcome any local authority to use the resources to support their work.

Introduction

The quality of the UK housing stock has important implications for the health impacts of climate change, as well as people's capacity to adapt to a changing climate. Housing needs to be accessible, flood resilient, and at a level of thermal comfort that does not create new health issues for residents. Yet, the housing sector is already creating challenges for many Disabled people, with a shortage of accessible homes, high rates of disrepair, exposure to indoor air pollutants and damp, and low energy efficiency.

According to research by Scope in 2023, Disabled people are more than twice as likely as non-disabled people to live in a cold house, which is a particular issue in the face of rising energy costs, energy inefficient homes and detrimental changes to welfare payments in the UK over the last 15 years. Being forced to choose between heating or eating, and with the associated fear of debt through not being able to pay the cost of energy bills, also has significant mental health implications.

When people cannot access energy services to meet their core needs (light, heating, cooling, cooking, refrigeration etc.), they experience energy poverty. Efforts to measure energy poverty typically take into account the price of energy, the energy efficiency of the housing stock and household income. However, they do not account for the greater time that many Disabled people spend at home due to wider societal barriers, nor do they account for the higher essential energy needs of some Disabled people; for example, for heat to prevent muscular stiffening with conditions like muscular dystrophy, for cooling during heatwaves when unable to thermoregulate (e.g. with multiple sclerosis), for people experiencing incontinence who need to wash clothes and bedding on a regular basis, for people reliant on ventilators and nebulisers, and for people with energy-powered assistive devices.

Efforts to decarbonise the housing stock (including existing and new homes), and to embed resilience to flood risks and overheating, could

be an opportunity to address some of these issues; but only if considered alongside accessibility measures. Support is needed, both to make and maintain such changes – either to individuals directly or through social housing providers and private landlords – since Disabled households are often less likely to have the funds or opportunity to invest in such measures independently.

Areas of housing policy that aim to enhance climate resilience and energy efficiency that risk making life harder for Disabled people include:

- **Complex grants** – when work is done on the home of a Disabled person, it creates significant disruption, which can have knock on health impacts. Not all Disabled people will be able to access or afford somewhere else to stay that meets their needs during this period, and the homes of friends and family may not be fully accessible to them. Without integrating the funding schemes for accessibility adjustments (e.g. the Disabled Facilities Grant), energy efficiency measures (e.g. Warm Homes grants) and climate resilience measures (e.g. Build Back Better grants), households are forced to navigate a highly complex landscape of different funding applications, eligibility criteria and multiple periods of disruption while works are done. The lack of accessible information or support available for navigating this complex funding landscape creates significant barriers for many in trying to understand what they may be eligible for, let alone applying.

- **Lack of disability competence in the retrofit sector** – as highlighted in a 2025 report by the Centre for Sustainable Energy, there is a need for the retrofit sector to: provide more accessible information about each stage of the retrofit process; develop tailored information that takes into account householder needs, lifestyle, and energy use patterns to support retrofit decisions; provide support to Disabled households with the application process to secure financial support, especially as the costs of retrofit are prohibitive for low income households; create accessibility plans with each household and upskill retrofit professionals such that they respect the needs of Disabled people throughout the retrofit process without adding unnecessary distress and disruption.

- **Sustainable energy technologies do not work for all Disabled people** - Sustainable energy technologies are sometimes treated with a 'one size fits all' philosophy, with social and Council-owned housing adapted in one block without consideration of the needs of individual occupants. This can lead to the installation of interfaces that occupants cannot use - or worse - technologies that are not suitable. For instance, some Disabled people find that heat pumps are too expensive to run, when poverty forces them to heat only certain rooms at a time, or too expensive to operate at the temperature required by their health. This problem is compounded by the fact that energy advice often does not acknowledge such complexities and can lead to Disabled people being directed to technologies that are not suitable for their needs.

- **Climate resilience and/or energy efficiency measures can compromise accessibility features**, for example, if: changes are made to building approach routes; if power sockets, other electrical controls or floor levels need to be raised; or air tightness needs to be improved. Air tight/double glazed door sets often include a raised threshold to maintain air tightness and prevent heat loss but this raised threshold can obstruct level access into the building, preventing wheelchair access and presenting a trip hazard e.g. for long-cane users. It is important that the controls for any new features (e.g. heat pumps, external shutters, ventilation systems, smart features etc.) are accessible and usable, including for people who may not have fine-motor control or for people who struggle with digital user interfaces. It is essential that support is given, particularly to landlords or Disabled residents of social and private rented housing, to cover the maintenance (and where necessary, timely repair) of such features to ensure ongoing effectiveness and usability.

Introducing Liza

Liza is a long-cane user with multiple sclerosis, who lives in private rented housing, with an unresponsive landlord. She recently heard about an energy retrofit scheme that her landlord might be eligible for, but she cannot access the information online as it is not screen-reader accessible. When she rang the helpline, they sent her an inaccessible pdf document in response. When she mentioned it to her landlord, he dismissed it, claiming lack of time to consider it. She struggles with the heat in the summer and the flat frequently overheats, such that much of her income goes on electricity to power a series of tower fans to make it more liveable. She also lives in a flood risk zone, has problems with damp in the winter, and has been looking into property level flood resilience measures but is worried about the weight and usability of the flood gates and the costs involved. She did try to join a local community flood group, both to contribute to community preparedness and to ensure there would be people nearby who would know to offer support in the event of a flood. But she struggled to participate in the meetings, with the high level of background noise in the meeting venue making it hard to follow the thread of discussions. Despite difficulties with her landlord, she does not want to move as she knows her routes in the area and is nervous about trying to familiarise herself with a new place since her sight has changed significantly over the period that she has lived there.

