

The right to access the city

Nordic urban planning from a disability perspective
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Preface

As part of the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning 2017–2020, three thematic groups were established to consider the following topics:

1. Sustainable rural development
2. Innovative and resilient regions
3. Sustainable cities and urban development

The groups were established by the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Regional Policy (EK-R), under the Nordic Council of Ministers for Sustainable Growth, with representatives of ministries, national authorities, regional authorities and cross-border co-operation committees. One purpose of the thematic groups is to implement the co-operation programme by contributing to the exchange of knowledge and experience between regional policy stakeholders, promoting Nordic perspectives and highlighting the importance of regional policy for sustainable development and growth.

This report is the result of work for the Sustainable Cities and Urban Development thematic group. The group focuses on 1) social sustainability and gender equality, 2) spatial planning, 3) urban qualities in small and medium-sized cities and the urban–rural relationship, and 4) the growth and development of Arctic cities. Within these broad themes, the group decides what activities to conduct, and researchers are responsible for their results.

The topic of this report—inclusive urban planning—is high on the Nordic agenda, and there is potential for learning and increased integration.

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Summary

The purpose of this report is to add a disability perspective to the discussion on the inclusive city in the Nordic region. This is done by studying Nordic municipal strategies and planning practices related to accessibility, universal design and inclusion from a disability perspective. In addition, we have included the perspective of users, via representatives of Nordic authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability. The cities in focus are Trondheim in Norway, Viborg in Denmark, Tampere in Finland, Reykjavik in Iceland, Qeqqata Kommunia in Greenland and Borås in Sweden. During this project, information has been gathered by interviewing national and local representatives from the selected countries and cities as well as analysing strategies and policy documents.

There has been Nordic co-operation on disability issues within an official Nordic framework since the 1990s, and today the work is primarily performed by the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability. Of course, the Nordic co-operation is supported and influenced by international frameworks, the most important being the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), adopted in 2006 and 1989, respectively, and ratified by all five Nordic countries and Faroe Island, Greenland and Åland. According to the UN, the UNCRPD marks a paradigm shift and gives universal recognition to the dignity of persons with disabilities. Even though this report primarily focuses on the city and the local level, the international framework has proven to be of importance. It seems to be especially important in countries early in the process of implementing universal design. For example, in relation to Greenland, it was mentioned that the signing of the UNCRPD resulted in the first steps towards a more accessible society.

Universal design has come to be widely used in Norway and to a varying degree in the other Nordic countries as well. The concept came out of the architecture and design field and it reflects an applied approach to social sustainability. However, universal design is also contested and sometimes considered a too academic concept.

The interviews for this report indicate that the municipalities welcome a broader discussion about accessibility. For example, in Tampere, Finland, they have gone from talking about accessibility to discussing disability issues in terms of equality. In other cities, concepts such as 'inclusion' and 'sustainability' are often used to frame accessibility.

The report shows the importance of knowledge and maintenance in disability issues. Levels of knowledge and awareness vary across municipalities, but regardless of the progress in the individual municipalities, these are highlighted as important. Regarding maintenance, the challenge is to spread both knowledge and awareness to those involved in maintaining the quality of universal design and accessibility solutions. In Viborg, for example, a cross-sectoral approach has reduced 'silo thinking' and spread knowledge about disability issues within the municipal administration.

In Norway, the central government has been an important actor in the implementation of universal design, illustrating the importance of national support, monitoring and evaluation. Over several years, initiatives by ministries and agencies have included both comprehensive strategies and more specific measures. Trondheim, which was part of a national pilot project on universal design in 2005, has now reached a point where the city can push the national development of universal design forward. Representatives from Trondheim and Greenland both mentioned the importance of data collection and evaluation for future work.

Finally, the report points to the importance of large part of universal design participation and representation in universal design. All the cities in this study emphasize the insights and contributions of people with disabilities in the planning process, in most cases in the form of institutionalized disability councils. To summarize, the lessons learned from this study concern the following topics:

- **There is growing interest in the many aspects of inclusion**
- **The UNCRPD is useful to overcome challenges of limited mainstreaming**
- **Disability issues often depend on 'champions' in local administration**
- **Knowledge and maintenance are key**
- **State support and funding are important for pushing agendas and local practice, but the municipalities can also become drivers**
- **Collecting data and conducting evaluations are important for learning and mainstreaming**
- **Representation is important**

1 Nordic learning about the inclusive city

The topic of this report should be seen in the context of the Nordic Co-operation Programme on Regional Policy and Planning 2017–2020 and its focus on urban social sustainability, urban quality and small and medium-sized cities. Planning for social inclusion has been central to the work of the Nordic Thematic Group on Sustainable Cities and Urban Development, and this report focuses on inclusion from a disability perspective. A key actor in this choice of focus was the Nordic Welfare Centre (NWC), an institution under the Nordic Council of Ministers for Social and Health Policy. One of NWC's areas of expertise is disability issues. NWC has also been tasked by the Council of Ministers to manage the secretariat of the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability (the Disability Council). The Disability Council is the Nordic Council of Ministers' advisory board and mainstreaming mechanism for inclusion and disability issues. This means that the project had support from two Nordic institutions working for three expert committees, the Committee of Senior Officials in Regional Policy (EK-R), Committee of Senior Officials in Social and Health Policy (EK-S) and the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability.

Nordregio and NWC together outlined a study and knowledge exchange on the planning and design of the inclusive city from a disability perspective. Both institutions were interested in learning more about ongoing Nordic practices and what Nordic cities can learn from each other regarding disability issues in urban planning. In the longer term, this could be the basis for a discussion on the Nordic region as a whole, and from a disability perspective would provide preconditions to realize the (envisioned) most integrated region in the world, encouraging mobility across Nordic borders.

This report presents our findings from interviewing officials working on disability issues in urban planning in Nordic cities and studying both local and national policy documents as well as research literature. A group interview with representatives from the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability adds the perspective of the users to the national and local strategy perspective. The members of the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability represent experts appointed by the governments as well as NGOs concerned with disability issues at the national level. The council members are therefore knowledgeable about the everyday life perspectives of people with disabilities and the challenges they may experience.

The purpose of the project is to add a disability perspective to the discussion on the inclusive city in the Nordic region. This entails studying Nordic municipal strategies and planning practices related to accessibility, universal design and inclusion. These can include strategies and practices in relation to housing, public or collective urban spaces or transport projects, i.e. urban development. The

examples of strategies or urban environments illustrate practices in the Nordic region. In addition, we have included the perspectives of users via representatives from NGOs.

The types of urban planning and spaces vary somewhat from case to case, but because local planning is of greatest interest, urban public spaces and urban transport issues are emphasized most strongly. The primary focus is neither indoor environments nor the design of housing, but rather urban public and/or collective spaces such as market squares, streets, parks, transport nodes and shopping centres. In addition, some cases address issues of public participation and governance related to disability issues. Initially, the ambition was to address the specific 'smart city' aspects of urban planning from a disability perspective, i.e. the use of new technology in creating supportive structures, inclusive spaces and planning processes. However, this did not emerge as a central issue from the interviews or examples that we collected. In itself, this may be considered an interesting result, but it means that the 'smart city' profile that we envisioned is not brought up very much in this final product. Urban planning and development from a disability perspective in Nordic cities are not primarily about new technology.¹

The report outline is as follows. After this introduction is a section on Nordic co-operation on disability issues, then a section presenting some key concepts and perspectives from research. Thereafter, the user perspectives are reported before the Nordic examples of urban planning and policy from a disability perspective. The report concludes with a discussion of several lessons learned.

¹ See the concluding remarks at the end of this report for reflections on this.

2 Nordic co-operation on disability issues

There has been Nordic co-operation on disability issues within an official framework since the 1990s. Now, it primarily takes place in the Council for Nordic Co-operation on Disability, which has 16 members from all Nordic countries and the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. The members are nominated by the governments and organizations representing people with disabilities at the national level. The Disability Council is an advisory board for all relevant sectors and policy areas of official Nordic co-operation. It produces yearly reports on developments and activities concerning disability inclusion. One important task is to promote and follow-up the activities of the Nordic Council of Ministers' action plan on disability co-operation (currently for the period 2018–22). The Nordic Welfare Centre holds the secretariat and co-ordinates the council's activities. Several of the current co-operation goals relate to co-operation on regional policy and planning, as well as to UN sustainability goals and broad urban social sustainability perspectives. The current action plan has three focus areas for ongoing activities: human rights, sustainable development and freedom of movement (see *Action Plan for Nordic Co-operation on Disability 2018 to 2022*). 'Sustainable development' refers to goals such as universal design and accessibility. 'Freedom of movement' addresses 'social and urban planning that supports freedom of movement for everyone' and includes 'transport, the built environment ("smart cities" and "age-friendly cities" are examples of how this is conceptualized by the WHO and others), and tourism' (Nordic Council of Ministers, 2018: 30). This means that urban planning and development issues, ideals and practices in Nordic cities are highly relevant to progress in disability issues.

The current vision of Nordic co-operation is to be the world's most sustainable and integrated region in 2030. The vision has three strategic priorities for the region: to be green, competitive and socially sustainable. Disability co-operation mainly but not solely contributes to social sustainability. Nordic co-operation is of course supported and influenced by other international co-operation initiatives. The most important example is the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). It was adopted by the UN in 2006 and since then it has been ratified by all five Nordic countries, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. The purpose of the convention is: 'To promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity' (United Nations, 2006).

According to the UN, this convention marks a paradigm shift and gives universal recognition to the dignity of people with disabilities. It emphasizes the necessity of using the correct terminology when

discussing disability, based on the understanding that disability arises from 'interaction between a non-inclusive society and individuals'. The convention is also important because it emphasizes participation. The slogan 'Nothing about us without us' underlines the importance of both the specific knowledge and experiences of people with disabilities and their *representation*, for example in urban development. Finally, the convention highlights both the current ongoing activities in our Nordic examples and what our informants claim is needed—capacity building, awareness raising and exemplars as well as mainstreaming.

Another important UN framework is *Agenda 2030* and the Sustainable Development Goals.² In relation to disability issues and urban development, goal 11 ('Sustainable Cities and Communities') should be emphasized. Among the targets agreed upon for goal 11 are:

- By 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations: women, children, persons with disabilities and older persons.
- By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries.

Moreover, goal 10 - 'Reduce inequality within and among countries'—is important in relation to disability issues in general. Among the targets agreed for goal 10 are:

- By 2030, empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

Among the members of the Council for Nordic Co-operation on Disability there is both knowledge and opinions on the most important international and national rules and regulations for disability issues in urban design. Many emphasize the UNCRPD, and some of the representatives consider it to be a bible and a useful common reference, while others see it as nice words but regard its guidelines as insufficient to affect implementation. In addition, the UNCRC is considered a strong instrument for creating inclusive environments. Another important source of instruction is the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. They also mention ISO standards on a variety of issues, the EU disability strategy and both UN and national regulations against discrimination. It is expected that an upcoming ISO standard concerning tourism will become important.

² <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>

Box 1.0 International framework of disability issues

United Nations

[The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#)

[The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)

The sustainable development goals – Goal 10:

[Reduce inequality within and among countries](#)

The sustainable development goals – Goal 11:

[Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable](#)

International Organization for Standardization:

The current ISO standard for building construction is under revision and will soon be updated:

[Building Construction—Accessibility and Usability of the Built Environment ISO/DIS 21542](#)

European Union:

[European Disability Strategy 2010–2020](#)

[The Web Accessibility Directive](#)

The new accessibility directive: [European Accessibility Act](#)

In this report, the focus is primarily the city and the local levels—i.e. public spaces, transport routes and urban planning—and therefore primarily also the role and responsibilities of local government. The local government is responsible for the creation and maintenance of accessible and inclusive urban public spaces, as well as for making public transport, tourist attractions and nature areas accessible for residents and visitors with disabilities. In addition, the municipality is primarily responsible for the democratic planning process and including the perspectives of people with disabilities. However, of course, there is Nordic co-operation on disability issues concerning subjects such as employment, education, the rights of indigenous peoples and health. However, these issues are not the focus of this report.

