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National accessibility strategies for persons with disabilities

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First and foremost thank you for the invitation to be present here and to speak on this important occasion. I am very happy to have this opportunity to present some of the reflections we have done in Denmark concerning library services for persons with a disability.

The title of this presentation is a **National Accessibility Strategy for Persons with Disabilities**.

Before I go into further details about the work with the National Accessibility Strategy in Denmark. I have to stress, that we – in this very moment - do not have an officially decided National Accessibility Strategy in Denmark. The Accessibility Strategy is still wishful thinking.

So when I speak about a National Accessibility Strategy it is not something that already exist – it is something which we would very much like the government to adopt and implement in our national library system.

The idea of a **National Accessibility Strategy for Persons with Disabilities** was developed by a small self-appointed group of persons related to either the library-world or the disability-world. And the occasion was, that my organisation had made a study showing, that Danish libraries in general were far from accessible for persons with a disability.

Therefore we created this idea of a National Strategy as a tactical element in a lobby campaign for better accessibility to information in general and libraries in specific. Some of the elements from the plan have been adopted, but far from all the elements.

The concept of a National Accessibility Strategy contains of a plurality of elements, where the development of exact action plan for each library is the main element, but also other elements must be included as well.

Before going into details with the action plan and the other elements in the strategy I would like to point out the basic principles or the basic values in the work with the National Strategy:

The basic principles of a national strategy:

- **Equal opportunities – everyone should have the same possibility to make use of the services offered**

Firstly - Equal opportunities have been the official basis for Danish disability politics since the early 90'. This also ought to include equal access to library services. And secondly in our modern information society – access to information is absolutely crucial in order to succeed in education and on the labour market – and in life as such. It is worth to remember, that the European Human Rights Declaration (in article 10) emphasizes the importance of access to information on equal terms with the freedom of expression.

- **The principle of compensation**

The principle of compensation is one of the principal ideas in Danish disability politics. This means, that you have the right to what ever you need of support and technical aids in order to maintain the same service from the libraries as any body else. The compensation is meant to give you an equal starting point. Part of the compensation will consist of individual aid (wheelchairs, hearing aids etc.). Another part of the compensation would consist of adaptations made in the environment: bookshelves that can be reached from a wheelchair, search tools which also are accessible for blind persons etc.

- **The principle of sector responsibility**

The principle of sector responsibility or mainstreaming is another one of the principal ideas in Danish disability politics. The concept is, that the authority, organisation or enterprise delivering services and goods to people in general is responsible for ensuring that these services are available and accessible – also for persons with a disability.

- **All groups should be considered**

It has been an important value in the work with the national strategy, that all groups of disabled should be covered by the strategy. Much too often we see that certain groups are

overexposed ex wheelchair users. Persons with learning difficulties and persons with intellectual problems are on the other hand often overlooked.

- **Go for the solutions most likely to be successful – make action plans**

The last principle or value we have stressed in the work with the national strategy is a principle on trying not to do this more complicated than necessary. To those who work in the field: Start with the obvious successes. Do not start with the most complicated and expensive problems. Make an action plan, that analyses and describes the problems; brake down the problems into manageable elements and solve the elements step by step. The important thing is not the speed, but the fact that you are moving. Slow and steady wins the race.

The elements of an action plan for each library:

So what are the elements, which ought to be reflected in an action plan? That can properly be very different from library to library – and of course from country to country. But based on the study we did in the Equal Opportunities Centre in 1998 we found the following elements properly ought to be part of most action plans:

- **Physical accessibility for wheelchair users**

Can you without problems drive from the parking lot to the entrance? Can you get into the building? Can you get around? Can you use the toilets? Etc.

- **Physical accessibility for persons with other types of impairment**

Very often physical accessibility is exclusively considered the same as accessibility for wheelchair users. But accessibility is also about constructing a foreseeable and logical environment, it is about lightning, it is about wire loop for pick-up coils and staff using sign language etc.

- **Accessibility to information on the library**

Most libraries have information about opening hours, how to get a library ticket, events etc. But very often this information is only available in one media – typically on print or on an inaccessible homepage.

- **Accessibility to search tools and the Internet**

It is part of the equal opportunity idea, that you are supposed to serve your self. This also includes the ability to use the search tools you normally use in you search for literature.

- **Accessibility to the homepage of the libraries**

Most libraries have now their own homepage. This homepage must of course be accessible for all. Also for people with a visual impairment and other groups which has specific requirements in order to operate a computer.

- **Accessibility to cultural arrangements**

Very often libraries are a cultural fix point in the community – and very often lending out books is just a part of the activities in the library. Lectures, meeting with authors etc. is also

part of the everyday life in a modern library. And of course these events have to be interpreted into ex sign language, so that it becomes accessible for ex deaf persons.

- **Staff assistance to citizens with disabilities**

Our study showed very clearly, that the staff found themselves very badly equipped to meet and help borrowers with a disability. They feel unsafe and uncertain about how to address and how to communicate with disabled persons. So part of an action plan must be an education program, where the staff is offered supplementary training.

- **Accessibility to materials**

A lot of disability groups need to have materials in other media than the ordinary printed version. Some need to have it in Braille, others as audio files. It is also extremely important that materials in an easy read version is available. There is an urgent need for producing more material especially designed for slow readers.

Elements of a national strategy:

- **Proposals for a national action plan for quality improvement of library service to disabled persons**

It is very important, that each and every library takes measures to improve the accessibility in exactly their library. But we do not think it is done with a local initiative. Therefore we have also suggested that there was designed a national action plan to improve the quality of the services to disabled persons. Some problems cannot be solved solely on a local basis. Therefore there will be a need for a common national wide initiative – that could for example be initiatives to improve the numbers of books in alternative versions, accessibility to the search tool, supplementary training programs etc.

- **Development of quality standards in libraries:**

- **Physical accessibility to the libraries**
- **Information accessibility**
- **Accessibility to materials for all disability groups**
- **Technical aids for the different disability groups**
- **Qualifications of the staff**

We need to develop a common national standard for what we consider a good and acceptable standard for accessibility in our libraries. The standard should area after areas describe the level we want to reach. Every single library in the country can afterwards benchmark themselves up against this standard.

- **The establishment of Denmark's digital library**

We know that almost all written material starts its live as electronic texts. That means that we in principle have the opportunity to make all material available – also for persons, who are unable to read a written text. This gives us an enormous potential in order to give blind persons, slow readers and others with reading problems equal access to literature and information. But we have to find an agreement with the publishers and the writers about the

conditions – and that seems to be a major problem. Thus we have just taken the first step towards a digital library by establishing a portal E 17 named after article 17 in the Danish law on copyright.

- **A company for the development and production of materials adapted to people with special needs**

In order to strengthen the development and production of alternative material to persons who is not able to profit from traditional written material we need to establish a new company which can produce easy-read-material, videos with sign language etc.

- **Education of library staff and formation of information network**

The study performed by the Equal Opportunities Centre in 1998 showed very clearly, that the staff found themselves very badly equipped to meet and help borrowers with a disability. They feel unsafe and uncertain about how to address and how to communicate with disabled persons. So part of an action plan must be an education program, were the staff is offered supplementary training.