(Liza is a fictional composite character taken from the real lived experiences of multiple Disabled people.)



Key questions for planning

- **Have you conducted an Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA) on your housing and energy plans?**

- **If so:**
  - Have you considered impairment-specific effects? E.g. mobility barriers to using specific technologies, barriers to carrying out retrofit individually, extra sensitivity to temperature extremes?
  - Have you taken intersectionality into account? E.g. being Disabled and from a socio-economically disadvantaged background could mean people can only afford to heat certain rooms of the home at a time, rendering some new energy technologies like heat pumps prohibitively expensive.
  - Have you worked with a pan-impairment Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) to review and feed into the EqIA to identify potential gaps?
  - Have other organisations fed in from the perspective of communities who may not specifically identify as Disabled but who often experience high levels of impairment or illness? E.g. people who are in temporary or emergency accommodation?
  - Have you set out tangible actions to address any identified gaps in the plans?

- **If not:**
  - Could you resource a DPO to review your housing and energy plans to identify gaps?
  - Could you involve DPO representatives within an equalities partnership to embed such insights and EqIA processes into your long-term housing and energy planning and monitoring?

- **Have you established effective links with other Council departments and agencies involved in resilience planning? e.g. with social services teams to explore making accessibility**

changes at the same time as retrofit, emergency preparedness, with social housing teams to ensure that Disabled people are living in climate-resilient housing that is not at risk of flooding or overheating, and with the planning department to prevent the development of social or accessible/adaptable housing on flood plains?

- **Are new homes being designed with both access and resilience in mind?**
    - Is this notion of resilience based on the needs of a range of individuals, including people who are vulnerable to extremes of temperature?
    - Are 25% of all new homes meeting wheelchair user building standards and 90% meeting accessible and adaptable building standards?

- **Is funding available to meet the needs of Disabled people? Is this funding targeted at those most in need and is support being offered to Disabled people to access it? Are you working with DPOs and social services to facilitate this?**

- **Are your projects working to a one-size-fits-all philosophy? If so, it is important to work with individual occupants to ensure you are making changes that will not create additional barriers for them - for instance smart control systems that are not explained or responsive to particular user requirements.**

- **Are contractors trained in access needs and how to communicate effectively and respectfully with Disabled people?**

- **Are you offering energy advice that is tailored to the needs of the individual?**
    - Are advisors trained in access needs and how to communicate effectively and respectfully with Disabled people?
    - Is the amount of information and content of advice appropriate for the individual?

- Do you have accessible translation of materials, e.g. sign language, large print, audio, Easy Read, Plain English?
- Do the changes recommended meet the access needs of the individual?
- Do the changes recommended meet the financial needs of the individual? Are estimated calculations based on their individual usage?



Credit: ShamPhat Photography

Members of the Climate and Disability Forum who refined Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people

Areas to prioritise

Housing

- Ensure all new homes are at least partly accessible.
- Private, rented and social housing should be protected against disasters. This includes ensuring accommodations meet high standards of thermal comfort (both warmth and cool).
- Local councils should make a register of accessible housing.
- Disabled people's housing should be reviewed for energy efficiency and resilience. High standards of thermal comfort [both warmth and cool] should be maintained when offering housing to Disabled people.
- Social housing should have easy access to all essential services such as doctors, shops and parks.
- Ensure that the homes of Disabled people who are renting are accessible and good for the planet.
- Disabled people who do not have a home should have their needs met, especially as climate change gets worse.

Energy

- Energy advice and support should be accessible and tailored to different access needs.
- The use of new technologies for heating, cooling and control systems should all bear in mind different access needs.
- Energy funding should be designed for Disabled people and prioritise them as an important community.

Read the full list of actions to consider around disability and housing and energy in Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people.

Case studies

Community Resilience Fund: Bristol-based DPO, West of England Centre for Inclusive Living (WECIL), reported that Bristol City Council's Community Resilience Fund created structures that supported several building accessibility projects to be carried out in a successful way. A large part of this success was due to funds being allocated for each project to allow for DPOs to work with those involved at every step, from auditing to implementation. This involvement ensured the best decisions for accessibility were taken at each stage, with DPOs given time to understand the needs of their client. For example, WECIL mentioned being able to spend time at a Jamia Mosque and understand cultural needs, such as the separation of men and women, which then meant they could advise on how to improve the accessibility of the areas for men and women.

Accomodation for college students: WECIL was also commissioned to carry out an audit of a tertiary education college accommodation site. Though the institution was initially keen to collaborate, early communications waned into a lack of contact. This meant that the building work started before the audit could be carried out and there had to be a lot of retrospective action to attempt to fix the accessibility issues. Staff and students were unhappy with the project because they understood that the problems they were experiencing could have been easily fixed had they been picked up on earlier. The retrospective actions also ended up costing considerably more money than had accessibility been included from the start.

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