In 2009, the predecessor of the Council for Nordic Co-operation on Disability indicated a need for improved knowledge and education in disability issues to achieve an inclusive city (Grip, 2009). Legal changes were mentioned, as well as the need to broaden the accessibility agenda from a sole focus on people with disabilities to an issue that directly concerns everyone. Universal design was

proposed as a basis for development in that direction. This shows that the disability discourse in relation to urban development and inclusive cities has continued for at least 10 years in the Nordic context.

The *Nordic Charter for Universal Design* (Björk, 2014) was initiated in the Nordic co-operation effort by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs in 2011 'to present rationales for a successful investment in universal design' (Björk, 2014: 4). The rationales were:

- To achieve participation and empowerment for all through universal design
- To raise the importance of diversity in society through universal design
- To ensure sustainable solutions through universal design
- To secure that the government takes responsibility for and stimulates the development of universal design policies and strategies
- To encourage cross-sectoral and interdisciplinary work to ensure the most environmentally and economically sustainable universal design solutions
- To innovate through universal design
- To increase understanding of the benefits of universal design within the population

The charter expresses a strong belief in universal design as a method and approach to inclusion. Because it was initiated in Norway, it can be seen as an expression of the established position of the universal design concept. As will become clear in this report, there have been and remain varying opinions on where this concept is suitable and how it functions for planning and designing an inclusive city.

'The work with universal design starts and ends in struggle for a society for everyone and requires a broad anchoring in society among single citizens, NGOs and among both the public and the private sector' (Björk, 2014: 6).

Another Nordic initiative was a project to harmonize building regulations, co-ordinated by the Swedish Board of Housing, Building and Planning.³ The project concluded that there would be several benefits from harmonized rules, but also that it would be a challenging process to get there, involving political will, financing and the need to overcome differences in several stages of the construction process (National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2016: 10).

In 2016 the Nordic Welfare Centre published a report on co-operation on universal design and accessibility in which an expert group once again highlighted needs such as more research co-operation, more education, and benchmarking of universal design and accessibility (Nordic Welfare

³ In Swedish, *Boverket*

Centre, 2016). The argument was that countries in the region have similar welfare state models as well as ambitions and systems of inclusion, i.e. a good basis for Nordic learning. In general, the report focused on knowledge and raising awareness rather than aspects such as stricter regulations in planning and design practice. Moreover, the ambition seemed to be to portray the Nordic region as one and focus on similarities rather than comparing countries or cities and seeking differences.

To conclude, there is potential for agreements at the Nordic level on the needs and challenges of planning and designing the inclusive city from a disability perspective, but what are the main barriers? Furthermore, while the Nordic co-operation, of course, builds on similarities, there is also a potential to focus on differences and for countries to learn from each other. Before we investigate several Nordic cases, we need a conceptual apparatus to help us. Therefore, the next section reviews selected research literature.

3 Concepts matter

When studying Nordic cities and their work on universal design, accessibility, inclusive urban design and age-friendly cities, the necessary measures and policies appear to be both straightforward and complex. Measures in the built environment involve specific interventions such as ramps, handles, rest areas, good signage, tactile paving, lighting and zoning (see, e.g. The Norwegian Public Roads Administration, 2015; The Norwegian Public Roads Administration, 2016). The 'products' are there, and therefore should not be difficult to install in the urban environment. Simply put, if it is possible to design and build a staircase, it should be possible to design and build a ramp. To adapt lighting is not impossible, nor is ensuring that the street surface enables good wheelchair access.

At the same time, planning and designing urban spaces involves several actors and is a time-consuming process. It is a political process that results in environments intended to last a long time, that are maintained, managed and often adapted over time to changing functions and users. This demonstrates the need for the constant development of competence and maintenance routines, not only among the planners and designers but also among parties such as business owners, event organizers and citizens. After that, it is important how disability issues are communicated, framed and administered in the municipality. It matters to people with disabilities how their everyday life is conceptualized by municipal planners, architects and others, and it matters both for practice and legitimacy whether the issue is understood in terms such as accessibility or inclusion. Depending on the concept applied, measures may appear more or less sensible. A report by the Norwegian research institute SINTEF (Høyland et al. 2018) frames disability issues, accessibility and universal design in terms of 'inclusive area development'. This concept includes everyone, not only people with disabilities. Moreover, overall service accessibility is emphasized, and disability issues are framed as integral to social sustainability.

Social sustainability is another key concept in this context and in contemporary urban development discourse in the Nordic countries (Tunström, 2019). It is often used to frame issues related to social inclusion, cohesion, democracy and engagement in urban development. Perhaps the most obvious connections between urban planning and design and social sustainability are issues related to accessibility and disability. For open and inclusive public spaces, many types of barriers need to be removed or lowered. These barriers can be economic, social or cultural, and concern subjects such as accessibility to local services, the mix of functions in a neighbourhood or the removal of both physical and cognitive barriers in the built environment. The city needs to be designed in such a way that it makes sense and is inclusive in both form and function (Lid, 2020). An inclusive built

environment supports social sustainability by enabling both residents and visitors with and without disabilities to meet, interact and take part in the same types of activities and events. In a sense, the built environment can support inclusion and reduce social inequalities. In addition, the local planning process needs to be inclusive, making it possible for both people with disabilities and those belonging to the norm to make their voices heard.

The concept 'universal design' has come to be broadly used in Norway and to varying degrees in the other Nordic countries. It came from architecture and design, and the ambition was to place disability and diversity at the centre of the field (Dolmage, 2017). The concept originated in the US and was described in 1997 by the Center for Universal Design in North Carolina State University. The centre included seven principles in universal design: equitable use, flexibility in use, simplicity and intuitiveness, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, size and space for approach and use (Zajac, 2016). This was meant to guide designers, product developers and architects in creating mainstream accessible environments in urban public spaces, private homes and digital spaces. This report primarily addresses universal design and inclusion related to urban public spaces, but it is important to bear in mind that as society is increasingly digitalized and made 'smart' with the help of technological innovations, both opportunities and challenges arise related to universal design.

Universal design is centred on the user and represents a holistic perspective on the user's life cycle. Because a person's mobility can differ during the course of life, and everyone will suffer from loss of mobility because of old age, universal design is for everyone. The term 'accessibility' is used less and less in the Nordic countries, and more people talk about universal design, or 'design for all' (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2013). However, note that the group interview with representatives from Nordic NGOs conducted for this report clearly concluded that accessibility as a concept remains strong and important in public discourse.

However, Dolmage (2017: 110) emphasizes that universal design is a practically new and inclusive ontology, clearly separate from increased accessibility:

'UD, registered as action, is a way to move. In some ways, it is also a worldview. Universal design is not tailoring of the environment to marginal groups; it is a patterning of engagement and effort. The push towards the 'universal' is a push towards seeing spaces as multiple and in-process. The emphasis on 'design' allows us to recognize that we are all involved in the continued production of space'.

There is a recurrent critique that design with the purpose of assisting people with disabilities is often an afterthought rather akin to retrofitting an existing environment, and universal design can be

considered an attempt to respond to this critique (Boys, 2014). Instead of the situation where a ramp is placed over stairs after the original design proves inaccessible, the entrance is designed from the start to accommodate all users. Furthermore, Boys (2014: 2–3) emphasizes the common practice of treating people with disabilities as passive users of buildings and services and urges letting experiences of disability influence architecture and the built environment:

‘This is not only in terms of working towards more inclusive design improvements, but also about revealing architecture’s deepest assumptions about what is valued and noticed, and what is marginalized and forgotten, in the process of design’.

When a construction or idea is planned without a user’s perspective from the beginning, the usability of the space or building is reduced, and even new problems can appear. Boys’s main argument is that a large conceptual change concerning these questions is necessary for universal design to have any real impact.

Another risk of the concept of universal design is that emphasizing the *universal* actually obscures the differences between people with disabilities (Dolmage, 2017). Universal design can thereby exclude, regardless of intent. It cannot solve all problems related to inclusion. In the same sense, urban planning and development often tend to benefit some groups, prioritize certain solutions and put certain issues on the agenda.

Boys (2014) proposes to acknowledge ability and disability as fluid concepts. A person is not just able or disabled; everyone is on a continuum. Over time, people temporarily or permanently move along this continuum, most obviously owing to ageing. This means that issues of disability and universal design solutions concern everyone, not just categories of people or groups.

In the field of planning, universal design is a regulated practice, with measures and tools that categorize citizens, even when they cannot or should not be categorized. The understanding of concepts as fluid risks clashes with practice in a field that is as much characterized by norms and categories as urban planning.

The importance of user participation is often mentioned in universal design. Boys (2014) claims that a general problem occurs when disability experts or people with disabilities are included in a planning process to comment or critique what is already created. For universal design to have any impact, the users’ perspectives should be considered from the beginning and from all angles.

At the centre of the issue is the need for a norm-critical approach to urban planning and design. Planning and design depend heavily on norms and rules (about subjects such as sustainability, building standards or energy use) and this is highly beneficial. However, some norms can create

barriers. Is it assumed that a citizen can use his/her legs while moving around in urban spaces? Is it assumed that he/she can reach above his/her head, read from a screen or see approaching traffic? A 'norm citizen' is often an adult that can find his/her way around in the city, working 9–5 and driving his/her car. He/she goes to restaurants, shops or the cinema regularly without having to check beforehand if the location is accessible. For urban planning practice, architecture and design practice, developers, builders etc. to revise or free themselves from this norm, constant work with competence development, changed rules and regulations, pilot projects, new inventions etc. is necessary.

In this report, we refer to 'persons with a disability' rather than by terms such as 'disabled people' or 'the disabled'. In addition, we are deliberately vague in the sense that we do not discuss in detail specific disabilities or use terms such as 'people with visual impairment', or 'people with cognitive impairment' to any great extent. However, it should be emphasized that there are problems with vague terminology. People with disabilities are a diverse group, consisting of individuals and several (variable) subgroups with very different needs and opinions. This also has implications for participatory processes. Who is selected to represent whom in a participatory event? According to the UN Convention, 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

According to Boys (2014), there may be conflict and friction not only between groups with different disabilities but also between people with disabilities and those without. Boys questions the view that 'what is good for a person with disability is also good for everyone, or that what is good for a person with one kind of disability is also good for all others' (2014: 27). According to her, this naive and simplistic idea is often presented by public authorities to upgrade universal design and make diversity invisible. For example, tactile paving is good for a visually impaired person, but not for a person in a wheelchair. By emphasizing or discussing these kinds of frictions, universal design becomes more creative and can achieve more inclusive outcomes.

According to Bringa (2018), a good concept for design should allow room for inspiration in planning and design processes. This includes recognizing the importance of both user participation and creative freedom. Bringa means that previous design of accessibility, focusing on exact measurements and standardization, removes innovation and artistic freedom from designers and architects. This to some extent also applies to universal design, which has meant that it has been given a lower status than other types of design assignments. However, this issue is not easily solved

because the standardization of measurements and legislative rules has been important for equality and accessibility (Bringa, 2018).

According to Bendixen and Benktzon (2013), the Scandinavian and Nordic tradition of 'design for all' has 'developed from representing a purely social dimension to a design topic that is discussed both in terms of its business potential and in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR)' (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2013). There are links to the Scandinavian welfare model and to the so-called international style in architecture and urban design as well as an ambition to achieve inclusion and equality in the built environment. For example, in Sweden building regulations with accessibility recommendations have been in effect since 1966 (Bringa, 2018), and there has been a focus on what the Planning and Building Act calls 'easily eliminated obstacles' since the beginning of the 2000s (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2013; National Board of Housing, Building and Planning, 2005). In Denmark, the Aarhus school of architecture has offered accessibility courses for 25 years. The universal design concept came onto the agenda in the Scandinavian countries (including Finland) at the beginning of the 1990s, and the UNCRPD was ratified between 2007 and 2009. In 2012, Norway held the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers and included universal design as an important topic in their programme. It had a similar focus in 2017.

