Climate and disability resource for local authority waste and circular economy planning

A resource to support local authorities to create sustainable waste and circular economy 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

There is growing recognition of the need for a circular economy; an economic system that keeps materials in use for as long as possible, re-using, repairing and re-purposing to minimise the production of waste and pollution. This approach to waste respects planetary limits, but must be expanded to include respect for human limits, too.

The way waste policies are often communicated and enacted is problematic for many Disabled people for a range of reasons:

- **The emphasis on eliminating single use disposable plastic makes life harder for Disabled people who rely on such plastics for care and medical purposes, eating or drinking.** For example, the plastic straw ban is one of the highest profile examples of eco-ableism (whereby environmental actions make life harder for Disabled people). The ban reduced access for many Disabled people to an important assistive tool with little meaningful impact on the reduction of plastic pollution. Alternatives are rarely appropriate; paper and biodegradable straws tend to fall apart, especially when used for hot liquids; metal straws do not flex and pose a choking hazard; glass or bamboo straws can be dangerous when used for hot liquids; and compostable straws often contain allergens e.g. gluten or starch. It is therefore essential to consider exemptions for Disabled people when introducing restrictions on single use disposable plastics and to discuss such measures with care to avoid stigmatising people who rely on them.

- **Recycling and waste services** can be inaccessible for many Disabled people, including those with mobility, sensory, chronic health and learning impairments. Though there are schemes to support Disabled people to recycle, such as 'supported collections' [or 'carry out services'] it can be difficult to find out about and apply to them or to report when a service fails to work as indicated.

The framing of recycling as a 'simple' way to contribute to environmental action alienates people who cannot recycle, be it

through inaccessible recycling facilities, chronic fatigue or not being able to see sufficiently to separate items out. More broadly, environmental messaging that foregrounds individual behaviour change over systemic change instils guilt amongst Disabled people who do not have a choice in the items they need to use and those they can or cannot recycle.

- **A focus on repair needs to be accompanied by affordable repair options with schemes for the collection and return of items for people who cannot access repair sites.** Repair costs for equipment that Disabled people may use (e.g. mobility aids) can be prohibitively expensive. Efforts to establish community reuse and repair hubs must embed disability awareness and accessibility from the outset. By supporting or creating accessible, affordable community repair cafes – and a library of things where people can borrow mobility equipment – Disabled people could be involved in the repair and re-use of such equipment in ways that have both social and environmental benefits.



Introducing Anna

Anna is a learning disabled woman with rheumatoid arthritis who feels passionate about waste reduction but struggles with recycling; in part because of the complexity of the communal recycling system in her housing association flats (with many different bins to separate things out into) and in part because the bin designs are not accessible with compromised finger dexterity. She often works with her personal assistant to write to supermarkets to ask them to stop using so much plastic and buys most of her fruit and veg from a local greengrocer who does not use plastic. She is aware that she has to use certain forms of single use plastic for medical purposes and feels guilty but unsure what to do about it. She has also been collecting a range of household items that could be repaired rather than replaced, but the nearby repair café closed down a year ago and she does not know where to take them now. She is running out of space in her small flat to store it all.

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



Key questions for planning

- **How are the needs of Disabled people being taken into account when introducing the Government's new Simpler Recycling legislation, which specifies the mix of materials and how they may be combined in collection services, the mandatory collection of food waste, and the new requirement to collect soft plastics?**

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

- **If so:**
  - Have you considered impairment-specific effects? E.g. mobility barriers to preparing recycling, or essential use and disposal of disposable single use plastics for medical reasons due to long term health conditions?
  - Have you considered the equity of waste plans for people who do not have access to a car or recycling centre? Or people who are unable to recycle without support?
  - Have you taken intersectionality into account? E.g. being disabled and from a socio-economically disadvantaged community with no local recycling centre?
  - 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 van dwellers, refugees and asylum seekers?
  - Have you set out tangible actions to address any identified gaps in the plans?

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

- **Have you meaningfully engaged with Disabled people to ensure your recycling projects meet their needs?**

- **Have you established effective links with other Council departments and agencies involved in waste resilience planning? e.g. NHS and social services around changes to medical waste collection.**

- **Are your recycling centres and other infrastructure accessible to all users, including people on foot and in mobility vehicles? Have you meaningfully engaged with Disabled people about whether this infrastructure meets their needs?**

- **Have your refuse and recycling teams been trained in how to avoid creating barriers for Disabled people in their rounds? Have they been given the time required to do their work in a careful, accessible way?**

- **How are recycling containers labelled or identified and how are the instructions for using the service made available to residents with varied access needs?**

- **Have you put in processes to enforce considerations of accessibility? For example, fines for repeated pavement blocking?**

- **Have you planned how to ensure that Disabled people understand changes to waste and recycling?**
    - Have you created accessible translations of communications, e.g. BSL, Easy Read?
    - Have you raised awareness of these changes through DPOs and other services that Disabled people use?

- **Have you considered your communications through a disability justice lens?**
    - Does your communications team have disability training?
    - Do they understand how to frame recycling and waste communications to ensure that people do not feel shamed or stigmatised for not being able to take specific actions?
    - Could communications be co-produced with a DPO?

Top priorities from Bristol's community climate action plan by and for Disabled people

Detailed actions for how to achieve these priorities can be found in the full plan.

- Care should be taken in planning and communication. While it is never the intention of communications to judge, care should be taken to ensure that Disabled people don't feel penalized or judged for using essential items.
- Ensure assistive equipment and medical equipment does not go to waste.
- Ensure that recycling and waste infrastructure is accessible for all Disabled people.
- Ensure that recycling and waste processes do not create barriers for Disabled people.

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

Further resources

- City of Doncaster Council, Northumberland County Council and Cornwall Council are often cited as good practice concerning free assisted collections.

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