According to Pasupuleti and Berggård (2014), there is a difference between the ways the larger cities in the Nordic region and smaller towns or semi-urban settlements apply universal design. The larger cities have more resources, and in many ways, they compete to become the most accessible city in the Nordic region and the world (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2013). Many smaller communities with limited resources may have difficulty providing and maintaining assistive devices. Winter conditions can make assistive devices unusable because of snow and ice. Pasupuleti and Berggård (2014) state that this is not just a matter of resources, but a consequence of maintenance being omitted from the concept of universal design.

4 Users' narratives

4.1 An everyday urban life for a person with a disability

What are the barriers to accessibility and inclusion in Nordic cities of today? Some impression may be gained from the following narrative. It is based on a group interview with representatives from Nordic NGOs and other members of the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability, such as government officials. Their reflections offer snapshots of the everyday life of a person with a disability.

First, the transport system is important for everyone, since it enables people to go to work or school, or to access other urban amenities such as libraries, shops or parks. However, not all trains and buses are accessible or follow the same universal design principles, and not all drivers of public transport vehicles are prepared to leave the driver's seat and manually install the ramp for wheelchair users, something that might delay the trip.

Nonetheless, good information is important for travellers. If it is possible to know in advance whether a bus or a train allows passengers such as wheelchair users to board easily, it is also possible to plan a work trip, shopping trip or holiday visit. And, how do you buy a ticket? If you cannot read the ticket machine display in the train station, can you at least find an information desk somewhere where there is a person to ask for help? If you cannot see, hear or understand the information, how can you get hold of it?

If you manage to buy a ticket and take the bus or train to your destination, public buildings can present barriers that you cannot overcome on your own. Despite building regulations, schools, shops or shopping streets are not always fully accessible. The automatic doors may be broken, the ramp too steep or the signage in the floors accidentally covered by carpets. Ensuring good and continuous maintenance is as important for accessibility and inclusion as following building regulations.

A particular challenge in Nordic cities is related to the harsh winter climate. Snow, ice and melting water in streets and public spaces can be challenging for anyone, but if you depend on markings in the street for your orientation or on a flat surface to move around on your own, poor snow clearance can practically imprison you in your home. However, from a Nordic perspective, summertime and the tourist season can also present challenges. Cities with many tourists change character through temporary outdoor seating and sandwich boards advertising tourist spots or restaurant menus. This is not always a result of the urban planning process but rather of business development. A relatively new challenge related to urban transport and business development is the phenomenon of electric

kick bikes creating unexpected barriers for wheelchair users and the visually impaired. A city's transport system is messy, and unexpected conflicts can occur. The kick bikes have created a new challenge because they are scattered all over the city, on sidewalks, in the streets, bike lanes and parks. Not knowing whether you will stumble and fall over a kick bike when you exit the bus on your way to school or work is an obvious constraint. Not knowing where the kerb is located is another.

It may be claimed that awareness of the importance of a disability perspective on cities and urban development is relatively high in the Nordic region, but there are cases where this is not as visible in practice. Good will exists, but this often fails in practice, according to one of the Nordic NGO representatives. There are rules and regulations, but practices vary. Information and signage systems are often unsatisfactory, information in Braille can be absent, bicycle lanes are not uniformly designed, shops are inaccessible, and cobblestones are still used in public spaces even though they present a challenge for many. Broken elevators or escalators can make buildings totally inaccessible. Less obvious but related to city design is what one NGO representative called 'universal courtesy'—the feeling of being welcomed and included. 'Is there a place for me to sit, to rest? Are there places where we can meet? For example, can the local pub handle one or more wheelchairs?' A visitor's map is not always helpful in answering these questions.

Modern society places great hope in digital solutions in the provision of public and commercial services and as a tool in people's everyday lives. The 'smart city' is one where we have mobile apps and computerized systems to assist not only with communication but with orientation, budgeting, exercise, information, citizen participation, deliveries, shopping and other activities. 'Smart' solutions can be helpful for people with disabilities, but they also highlight the diversity of this group. People with disabilities include those whose lives are improved by digitalization and those who are further excluded owing to their inability to push a small button, read or understand instructions on a screen or hear automatic spoken messages. There is consequently a need to practise inclusion and universal design in the digital and 'smart' city as well.

4.2 Packaging the issues

The research in this project indicates that concepts matter, and discussions continue on the use of concepts such as 'accessibility' and 'universal design' in planning and urban design practice.

However, from the users' and NGOs' perspectives, what does it matter how disability issues in urban planning and design are framed or packaged? The focus group reflected on this and it became clear that there are many concepts in use, and they are of value in different ways. Different concepts are 'in fashion' at different points in time, and the most useful are applied. According to one participant, today it gives her work more legitimacy if she frames it as 'social sustainability'. Another participant said that it matters who the audience is—the public or a specific group or organization. A few of the

NGO representatives in the group considered concepts such as inclusion and accessibility easier for most people to understand, while universal design often demands an explanation, especially outside the urban design domain. There was strong agreement in the group that accessibility as a concept remains powerful and important.

4.3 Users' influence

It is important in a democratic planning process to guarantee the right of citizens to influence or participate, for example through participatory processes or citizens' councils. By enabling residents to add their perspectives on a new development in their neighbourhood or on a specific place, several benefits related to democracy, legitimacy and efficiency may be achieved. The NGO representatives in the group interview were all familiar with the specific processes around user influence by people with disabilities because their organizations are often asked to participate. Moreover, as in regular citizens' participation processes, there are challenges in making it work. One NGO representative received so many requests for input that they were unable to respond to all of them, and they lacked the resources to advertise the opportunity to participate and to manage user representation well. Another representative had experiences of participation too late in the process—a common issue for citizen participation in general—and the participatory activity became a masquerade instead of actual influence. Another challenge for citizen participation in general is that users participate on a voluntary basis in their spare time without reimbursement. Of course, this affects representation because not everyone has time to spare, and can do it for free. According to one NGO representative, it is possible to imagine users with disabilities as consultants that should be reimbursed for their time. Finally, mirroring citizen participation in general, there is a risk of conflicting interests among users or citizens. The collectives of 'citizens' or 'people with disabilities', are not homogeneous and it is not guaranteed that they want the same thing or will express the same opinion on an urban development issue. This demonstrates the importance of good representation in user participation.

One useful example that arose in the conversation with the Nordic NGO representatives and government officials is the Norwegian tool called 'Folkestråkk'. This Norwegian term means 'Citizens' tracks' in English and it is an educational and inspirational collection of tools and examples of organizing participation. It was developed by Design and Architecture Norway (DOGA⁴).

⁴ More information about DOGA in Norwegian: <https://doga.no/verktoy/folkestrakk/folkestrakk-veilederen/>

4.4 Learning from differences and similarities between the Nordic countries

Because the focus group consisted of representatives involved in Nordic co-operation, they may have taken the value of Nordic knowledge exchange as a given. However, some saw good potential in learning from other Nordic countries. For example, what are the economic benefits of universally designed schools? According to one participant, the Nordic countries with similar welfare state models and experiences should be able to learn much from each other in this regard. However, experiences from discussions on harmonizing rules and regulations in construction indicate challenges. There are differences in standards between the Nordic countries. If we then adapt to standards that are lower in one country than another, the message to the ambitious country is counterproductive.

The group reflected on whether some municipalities or particular projects had more success in creating impactful universal design solutions (or the preferred term in the particular case). A few specific examples were mentioned, but engaged advocates of the issue appeared to be most important. This indicates that the success of a project stands or falls by the municipal officials or private-sector employees initiating and maintaining projects that successively become integrated into mainstream practice. However, among the examples mentioned were the Nordic initiative on age-friendly cities⁵, a project and an issue that drew attention to disability issues even at the national level. The Danish *Tours on Wheels*⁶ project was raised. This is an initiative where local disability organizations arrange a city tour using a wheelchair. When the mayor of a Danish city was taken on a tour it affected the mayor's understanding of the issue, for example through the experience of being perceived differently from a person not using a wheelchair.

According to focus group, even though Nordic cities are considered to function rather well from a disability perspective, there is a need for more action, for implementation rather than 'talking and talking', and for spreading knowledge in society. Finally, it is also important to learn from other parts of the world beyond the Nordic region.

⁵ More information about the Nordic initiative on age-friendly cities: nordicwelfare.org/projekt/livskvalitet-for-aldre-kvinnor-och-man-i-norden/

⁶ More information about the project Tours on Wheels: www.facebook.com/toursonwheelsdk/

5 Planning and designing inclusive urban spaces in the Nordic Region

5.1 Trondheim, Norway

Several efforts at the national level

The government is a central actor in universal design and accessibility in Norway. For several years there have been initiatives from ministries and agencies concerning both comprehensive strategies and more concrete measures. Accessibility for people with disabilities was introduced into legislation in 1976 (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2016), and today there is strong governmental support for measures related to the built environment, transport, ICT and welfare technology, as well as considerable professional knowledge and practice. The UNCRPD was ratified in 2013 and there are additional EU and Nordic requirements that Norway follows (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2016). A few examples of national policies are guides on the design of road and street infrastructure (The Norwegian Public Roads Administration & Norwegian Building Authority, 2015; 2016), guidance and examples related to cultural heritage and universal design (Ministry of Environment, 2010) and a governmental Action Plan for Universal Design (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2016). There are universal design and accessibility aspects of the national transport plan, as in governmental strategies concerning ageing, health care and higher education. Overall, this means that support from the top and down is quite strong, providing funding, knowledge, networking and mapping.

According to the Government's Action Plan for Universal Design 2015–2019, Norway has the basis of a universally designed society, but there is still a need for more systematic and concerted efforts (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2016: 13). Universal design is seen as integral to sustainability and the action plan is largely a catalogue of measures concerning ICT and welfare technology, everyday technology, buildings, outdoor areas and transport. The measures are on a broad array of topics, including technological development, standardization, strategic plans, loans and grants for home improvements, skills training, improving the planning process, urban design of important outdoor areas, efforts to create continuous travel chains, information and networking. They involve many different ministries and involve governmental actors, businesses and NGOs. One apparent ambition is to clarify the responsibilities at the state and local levels. The users' perspective is not always strong, but the measures are oriented towards the actions of other actors with funding from the state.

The action plan stresses the need to maintain and monitor completed work and being aware of the universal design aspects of several national plans and strategies (such as in transport or sustainable urban development). It can be concluded that knowledge and practice have existed for many years in Norway. Nevertheless, there are challenges such as spreading knowledge beyond the already knowledgeable and making implementation and outcomes more systematic and persistent.

A pilot project on universal design in public spaces

In 2005, a pilot project was initiated by the Ministry of Environment, which appointed 17 'pilot municipalities' in universal design during the period 2005–2008. Among them was the city of Trondheim. There is much experience to learn from in this project, from the small-scale efforts to comprehensive strategies. The pilot project municipalities worked not only with specific tools but also on strategic and structural challenges in relation to integrating urban design into the planning and development process and practice (Ministry of Environment, 2009). Again, the starting point was to acknowledge and build on 30 years of experience of work with accessibility for people with disabilities. Moreover, similar to the action plan, the primary object was to improve the systematic work and the integration of universal design into central municipal processes and policies to achieve lasting effects. The goals for the pilot project were the following:

- Create attention to and results for the municipal administration as a whole, across sectors
- Contribute to local efforts by co-operating with businesses and other private and public actors
- Achieve good solutions in the built environment, characterized by good accessibility, safety, environmental quality and aesthetics
- Further develop co-operation with the advisory council for people with disabilities and other user groups
- Contribute to increasing the competence of all responsible for planning, implementation and maintenance
- Be a role model and encourage efforts in universal design in other municipalities
- Be a dialogue partner in the national efforts for universal design

In spite of this project being localized in specific municipalities and locations, the goals reflect the development of general competence in universal design. The final report from the pilot project (Ministry of Environment, 2009) mentions that the regional level has been important for

networking, co-operation and learning. The work has also been characterized by regular dialogue between the municipalities and the state.

Among the success factors of the Norwegian pilot project are cross-sectoral co-operation, individuals strongly engaged in the issue, study trips and demonstration projects. It is important to show what universal design can look like and to use study visits to experience what it is like to be visually impaired or use a wheelchair when visiting a cinema or using a cash machine. Furthermore, political legitimacy and the active involvement of a local disability council is emphasized as a success factor. The evaluation (Ministry of Environment, 2009) also recommends using the Planning and Building Act and a comprehensive plan to promote urban design.

The concept of universal design

Trondheim Municipality has a full time position for an adviser on universal design; since 2005 this position has been part of the Urban Development Department rather than the Health and Social Welfare Department. The role of the adviser is diverse, and it includes promoting awareness of disability issues and being an educational resource on disability issues and universal design for municipal staff. Even though knowledge and awareness have increased, there remains a need for more learning, and according to interviews the promotional aspect of the job is central. The adviser is called in to evaluate plans and to ensure that the universal design aspect is addressed.

In both local and national policy documents (Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2016; Høyland et al. 2018) there is considerable focus on knowledge and competence. According to the interviewee, this—together with increased users' influence—is the central issue, rather than, for example, establishing stricter rules or a clearer division of responsibilities.

According to the interviewee, it is important to start from an agreement on the use and understanding of concepts in the specific domain; furthermore, it makes sense for a municipality to use the same concepts as those in the legal frameworks. In Norway, including Trondheim, universal design⁷ has come to be widely accepted and used in public spaces and public buildings. For private homes, the established concept is accessibility⁸. In addition, the group of interest is 'people with disabilities' rather than 'disabled', to stress that people are more than their disabilities.

Overall, the interviewee had a positive attitude to the concept of universal design because it directs the discussion to issues of both aesthetics and functionality. It is a comprehensive concept, primarily

⁷ *Universell utforming* in Norwegian

⁸ *Tilgjengelighet* in Norwegian

concerning good orientation and accessibility, as well as creating contrasts and tactility through the use of certain materials and lighting. In addition, public spaces and buildings should be 'simple and intuitive'. According to the interviewee, it works best if the universal design perspective and practice are introduced early in the planning process. Moreover, universal design does not primarily stress adaptation and specific solutions for specific people or groups but emphasizes solutions that are beneficial for everyone. However, of course, there are situations when solutions for specific groups or individuals are necessary, and according to the interviewee the claim that universal design creates solutions for 'everyone' has received criticism.

Practising universal design in Trondheim

Trondheim was designated a 'resource municipality' in universal design in 2009, following on from the pilot project 2005–2008. This means that for many years it has had state funding, support and extra focus on disability issues in urban planning and design and has built awareness and competence. The local disability council has been an important promoter, and Trondheim has had other local resources to build on, with university research and education, the SINTEF research institute and the State Housing Bank⁹, in addition to co-operation at the regional level (Ministry of Environment, 2009). Another important municipal tool is the ability to set strict demands for new developments and thereby function as a role model. It has been somewhat more challenging to push other developers to do the same (Ministry of Environment, 2009). Trondheim has also addressed the challenge of compromising cultural heritage and building preservation with universal design (KS, 2019). In short, the municipality has used its regulatory power, the users have influence through bodies such as the disability council, and good practice has created knowledge and support.

The role of the 17 resource municipalities was to develop new universal design strategies and strive to implement universal design and spread knowledge and experiences both internally and externally (Trondheim Municipality, 2013). The work was refocused from the national level and the municipality was instructed to work on universal design in outdoor spaces, buildings and to a degree in traffic planning.

Their results were evaluated several times during the project period using specific indicators (see Trondheim Municipality, 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013). This meant a stronger local and national focus on universal design and disability issues as well as political and administrative support for the efforts; according to the interviewee, this bolstered the universal design work in the municipality. Of course,

⁹ *Husbanken* in Norwegian

financial support from the state is often the key to local political support, but there was also unity across the local political parties and a dedicated local council chairperson, who strengthened the legitimacy of the work.

Through the initiative, Trondheim municipality was able to experiment with different strategies and develop tools to strengthen disability issues and the universal design perspective. The practical results included both usable planning tools and accessible buildings, but the project also meant that Trondheim could collaborate with national authorities. The interviewee described this as perhaps the most important result of the years as a resource municipality—the support made it possible to work systematically, report regularly on results and be evaluated. It meant that Trondheim became a role model for other cities, and it raised the issue at a national level. This is still important because representatives from other Norwegian cities return for study visits and keep inviting the universal design adviser to educate them in their cities. Another factor that makes this kind of national learning possible is a network of 50 municipalities created by the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities (KS) working on universal design.

In Norway, the state-supported initiative has strengthened focus, action and legitimacy on disability issues and universal design in urban planning. In that sense, it has been a top-down process. However, one result of this is that the municipalities and their organization (KS) can now influence national awareness and policymaking, for example through the above-mentioned network.

The focus of disability issues in urban planning is the above-mentioned good orientation and accessibility, which means that people in need of a wheelchair or walker, people with children in strollers, pedestrians or cyclists can be considered priorities. Other high-priority issues are the navigation of entrances to buildings and furniture in public spaces, in particular for people with visual impairments.

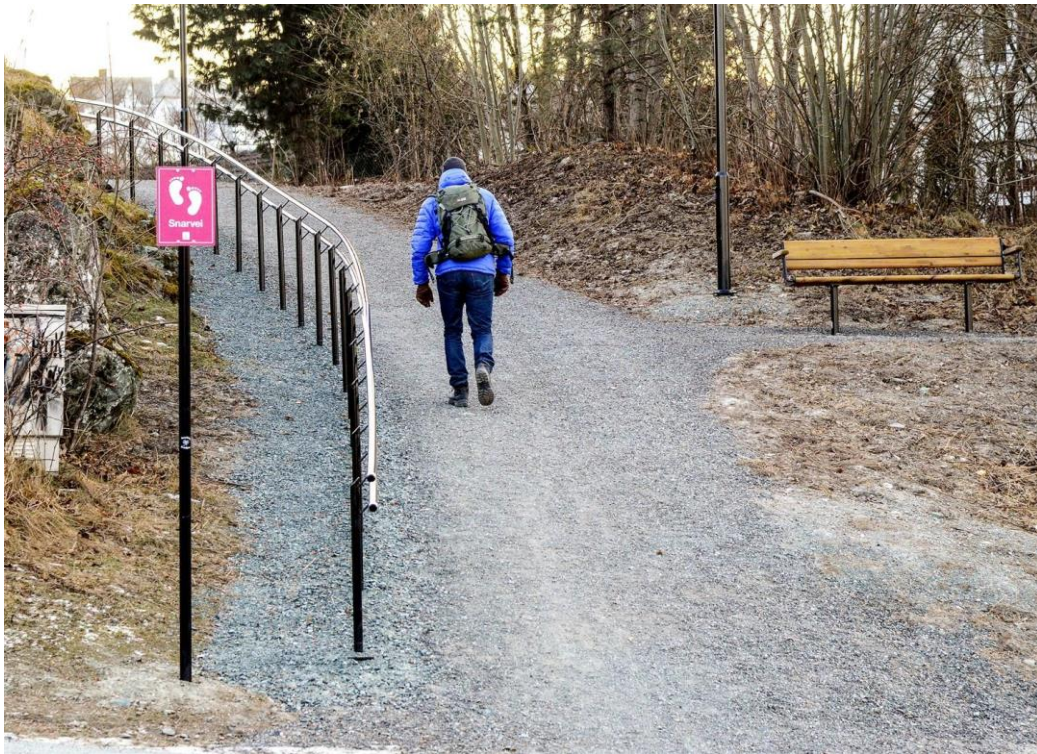
The World Health Organization currently devotes considerable attention to the issue of 'age-friendly cities', which is visible in the Norwegian context (see also Nordic Welfare Centre, 2019a). According to the interviewee, this has also led to more attention to universal design and disability issues in cities and public spaces (Ministry of Health and Care Services, 2018; KS, 2019).

In the municipal administration, the divisions concerned with parks, public spaces and traffic have most awareness of disability issues. The interviewee specifically mentioned landscape architecture as a profession with high awareness. The challenging part of the municipality's work on disability issues is the maintenance divisions, such as those responsible for snow clearance. The challenge of good maintenance illustrates both the simplicity and the complexity of universal design and accessibility. In a report published by the Norwegian Public Road Administration (The Norwegian

Public Roads Administration & Norwegian Building Authority, 2015) photos of carpets, temporary signs, furniture or sculptures covering or blocking tactile paving show how good universal design can be rendered useless through thoughtless management.

According to the interviewee, the most effective inclusion measures from a disability perspective are diverse. Apart from an overall focus on good orientation and accessibility—the core of universal design—it is key to have political and administrative legitimacy. A more practical suggestion is to divide urban spaces into separate zones for walking and for outdoor furniture—quite the opposite of the acclaimed ideal of ‘shared space’. Another successful suggestion is to ensure accessible activity spaces (such as playgrounds and football fields). It must be possible for people to access them and spend time there, even if they cannot use the swings or play football. Finally, age integration is stressed. That entails creating urban spaces that attract people of different ages who can benefit from each other’s presence.

It is possible to imagine that universal design initiatives risk being interpreted as efforts to clean up public space with negative consequences for its urban qualities. However, the interviewee has never noticed this in Trondheim. Instead, the contrary is true. The reason for this is the focus on both functional issues and improvements and the aesthetic aspect of the city spaces. Another reason for support from citizens may be participatory strategies. Trondheim personnel meet users through the disability NGOs twice a year, and the municipality has an advisory council that includes representatives from NGOs and the municipal officials. According to the interviewee, the key to a successful process is the inclusion of disability and universal design perspectives early in the process, which allows inspiration by other cities, experimentation with solutions and study trips with the local NGOs.



This picture shows elements of a project in Trondheim, where around 500 so-called 'shortcuts' are added. They are universally designed walking paths, with features such as handrails and rest areas with benches. The width of the path and space by the benches allow room for wheelchairs; the lighting and the gradient of the path are also important aspects to consider.

Photo: Trondheim Municipality



This picture shows Finalebanen park, which has been designed in line with universal design. The project to design the park is a collaboration between Asplan Viak and Trondheim Municipality.

Photo: Trondheim Municipality

5.2 Viborg, Denmark

Regulations and inspiration at the national level

In Denmark, the Building Regulation (BR18¹⁰) is the central framework at the national level that regulates how buildings and outdoor areas should safeguard accessibility. In addition, the Danish Road Directorate guides and systematically evaluates accessibility for traffic and transport through so-called accessibility revisions (see, e.g. The Danish Road Directorate, 2017). In 2011, the Ministry for Urban and Rural Affairs published a report on the universal design of public spaces in the neighbourhood (Sigbrand & Pedersen, 2011) primarily for guidance. The report presents inspirational examples, information about disabilities and suitable tools available for public and private actors in urban development and design. Behind this report, apart from the Building Regulation are the UNCRPD and the UNCRC. Universal design is seen as a vital tool regarding inclusive urban spaces under these conventions. Finally, other important actors are the Danish Building Research Institute¹¹, for example via its website¹², which has inspirational examples, advice and recommendations on accessibility and universal design, and the 'Design for All' network that lobbies, networks and educates on inclusive design issues.

The use of concepts

There are several ways to conceptualize inclusion related to disabilities in the Danish context, among which are universal design and Design for All. It appears that accessibility is the more practical concept used by people such as developers, while universal design is the more academic concept (see, e.g. Grangaard, 2018). According to the Design for All network, the term 'design for all' has a wider focus than universal design, for example including the digital space. Moreover, an educational programme in universal design at Ålborg University clearly advocates for that concept.

The city of Viborg primarily uses the concept of accessibility. However, the interviewee from Viborg claimed that the more the city learns about disability issues, the less useful this concept becomes. Instead, there is a need for a concept encompassing the many different topics and policy areas that should be involved in the creation of an 'inclusive city', which is the concept that the interviewee prefers. The city must work for everyone and create quality of life for everyone while remaining diverse and open. The interviewee, who is an architect heavily involved in a project to improve the

¹⁰ See <https://byggningsreglementet.dk/>

¹¹ Statens Byggeforskningsinstitut in Danish

¹² www.rumsans.dk

accessibility of the historical town centre of Viborg, claimed there was a need to talk more about the meaning of safety, openness and diversity in relation to disability issues for the city.

Practising inclusion in Viborg

The interviewee is not formally responsible for disability issues in the municipal administration, but his experience has made him a knowledge resource in the municipal administration. Therefore, attention to disability issues in Viborg to some degree depends on the personal assistance of the interviewee, which can be considered a weakness. However, the Viborg strategy of always working in multidisciplinary teams may help, and knowledge is now spreading within the administration. In addition, the administrators are planning 'screenings' on topics such as accessibility issues, so project plans will be screened by other divisions of the municipal administration. This allows people such as those working directly with people with disabilities to influence planning practice.

Central to the work on inclusion in Viborg is the project to improve the accessibility of the historical town centre. As part of the project, an architectural competition was launched. In this competition, two approaches to accessibility emerged—one discrete approach and one that was more comprehensive. In the end, the city chose the discrete approach, and it has been designated 'the inclusive city' or 'the city without barriers'. The interviewee reported that this also moved the focus from the user to the city.

The inclusive city should include everyone. However, according to the interviewee, planning for disability issues often entails prioritizing people using wheelchairs and those with visual impairments. The wheelchair is almost the symbol of disability and accessibility issues, and work related to the urban environment often concerns facilities such as tactile or other types of paving materials, primarily intended to help those using wheelchairs or with visual impairments. In addition, people using wheelchairs are visible, but people with conditions such as cognitive disabilities can easily be overlooked in the design of urban spaces. The Viborg disability council was recently reconstituted to improve its coverage of various groups, but according to the interviewee, it remains a challenge for the city and employees concerned with disability issues.

At the heart of the issue for the interviewee is that everyone should be able to choose places to walk or spend time in the city, including people with disabilities. In addition, it is important to see the connections between the interests and needs of 'normal' user and others. For the built environment this can involve having sufficient space for more than one wheelchair on the pedestrian path or places to rest when walking uphill (also for a person in a wheelchair).

In the historical town centre work, external funding has been crucial, contributing not only funding but also knowledge and active involvement. Local politicians have been interested in participating in steering groups and working groups. According to the interviewee, this legitimacy and support have had considerable significance for the results.

Participatory approaches

The city of Viborg has several citizen councils that can advise the city on 'their' issues. A disability council, a senior citizens' council and a youth council have all been involved in the project to improve the accessibility of the historical town centre, and they arrange workshops where citizens with and without disabilities participate. Among the outcomes of the participatory approaches, the interviewee mentions an 'accessibility app'¹³ to improve and provide information on accessibility to the areas of cultural heritage in the historical town centre for residents and visitors, and a three-dimensional city model functions as a city map for people with visual impairments. Furthermore, participation has provided positive feedback on the work with the project overall, but also criticisms of the choice of tactile paving, which turned out to be aesthetic rather than functional and did not cover the whole town centre.

Related to the issue of criticism, the interviewee has experienced little negative feedback on accessibility measures. He concludes that the ambition to beautify the city that has been integrated into the project has been successful. The accessibility measures are part of this ambition. Removal of parking spaces has prompted negative feedback from local commercial actors.

In the interview, the architect from Viborg was asked what was most important to highlight disability issues in urban planning. Is it increased competence among planners overall, is it more regulations and clear responsibilities, or is it increased participation by users? The project on the historical town centre indicates that regulations are very important, in particular in relation to cultural heritage. In addition, the interviewee mentions the importance of inspiration from practices in other cities and knowledge and experience from user groups. Concerning more practical measures, the interviewee stressed taking the specific site and its resources or challenges as a starting point and as mentioned above focus on the diverse population as a whole rather than on specific groups.

¹³ Apart from this, the city has rejected technological measures and focused entirely on the built environment. There was proposal to implement free Wi-Fi in the city, but this was not realized.

Viborg Baneby



Viborg Baneby is a new district in a former industrial area of Viborg where accessible urban spaces are one important parameter in the urban design. In Baneby, there is a mix of ramps, stairs, walking paths and places for resting designed to offer people different ways to reach their destinations.

Photo: Viborg Municipality



This picture shows the bridge Hærvejsbro for pedestrians and cyclists. The bridge was opened in 2018 and is one of the new bridges that connects Viborg Baneby with the city centre.

Photo: Viborg Municipality

5.3 Tampere, Finland

A new legal framework and toolbox

In 2018, the Finnish legal requirements for accessibility to buildings and their surroundings were revised with a new decree (part of the National Building Code) aiming for increased *equality*. The new decree primarily arose from the implementation of the UNCRPD. Another central starting point is the concept of 'design for all' (considered synonymous with universal design) which here means solutions that are suitable for all, that take variations in needs and abilities into consideration, and do not exclude the rights of people with disabilities to access special support (Kilpelä, 2019). Other important directives are the Finnish Discrimination Act and EU directives.

The new legal requirements for accessibility presented by Kilpelä (2019) function as a toolbox and a detailed design guide, with minimum standards for buildings and outdoor environments and suggested design solutions. In public space, there are specific requirements, such as access routes (with measures such as tactile paving), parking spaces, car accessibility, and the design of the immediate surroundings of houses (courtyards, playgrounds etc.) New developments in relation to accessibility are described in the accessibility directive and consider topics such as physical accessibility and signage for easy navigation located and designed for people with disabilities.

On the use of concepts: from accessibility to equality

In Tampere, the year 2020 is the year of equality, which means that as this report is being written, many activities related to inclusion and accessibility are beginning, not only related to urban planning but to several of the municipality's areas of responsibility. The interviewee from Tampere has gone from being a co-ordinator of disability issues to an 'equality co-ordinator', with responsibility not only for disability issues but also for other aspects of inclusion and equality. The city has chosen to organize disability issues as well as many other social equality issues. Among the responsibilities of the equality co-ordinator is to educate colleagues in the municipal administration in understanding and practising equality in their daily work. According to the interviewee, everyone should ideally have a basic knowledge of disability perspectives, but it is also necessary to have one person with that responsibility alone, who may be contacted for advice on both processes and planning.

The interviewee agrees that concepts matter for practice. They are necessary and contribute to learning. In Tampere, the municipality representatives have gone from talking about disability issues

to talking about equality instead. This change of framing broadens and perhaps also politicizes the disability issue because it now falls under the same heading as topics such as the situation for Roma people in the city or issues related to sexual orientation. For the interviewee, equality brings an additional perspective related to that of universal design or 'design for all', even though these concepts are not commonly used in Finland. According to the interviewee, universal design is practised in Finland, but it is not called that. Moreover, if universal design is done properly there is no risk of it becoming a practice that obscures differences.

From an unsuccessful accessibility plan to practising social equality

Tampere used to have an accessibility plan. However, according to the interviewee, this plan was not very successful or influential. Instead, it added to the municipal planning workload without influencing urban planning practices. The current model establishes strategies and as few as possible (obligatory) plans. There are fewer plans, but they are more valuable and better implemented. Even though the accessibility plan had a good purpose, the interviewee reports that it failed because it depended on changing people's thinking and on tools that the city lacks. The plan had a list of measures to be implemented within a certain time, but most did not proceed as planned and the division of responsibilities was not clear. Now, in developing the new equality plan the city has tried to learn from this previous experience. The new plan is obligatory, and therefore has more legitimacy and it is hoped more impact. However, it is clear from the accessibility plan that there have been municipal efforts on accessibility for several years, and these efforts have been at both the detailed design level and the structural and administrative level. There has been a disability board in Tampere since 1987 (Karojärvi, 2019).

In the Tampere City Centre Development Programme 2015–2030 one development policy concerned 'a city centre welcoming to all', emphasizing car accessibility and good pedestrian and cycling opportunities as well as reduced traffic in the immediate centre. However, the most important new transport project in Tampere city centre is the new tramway. This project has the interests of people with disabilities high on the agenda. The accessibility of the tram coaches for people with disabilities was evaluated in a 1:1 plywood model of the coaches. Through rounds of testing, feedback and retesting of the amended wooden model, the disability board was able to influence the design. Other types of user groups also tested the model, for example tall people, people with prams or large pieces of luggage and elderly people (Karojärvi, 2019).

As mentioned above, the interviewee reported that in 2018 Finland passed a new accessibility decree and practices around accessibility are improving. Actors involved in planning and building are

becoming more knowledgeable and see accessibility improvements of the built environment as an important part of the planning process. There have been occasions where developers have tried to avoid the effort of creating good accessibility, but overall, the practice is improving. Some exceptions have been discussed for renovation projects, but there are fewer for new buildings. The interviewee, who has worked in the city of Tampere for many years, states that the changes in knowledge and practice regarding accessibility in the last 10 years have been massive. Both the new accessibility decree and the Act on the Provision of Digital Services are very important legal frameworks, but the Year of Equality in Tampere actually means going beyond the national frameworks. The interviewee has received strong local political support for this. The local politicians are engaged in accessibility and disability issues. However, funding remains challenging to procure.

What is most important for an inclusive city from a disability perspective? The interviewee primarily mentions transport and mobility. It is vital that the city has a public transport system to allow equality of mobility and good services for people with disabilities. The whole urban environment must also allow its residents and visitors to move from one place to another. People's needs are diverse, and they must be able to make their own choices and decisions, even if they have a disability. This implies both built environment measures and digital solutions. Concerning more practical matters, the interviewee emphasizes the importance of maintaining the city's spaces and buildings, especially in the wintertime. Nordic cities tend to become wet, snowy and icy in winter, and this can affect accessibility to a high degree.

The interviewee states that the municipalities know those with visual impairments and using wheelchairs best and they are the most active. People with hearing impairments have been critical of this and claim that their needs are not considered sufficiently in the development of the city. The interviewee believes that this criticism may be justified and that the lack of focus and impact may be attributable to the wide variety of needs within this group, and the fact that their disability is invisible.

In the introduction to this report, the 'smart city' was mentioned briefly and it was claimed that disability issues in urban planning are not primarily about implementing new technologies. The interviewee from Tampere believes that one reason for the marginal role of new technologies is that these are still quite general, directed at 'everyone' and not specifically at people with disabilities. Moreover, technological development is fast while urban planning is relatively slow, providing infrastructure that is supposed to be sustainable for a long period. We do not know what technological solutions may be in place in future, and the ones we implement today may be out of date in a very short period. Tampere's huge tramway project has disability issues at the core and

some 'smart' solutions have been discussed. However, it is based on good planning practice, good design and participatory approaches. In the development of the new equality plan, there has been more citizen participation than usual. There has been interaction with all the citizen group boards in the municipality—the senior citizens' board, the youth board, the children's board, the accessibility board, the Roma people's board etc. The interaction has taken the form of meetings, discussions and workshops.

5.4 Reykjavik, Iceland

Increased awareness at the national level

Universal design has been a concept in Iceland since the government signed the UNCRPD in 2012. In parallel with signing the convention, an action plan for people with disabilities for 2012–2014 was adopted (formally called the *Parliamentary Resolution on a Plan of Action on Disabled Persons' Affairs until 2014*) (Althingi, 2012). The plan includes long-term priorities and proposes 'principal goals in disabled persons' affairs to 2012–2020'. It states that the plan should take account of the UNCRPD and other international human rights agreements to which Iceland is a party. It emphasizes that the work should focus on human rights and prohibit discrimination based on disability. It is also written that 'disability' should be recognized as a concept in transition and that the planned environment and attitudes prevent full participation in society on an equal basis (2012: 1).

One of the individual categories of the action plan is access; it states that 'universal design' should be employed in the design of all structures' (2012: 4). This was the first mention of universal design in a policy document in Iceland and it has proven to be a big step in work on disability. The current action plan for 2017–2021 states that universal design should guide all planning of the environment and that it should be implemented with changes to the existing built environment. Universal design relating to new developments is also emphasized in the building and regulation law¹⁴ (Iceland Construction Authority, 2012).

The Ministry of Social Affairs co-ordinates the disability policies while the Iceland Construction Authority deals with universal design and accessibility issues at the national level. The Construction Authority is a supervisory agency under the Ministry of Social Affairs, which it advises on policy. In 2018, the Construction Authority was moved to the Ministry of Social Affairs from the Ministry for the Environment and Natural Resources. According to interviewees, Iceland has much work to do on

¹⁴ Byggingarreglugerð in Icelandic.

issues of accessibility and universal design, but they report progress since the signing of the UNCRPD.

According to Construction Authority representatives, it was a struggle at first to fulfil the mission of providing advice and guidelines to other actors because of the rapid implementation of the new regulations and the Construction Authority's limited knowledge of universal design. It took a long time to adapt to universal design and it remains difficult to create awareness and understanding about it. It was mentioned that many people involved in the building and planning process complain about the costs of building according to the regulations. A representative from the Construction Authority claims that there are rumours that a project will be 30% more expensive if it is built according to accessibility or universal design regulations. However, it is calculated to be an average of 3.5% more expensive, but the rumours highlight the difficulty of raising awareness of these matters. Disability organizations have advocated these building standards, but their efforts have not been acknowledged until recently.

Regarding municipality awareness and knowledge of universal design, the Construction Authority representative believes these vary greatly. The building and regulation laws of 2012 created more awareness and momentum, but many smaller municipalities do not follow the regulations. In 2011, municipalities assumed responsibility for providing services for people with disabilities. In addition, all municipalities have a legal responsibility to include a disability council in decision-making. However, most municipalities in Iceland are small, except for the City of Reykjavik, and some only have 200–300 inhabitants, which makes some regulations challenging to follow. In addition, there are difficult weather and geographical conditions. At the moment, only approximately 7–8 out of 72 municipalities have disability/accessibility councils, according to interviewees.

Universal design—more and deeper than accessibility

The universal design concept has existed since its introduction in the building and regulation law of 2012 and the plan of action from the same year. In the interviews, local and national representatives talk about universal design as 'more and deeper than accessibility'. They mean that it requires understanding who a design is intended for and considering all disabilities, not only the easily visible ones. National representatives say that the concept is used similarly to the way national agencies in Norway apply it. Explaining universal design, the interviewees believe that the concept focuses on the outcome more than the process. On the other hand, there are strong participatory elements in Iceland, such as the disability councils the national authorities require in all municipalities, even

though this is not always realized in practice. Reykjavik has also developed a structured process of universal design with the accessibility committee. This will be explained in more detail below.

According to a representative from Reykjavik, universal design is frequently applied in the city, particularly by the Department of Environment and Planning. However, he notes that the concept is always challenging, and people struggle to understand it fully, mainly because it is broad and abstract. Many people believe it only concerns buildings and accessibility, while he emphasizes the importance of extending the concept to include access to services and information.

The Accessibility Committee in the City of Reykjavik

Authorities in Reykjavik, with approximately 90% of the built area in Iceland, work extensively on disability issues. Even though the new action plan and building regulation in 2012 was a national initiative based on the UNCRPD, the city is attempting to take the lead, especially in involving people with disabilities in the building and planning process.

The Accessibility Committee was founded in 2003–2004 but according to a project manager at the Human Rights Office, suggestions from the committee were not taken seriously at the time and many considered the committee to exist mostly for appearances. Even so, it was an important first step that later developed into the current structure. When the new City Council was formed in 2014, the committee was moved to the Human Rights Office. The idea was to connect its work more closely to human rights issues as stated in the UNCRPD.

After the elections in 2018, the responsibilities of the committee were changed. Previously, the committee was responsible for reviewing city planning and renovation of existing buildings, but the new agreement includes reviewing the services in the city. This means that the committee also reviews policies about services provided by the Department of Welfare in the City of Reykjavik. The role of the committee has expanded from considering physical disability to providing access to all kinds of services. Co-operation between the committee and the Department of Welfare has only just begun, but the project manager from the Human Rights Office hopes it will develop further. Since 2014 the committee has had approximately 60 meetings and considered many planning and rebuilding projects.

Because suggestions from the committee were not seriously considered until recently, many of the buildings that are being renovated in Reykjavik are only 10–15 years old. According to the project manager, there has been a change in the past few years and builders and planners are more aware of the committee and take advantage of its knowledge. Even though it is not a legal requirement to

consult the committee, many builders and planners do not want to design a building that must be changed within 10 years.

The committee consists of six members from three Icelandic disability organizations and several city councillors. The regulation requires at least three representatives each from the disability organizations and the city council, but at the first meeting, there was consensus that the disability organizations should have greater representation. Three of the disability organization members are from the largest umbrella organization, two are from an interest group for people with intellectual disabilities and one from an NGO that provides 'user-controlled services'.

Reykjavik has also been developing an accessibility policy for the city. A project manager at the Human Rights Office states that the policy was designed to have real impact and include universal design. Unfortunately, the work was put on hold after the election in 2018, and the office hopes it will recommence soon. The same project manager claims that many people have been waiting for a clear accessibility policy; the office has received complaints from organizations about the accessibility of the city centre, public areas and buildings. Both the policy and the committee were city council initiatives.

'Rebuilding' of swimming pool in Sundhöll

One of the projects approved by the Accessibility Committee was the rebuilding of a swimming pool complex in downtown Reykjavik, in the neighbourhood of Sundhöll. The old complex is one of the most famous buildings in Iceland and protected from rebuilding and remodelling. Therefore, the city and the architect decided to make an accessible extension to the building. The extension is a 1,140 m² two-storey building with an outdoor pool that connects to an indoor pool and has a new elevator and staircase.

Swimming pools and bath houses are an important part of Icelandic life and culture. They are places where people socialize, relax and exercise. Therefore, it is even more important that everyone has access. Even though this project is not considered to be an example of universal design and it may be argued that all areas and rooms of a building should be accessible, this is an example of making the best of a situation with two conflicting regulations. The Accessibility Committee visited the new extension and was very pleased with the outcome.



Swimming pools and bath houses are common in Iceland and it is important that they are accessible to all. This old Swimming pool in the neighbourhood of Sundhöll was rebuilt with a new accessible pool area.
Photo: City of Reykjavik



This picture shows the Accessibility Committee visiting Sundhöll after it was reopened with the new pool area.
Photo: City of Reykjavik

5.5 Qeqqata Kommunia, Greenland

Important steps towards a more accessible society

Greenland started work on disability issues relatively recently. Historically, people with disabilities born in Greenland were sent to Denmark, based on the view that the Greenlandic society could not ensure their rights, for example in terms of accessibility. According to interviews with disability actors, Greenland did not have the same social support resources as Denmark, and the harsh climate and environment with much snow, ice and hills made it difficult and expensive to provide what was needed. Therefore, signing the UNCRPD in 2012 was significant because it states that everyone has the right to stay where they are born and have their needs met and rights respected. This meant that in 2012 Greenland began to take genuine action on disability issues.

Greenland has no strategy or action plan regarding disability policy, but the area is highlighted in the 2014–2018 coalition deal (Government of Greenland, 2014). The coalition deal states that the UN convention should be central to disability measures, care and services must be adapted to the needs of people with disabilities; there should be appropriate employment for people with disabilities and the community and planned environment should be accessible. In 2018, a new draft bill was submitted for public consultation. The bill, which is a revision of the legal framework on disability, is based on the UNCRPD and contains new possibilities for municipalities and the Greenland government to support people with disabilities. Even though disability issues climbed the agenda from around 2012, the 2006 building regulation has also been important for building accessibility in Greenland. It states that 'Buildings must be designed to ensure satisfactory conditions for their use in terms of safety, health, accessibility and use for all, as well as cleaning and maintenance' (Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure, 2006: 31). However, it also states that this mainly concerns new buildings and renovations to old buildings, and that exceptions can be made to adapt to local needs (Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure, 2006). A status update on disability issues on Greenland mentions that Greenland struggles to reach the UN convention's goals regarding both physical and digital accessibility and recommends that the government establish clear standards concerning accessibility for construction, public transport and public websites while ensuring effective compliance control (The Danish institute for Human Rights, 2019).

Data and statistics on the lifestyles of people with disabilities in Greenland are limited and awareness of their rights is lacking. The absence of people with disabilities has also resulted in a society with insufficient information and knowledge, leading to prejudice. Today, people that were sent to Denmark as children are returning to Greenland and the authorities have more pressure to

improve accessibility to meet the standards of the UN convention. Social exclusion and homelessness are growing problems in Greenland and people with disabilities are an especially vulnerable group (Nordic Welfare Centre, 2019b). The first umbrella organization for disability organizations, Nunatsinni Inuit Innarlutillit Kattuffiat (NIIK), was established in 2018, and in the same year a national disability centre, Pissassarfik, was opened to offer counselling, guidance and training for people with disabilities (including children) as well as for professionals and relatives.

The independent agency Tilioq

Because disability issues are new on the policy agenda in Greenland and because its municipalities are small, most of the ongoing work is conducted at the national level. Greenland signed the UNCRPD in 2012, and the first spokesperson on disability issues was appointed in 2017. The spokesperson's mission is to secure and promote the interests of people with disabilities based on the convention.

To implement and realize the mission of the spokesperson, an independent agency, Tilioq, was created under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Justice, Equality and Family. Tilioq (which literally means *friend* or *messenger* in the Inuit language) promotes and secures the rights of people with disabilities by spreading information. In practical terms, Tilioq supports municipalities and other organizations by creating awareness of the rights of people with disabilities as well as aiding municipalities to support citizens. At the moment, three people work at Tilioq, which shows the small scale on which Greenland can work on such issues in comparison to the other Nordic countries. Therefore, Tilioq has several Nordic contacts and co-operation partners, for example, Danish disability organizations and the Nordic Welfare Centre in Stockholm. The Greenlandic umbrella organization NIIK is also part of the Council of Nordic Co-operation on Disability.

According to interviewees at Tilioq, a lack of statistics and the high levels of prejudice are two of the most pressing issues for the organization. More general research is also requested by disability organizations in Greenland. Another national-level challenge mentioned is the lack of mainstreaming. This issue has recently arisen in relation to the limited accessibility at Kangerlussuaq Airport in Qeqqata Municipality (Tilioq, 2019). According to interviewees from Tilioq, there is insufficient co-operation between ministries and a lack of mainstreaming, which obscures the division of responsibilities between the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Ministry of Social Affairs. The airport is an important symbolic location because it is the first place that visitors to Greenland arrive, and it is important for Greenland as a whole because it is an isolated place characterized by a challenging landscape.

According to interviews with a representative from Tilioq and representatives from Qeqqata Municipality, the building regulations are not always followed owing to a lack of building knowledge and because of limited economic resources. Some interviewees also reported that the issues are either not prioritized or are simply not raised.

The concept of universal design is not used in external communication

Because Tilioq's mission is based on the UN Convention, the human rights perspective is important in packaging and communicating its work. Internally within the organization and in policy dialogue with other actors, members often cite the concept of universal design. However, when communicating with the public or municipalities, they feel that there are pressing issues regarding basic human rights, improving data and statistics, understanding the situation in Greenland and supporting civil organizations that need to be prioritized instead of universal design. According to interviewees, Tilioq needs to start by educating people to use 'person with a disability' instead of 'handicapped' or 'disabled' instead of adding another 'difficult concept' such as universal design. In their view, it would not be productive nor help the cause.

When Tilioq evaluates the work of municipalities, it includes accessibility as a dimension, while the concept of universal design is mainly used in internal communication or when it is deemed useful. Representatives from Tilioq state that because they are the only three people working at the organization, they must prioritize their resources for the greatest impact. Moreover, because of the low awareness of disability issues in Greenland, Tilioq has chosen to communicate in terms of accessibility and not refer to the newer and more difficult concept of universal design. Even though the term is used internally, very few participatory measures are used on Greenland. (an exception being the *Arctic Ageing* project presented below). The national human rights perspective is also trickling down to the municipalities, which mostly use the concepts of inclusion and accessibility instead of universal design.

Practising universal design in Qeqqata Kommunia

According to Tilioq, work in the municipalities is generally progressing quite slowly. Municipalities do not prioritize disability issues, owing both to economic restrictions and to a lack of awareness. The interviewees believe this has to do with Greenland's history, and that disability issues are still taboo. There are opportunities for municipality employees to educate themselves, but the interviewees are not sure how many in the various municipalities actually do this. However, co-

operation between Qeqqata Kommunia municipality and Tilioq works well. According to Qeqqata Kommunia municipality, it is very beneficial to have Tilioq in the same municipality, which may be why Qeqqata Kommunia is one of the more active municipalities. An interviewee from the municipality also reports that documents and information provided by Tilioq are very important in the municipality's daily work.

Qeqqata Kommunia municipality has a vision document for its disability policy that was produced in 2012 (Qeqqata Kommunia Municipality, 2012). The document states that the disability policy should contribute to ensuring all citizens' rights to participation, equality, opportunities, individual consideration and equality in city and rural areas (2012: 4). This should be done through eight focus areas: accessibility in cities and towns, housing conditions, school and education, leisure services, employment, care and support staff, return of people with disabilities from Denmark and strengthening dialogue with people with disabilities and their associations through a Disability Council. The opportunity for people with disabilities to return to Greenland is part of the Greenlandic self-government policy. Before a person with a disability 'returns home', there is an individual assessment of the expected life quality in Greenland. Since signing the UN convention in 2012, all municipalities should provide people with disabilities with the same opportunities, but this is not always the case.

The municipality has recently hired an occupational therapist to highlight different disabilities and provide information about tools and support. At this stage, it is easier to gain attention for 'visible disabilities', for example, accessibility for people using wheelchairs. Even though there are facilities and homes for people with cognitive disabilities, there is limited knowledge and awareness among either citizens or officials. This is an area that both Tilioq and Qeqqata Kommunia are trying to improve.

In the Strategic Plan for the whole of Qeqqata Kommunia municipality, one goal concerns 'a sustainable Arctic society in 2020' with a focus on education, social issues and environmental issues. Under the strategy, people with disabilities are mentioned in relation to increasing quality of life and accessibility in houses and apartments (Qeqqata Kommunia Municipality, 2015). Related to this, the municipality has a sustainability council, which among other areas considers disability issues. The council works in an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral manner on projects relating to sustainability. One of its projects is presented below.

Asiarfik: 'Where you enter free nature'

One project from the sustainability council is about making nature more accessible for elderly people in the area Niviarsiat in Sisimiut. Niviarsiat is an area where many older people live, and the municipality wanted to improve the life quality of the residents.

The project was conducted in 2018 and is part of the larger *Arctic Ageing* project structure (Arktisk Aldring, AgeArc¹⁵), a collaboration between Greenlandic municipalities and researchers from the University of Copenhagen, Ilisimatusarfik (University of Greenland), the Danish National Centre for Social Research, the University of Southern Denmark and University College UCC. Initially, the Niviarsiat project was not specifically aimed at improving accessibility but at increasing the quality of life while engaging the citizens of the area. Four workshops were held where the citizens and municipality representatives decided what they wanted to improve in the area. The outcome of the workshops was that the citizens wanted easier access to nature and places where they could spend time with their families. The natural environment of Greenland is very important, and spending time in nature is a large part of its culture, which makes accessibility an important issue. In addition, the harsh climate and the mountainous landscape can reduce the possibilities for older people or those with disabilities to access nature. Therefore, for this project, it was decided to build a 70-metre long wooden trail and terrace that leads onto the mountain. Even though the terrace is not far from a built-up area, the idea is that its hidden location in the mountain should feel like being in the midst of nature (Qeqqata Kommunia Municipality, 2018).

Even though the project has not yet been fully evaluated, most comments have been positive. In the first year after finalizing the project, the area has been frequently used and the residents have named the place *Asiarfik*, meaning '*Where you enter free nature*'. This project is a good example of an open participatory process where the wishes from citizens have been a central consideration. The idea of having a participatory element in the project came from Copenhagen University, and according to the project leader at Qeqqata Kommunia municipality, co-operation with Copenhagen University was very inspiring and beneficial. The municipality also claims that the project is an example of how funding can be established when there are willingness and creativity. The funding for this project came from the Arctic Ageing project and the municipality.

¹⁵ Learn more <https://arktiskaldring.ku.dk/>



This picture shows the 70-metre long wooden trail and terrace that leads onto the mountain named Asiarfik: 'Where you enter free nature'. The trail and terrace were the outcome of a citizen participatory project in Qeqqata Kommunia municipality.

Photo: Qeqqata Kommunia Municipality



The citizen in the project wanted a place in nature where they could spend time with their families. This picture shows the citizens of Niviarsiat in Sisimiut using the terrace.

Photo: Qeqqata Kommunia Municipality

5.6 Borås, Sweden

The new national focus in disability policy

The national goal of the Swedish disability policy is as follows: 'With the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a starting point, to achieve equality in living conditions and full participation of persons with disabilities in a society based on diversity. The goal is also to contribute to increased gender equality and to take into account the children's rights perspective'. (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016).

In Sweden, building regulations with accessibility recommendations have been in effect since 1966 (Bringa, 2018), and since 2000 there has been a focus on what the Planning and Building Act calls 'easily eliminated obstacles' (Bendixen & Benktzon, 2013). The latest national action plan for the disability policy, *From patient to citizen*, was presented in 2000 and is the foundation of current Swedish disability policy, (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 1999). In a strategy for the implementation of the disability policy 2011–2016, it was stated that the goal from 2000 remains relevant and important and therefore should be without a time limit (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2011). Thus, from 2000 to now, the goal has remained almost the same, except for adding the word 'diversity' to explain the aims of Swedish society.

Currently, Sweden does not have any strategy or action plan for its disability policy (Nordic Welfare Centre n.d.). However, in 2015 the Swedish Agency for Participation was given the mission to put forward a proposal for how the disability policy can be more efficient and systematic and what focus the continued work should have. A new focus was presented and voted through parliament in 2017 (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, 2016). According to the Swedish Agency for Participation, the new focus is to identify and reduce barriers to full participation. There are four goals that should guide the implementation: the principle of universal design, existing limits in accessibility, individual support and solutions for individual independence, and preventing and counteracting discrimination.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for co-ordinating the disability policy, but several other ministries, agencies and sectors are also involved. The Swedish Agency for Participation's mission is to support the municipalities in implementing the disability policy and to spread knowledge and to range of actors in disability matters; this mainly concerns working with national and local public actors. Every year the Swedish Agency for Participation presents a report to the government on progress towards the disability goals. The report has two parts: the work of public actors to make

society more accessible and a description and analysis of the living conditions of people with disabilities in Sweden.

The new focus of the disability policy is a first step towards making it more concrete, but at the time of writing, it has not yet been implemented. Because municipalities in Sweden are responsible for implementing the disability policy, interviewees from the Swedish Agency for Participation report a risk in failing to provide clearer guidelines. This limited guidance may create a situation where the policy is interpreted differently and unevenly across municipalities.

Universal design as accessibility?

The interviewees from the Swedish Agency for Participation believe that the impacts of concepts—which concepts are used, and what meaning they are given—can be grand. When it comes to universal design¹⁶ there are conflicting aspects to consider. Universal design is a useful concept, but in many places, it has become synonymous with accessibility and given less importance. According to the interviewees, they see universal design as primarily the *process* that should be implemented when building or designing, and not primarily the outcome. If people with different disabilities are included from the beginning of the process it should result in more accessible outcomes. Therefore, they have started using the term 'accessibility through universal design'.

According to the interviewees, differences in interpretation of universal design are a general problem at the local, national and European levels. They give the example of Norway, where the interpretation of universal design at the national level is linked to accessibility and a focus on standards and discrimination legislation, which they claim eliminates the focus on the process. On the other hand, Norway is considered a successful example of how those at the national level have managed to create momentum and push the agenda of universal design at the local level. Even though the Swedish representatives have a different understanding of the concept, they still consider the Norwegian example to be successful and worth learning from.

The national representatives also mention that the concept of universal design can be useful to avoid thinking in silos, which is a great challenge in the field. This means that even though disability issues are said to be cross-disciplinary, they often fall between two departments. The UNCRPD is very important because it categorizes the rights of people with disabilities as human rights and not a special interest for some.

¹⁶ In Swedish: Universell utformning

The municipality of Borås in the south-west of Sweden also uses the terms 'accessibility' and 'universal design' interchangeably. However, the concept of accessibility in Borås includes many of the characteristics of universal design, especially the participatory element of including people with disabilities in the early stages of urban planning and building processes. The concept of universal design is used to educate public officials and for internal communication, while accessibility is used in external communication, primarily because it is more widely recognized by the general public. Thus, the interviewees have a practical approach to concepts and '... do the same thing regardless of what we call it'. For example, it might be easier to convince an architect to support a project if the term 'universal design' is used instead of 'accessibility' because it has become a buzzword that carries more legitimacy for some professions. The interviewees believe that concepts are important and that streamlining of concepts is necessary. They even argue that all local and regional authorities should use the same concepts, which should be decided upon by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR).

Governing disability issues in Borås

Mainly two sector offices are responsible for disability issues in Borås municipality. The disability policy is administered by the Office of Social Welfare, which has primary responsibility for supporting people with disabilities in the municipality. The Social Service Act is of central importance for this support. The municipal managers of the city's indoor premises¹⁷ are responsible for physical accessibility. They ensure that actors in the municipality build according to regulation.

The disability work in Borås municipality is based on *The action plan 2018–2020 for an accessible society* (City of Borås, 2018) wherein six articles from the UN convention are chosen as focus areas. These are: Increase knowledge of the situation of people with disabilities (Article 8), Increase accessibility (Article 9), Reduce violence and other abuse (Article 16), Provide education for all (Article 24), Put more people in work (Article 27) and increase opportunities for active leisure (Article 30). The focus areas are converted to measures in the action plan. The plan is a political document created with the input of the three disability councils. It was decided at the beginning that the plan should focus on physical accessibility and the environment with a special focus on cognitive disabilities.

The municipality employs two full time officers with responsibility for accessibility. One of the officers is involved in the planning and building process to ensure that new buildings and

¹⁷ Lokalförsörjningsförvaltningen in Swedish

renovations follow legal requirements. The second officer is a disability consultant who works under the social and care administration with a stronger focus on cognitive disabilities. This includes both educating people working in the municipal administration and spreading knowledge about the 'programme for an accessible society' and participating in the three disability councils. According to interviews, there are many benefits to having two full time positions dedicated to accessibility, which is not always the case in municipalities. First, it allows for frequent and intense dialogues with disability organizations. Second, it is valuable for a holistic perspective on disability. Because they work on two fronts, one is involved in the planning process of physical accessibility while the other is in contact with the disability organizations, which creates a platform for strategic discussions among themselves and with the disability councils. It is also mentioned that the disability organizations are satisfied to have one person involved from the beginning of the planning process and that there has been a change for the better regarding accessibility in buildings and the physical environment. It has also made the municipality push the agenda further than the minimum legal obligations when the municipality builds for itself. According to municipality representatives, the strong disability organizations in the area have driven the development for a long time and influenced local politicians.

Regional influence

The regional authorities (Region Västra Götaland) work extensively on disability issues and there is a strong regional influence on the municipality of Borås. Most importantly, Borås municipality uses the guidelines for accessibility created by the regional authorities. These include guidelines and standards for physical accessibility, *Accessible and usable environments* (Region Västra Götaland, 2018) and for accessibility information, *Guidelines for accessible information and communication* (Region Västra Götaland, 2013). Interviewees from the Borås municipality state that the regional guidelines for accessibility are very useful because they show what needs to be done locally. Because the guidelines were created in collaboration with disability organizations in the region, they provide a good foundation for a local process of accessibility and a high level of trust and security between actors using the guidelines. The foundation established by the guidelines reduces 'trivial conversations' and allows for discussion of larger structural questions. An interviewee reports 'we have moved from talking about buildings and regulations to asking more structural questions about inclusion, for example, how the culture sector can be more inclusive'.

Borås municipality also uses the regional accessibility database—the only one of its kind in Sweden (Region Västra Götaland, 2019). The accessibility database is used throughout the region and it

provides information to citizens and visitors about accessibility in everyday life. The principle is that businesses, organizations, museums, outdoor premises, ski resorts and other organizations describe the accessibility of their premises so that people can have this information before planning a trip or visit.

Disability councils

Borås municipality has three disability councils. The disability councils work for positive development and increased inclusion of people with disabilities to live in Borås, increased accessibility, increased influence for people with disabilities and co-operation between disability organizations. One council is connected to the Leisure and Public Health Committee and another to the Social Care Committee. The Central Council for Disability deals with more strategic and holistic issues related to co-operation and information. For several years, the council has been affiliated with the municipal board, which interviewees describe as positive because the organizations involved now receive specific funding. According to representatives of Borås, they aim to use the expertise of the councils as much as possible and include them in as many activities as they can. For example, the councils are vital to the accessibility courses that the municipality offers in which there are lectures on human rights.

Award winners

The accessibility work in Borås municipality has been nationally and internationally acknowledged. In 2015, Borås won the European Union's Access City Award with a description of Borås's commitment to improving accessibility since the early 1990s. Several accessible public spaces such as the library, the zoo and the theatre are mentioned in relation to co-operation between private companies in Borås and the regional accessibility database. In 2019, Borås was chosen as a good example of the Design for All Foundation, which collects and disseminates universal design practices and knowledge. Borås was chosen in the 'Products, service and public spaces' category. In the same year, Borås was ranked 'the most accessible municipality' in Sweden by Humana's accessibility barometer. Borås has been a forerunner for many years and was runner-up last year. The award is based on the results of a survey to which 191 out of 290 Swedish municipalities responded. The municipality's work on providing summer positions for young people with disabilities was especially highlighted.



This picture shows a preschool in Borås designed with several measures to increase accessibility. The play area has no obstacles and the iron pillars on the front of the house provide enhanced visibility. There is also an accessible parking space, entrance, elevator and a doorbell on the gate. What the image is not showing is the internal competence development that the municipality has provided teachers and staff at the schools to increase inclusive communication. Source: City of Borås

6 Concluding discussion and lessons learned

This study of disability issues in the urban design and planning of Nordic cities has resulted in a report that focuses on concepts and terminology rather than on urban design solutions. This was a somewhat unexpected but important outcome that is worth emphasizing. It is clear in the research literature and public debate that the ways issues are framed and designated, or terminology develops over time—in this case around disability issues—matters for the legitimacy and knowledge of an issue. For policymakers or local officials, it is important to be aware of how words and concepts can include or exclude, and how they can stigmatize people or frame a problem in a way that does not serve constructive urban design or planning practice.

The concept at the centre of this report is universal design. The term expresses an applied understanding of social sustainability. The term addresses both design as a product and the process of designing from an inclusive perspective. In relation to this, the term 'accessibility' is considered to

refer to the adaptation of an existing environment or building, while universal design implies another way of thinking from the outset. Accessibility measures are implemented to make a public space or built environment accessible, so they can single out those who require the adaptation, people with disabilities. Accessibility measures can make it appear that people with disabilities are not included from the outset, or that their experiences and specific needs are not considered as part of the design process. However, universal design is also a contested concept that is sometimes considered too academic. In communication to a broader audience, the term 'accessibility' is still in use because it is considered established and easily understood.

In several of the municipalities discussed in this report, representatives report that their citizens have difficulty understanding the concept of universal design. In both Borås and Qeqqata Kommunia, the municipality representatives explained that they strategically chose the concept of accessibility over universal design. Even though universal design is used internally, the public has become familiar with the term 'accessibility' and the concept can continue to build momentum. Although Borås relies on the elements of universal design, its staff still refer to accessibility for external communication.

Terminology is also strongly related to application and practice because it can influence not only how disability issues are understood, but also where they are administered and the tools that are given to municipal officials. In Iceland, disability issues went from being framed as environmental issues to social issues when responsibility was reallocated within the local administration. In Trondheim, Norway, the universal design adviser role was transferred from Health and Welfare to Urban Development in 2005, and the Finnish city of Tampere has recently chosen to frame disability issues as part of equality. The official from Tampere who was interviewed thus went from responsibility for disability issues to responsibility for equality, including many issues related to social inclusion and discrimination.

Municipalities welcome the concept of universal design, and representatives from both the national and local levels in our selected Nordic cities appreciate the concept because it is broad. Moreover, even though it is still important to discuss detailed design regulations and measurements, **there is a growing interest in the broader discussion on the many aspects of inclusion.** Borås has established a building process concerning accessibility that satisfies the disability council, which has freed the disability council to discuss structural issues. The Accessibility Committee in Reykjavik has increased its commitment and it now has a mission to evaluate and advise on public services in the city. However, the interviewees in this report describe the issue of terminology and conceptualization as an ongoing discussion. In Norway, universal design is the official term at both

national and local levels, but in the other Nordic countries several terms are in use and there is some uncertainty concerning the best way to talk about inclusion in urban design. The Swedish interviewees reflect that the differing interpretations of universal design are a problem at the local, national and even European levels. Universal design can be oriented to design standards and discrimination, or it can be oriented more towards the inclusive planning and design process. There is a risk of confusion. The Danish interviewee expressed the view that there is a need for a new concept to replace accessibility, such as 'the inclusive city'. It is apparent that this discussion is ongoing, and that the Nordic countries are not in the same place regarding terminology.

The Nordic countries are not in the same place regarding practice either. Disability issues are on the agenda in every country's urban development and design, but despite policy efforts to create a common framework, the Nordic region is not coherent. It does not follow the same charter or the same glossary, it is not doing things in the same way everywhere, and it is not possible to assume similarity of disability issues in urban planning and design. However, there are several commonalities. First, a common denominator in this report is the UNCRPD. The UN Convention has had an impact on policies and regulations and on practice, and it has connected disability issues to human rights. The signing of the convention is also the main reason for undertaking proper efforts to resolve disability issues in Greenland and Iceland. **The UNCRPD convention is useful to overcome the limited mainstreaming of disability issues.** At the national and local levels, it has been mentioned that there is a lack of co-ordination and mainstreaming between ministries and departments. Questions about disability often fall between departments of infrastructure, environment or social affairs. The UN convention connects disability matters to human rights, and as a result, they are labelled in terms of equality, social sustainability and inclusion.

Another consequence of a lack of mainstreaming is that **disability issues often depend on 'champions' in local administrations.** They are presented as a reason for the success of some municipalities, and they are sources of expert knowledge who are important for educating colleagues and pushing the agenda in the entire administration. However, really integrating disability considerations in urban planning and design and achieving long-term planning and consistency requires the questions to be institutionalized into action plans and strategies.

In the introduction to this report, it was stated that urban planning and development from a disability perspective in Nordic cities is not primarily about using new technology. Initiatives are seldom framed as 'smart city' efforts and the cases mentioned in this report do not indicate that digital solutions and 'smart technologies' are commonly used. The representative from Tampere believes that this is because the existing technologies remain to a large extent general and not

specifically for supporting persons with disabilities. There is also an imbalance between the fast development of digital technology and its slower implementation in the public sector. However, the multidimensional aspects of universal design are deemed positive because they allow ICT and digital solutions to be included. Digital technologies are highlighted as important tools for the future but are today not commonly used on municipal level. **Instead, the central concepts are knowledge and maintenance**, and the use of an inclusive process. Regarding knowledge, research highlights that people with disabilities have many subgroups and people with very different needs that are difficult to categorize. This means, for example, that a solution for people using a wheelchair may still exclude owing to specific types of chairs or users and a regulated practice may not be inclusive. This is a challenge for the field of urban planning and design because it is based on regulations, plans, norms and standards. In a sense, categorization is inherent in planning. In addition, universal design has become rather regulated, with measures and tools that depend on norms and categorizations. Research also indicates a risk that the 'universal' in universal design obscures diversity and hides a potential conflict between the interests of people with disabilities and those without. However, the ambition is often to achieve a solution that is attractive for everyone. We conclude from this that it is of key importance to express both knowledge and awareness of the potential conflict and to respond explicitly. The ambition to include 'everyone' must not become a black box that hides differences in interests and needs.

The second central concept is maintenance. If the well-designed results of inclusive local planning and design processes are not attended to, they create barriers that some people with disabilities will find impossible to overcome. Broken lifts, blocked tactile paving or access paths covered with ice and snow in the winter were mentioned in both policy documents and interviews as problems that demanded increased attention.

State support and funding are important for pushing the agenda and changing local practices, but the municipalities also become drivers. As we have seen in Trondheim, the commitment from and co-operation with the national government has played a vital role. The national actors in Sweden and the representatives from Borås all argue that work at the local level would benefit from more national input or guidelines from the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. This would result in greater compliance. Nonetheless, we have seen that the municipalities often manage to go beyond the national standards. Trondheim municipality can now influence the national-level initiatives, and both Tampere and Borås are said to do more than the national framework requires to further development, and they have political support for this. The importance of political support came up in several of the local examples. Nordic municipalities are powerful in

urban planning issues and the active support of local politicians on steering or working groups is important for achieving goals.

The cities also receive positive attention from the outside owing to their work on universal design and accessibility. Trondheim receives study visits and is used as a good example, and Borås has won several awards.

Collecting data and conducting evaluations is important for learning and mainstreaming, as was highlighted in places such as Qeqqata Kommunia and Trondheim. Trondheim's work as a resource municipality required annual evaluations and visible results, which bolstered efforts on universal design in the municipality. It was reported that systematic and regular reporting, made possible by national support, was one of the main results of the project. Evaluation and results are important to convince politicians about funding and to get developers and the public on board. For the independent agency Tilioq in Greenland, where disability issues are a relatively new policy area, the collection of basic data and statistics about people with disabilities and their lives in Greenland is one of the main priorities.

Representation is important. All municipalities in this study include participatory measures in different ways, and a fundamental aspect of universal design is that the planning and building process should involve a participatory element. On the municipal level, this process is institutionalized through disability/accessibility councils/boards/committees in all cases except for Greenland, although even in Qeqqata Kommunia there has been citizen engagement. The report illustrates council participation in planning processes as well as their influence on action plans. Representatives from the municipalities stated that knowledge from the councils is becoming more appreciated; for example, in Reykjavik, even the developers have now started to use council expertise. The disability councils also function as a link to the local disability organizations (who are often represented in the councils) and in all municipalities, the work and commitment of these organizations are seen as valuable and as a driver for development, especially in influencing local politicians.

Citizen participation in planning is often organized through invited and voluntary efforts by engaged citizens in their spare time. For disability issues, engaged citizens are needed for their particular knowledge and competencies in disability issues. Consequently, they are not just engaged locals, but also frequent users of particular services. If municipalities take their knowledge and experiences seriously and want to ensure good representation from the range of people with disabilities, it should not be impossible to consider them to be consultants providing a paid service.

Several of the municipalities highlight the challenge of equal representation of people with different disabilities. It is mentioned that groups with people with visible disabilities often are stronger while people with cognitive disabilities risk being excluded, and that it is necessary to pursue diverse representation.

To summarize, the lessons from this study concern the following topics (presented in the same order as discussed above):

- **There is a growing interest in the many aspects of inclusion**
- **The UNCRPD is useful to overcome challenges of limited mainstreaming**
- **Disability issues often depend on 'champions' in the local administration**
- **Knowledge and maintenance are key**
- **State support and funding are important for pushing agendas and influencing local practice, but the municipalities can also become drivers**
- **Collecting data and conducting evaluations are important for learning and mainstreaming**
- **Representation is important**

This report has focused on the planning and implementation of universal design and accessibility. Participatory processes have been highlighted, especially in the context of disability councils/committees or boards. From the perspective of the municipal representatives, collaboration with disability councils has worked well but it is worth emphasizing that this study has not gathered information on the perspectives of the councils. How co-operation works in practice, whether the councils find that their opinions are heard, or their knowledge used, and the groups of people with disabilities that are represented are all important issues for future Nordic research.

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