

Summary:

How Norwegian Counties Work with Universal Design of Local Public Transport

The profile of universal design has grown as more and more national political goals and regulations require its inclusion in the planning and operation of public transport services. This report uses surveys, document studies and interviews to look at what Norwegian counties do to increase the accessibility of public transport. It asks to what extent universal design is involved in the plans the counties introduce the measures they adopt and the challenges they experience.

Universal design strives to be a broad-spectrum solution that helps everyone, not just people with disabilities. This is reflected in the following definition, accepted in Norway after its proposal by a Norwegian committee in its review on "Equality and Accessibility" (NOU 2005:8): "Universal design means designing or adjusting the main solution of the physical environment so that its general function can be used by as many as possible (our translation)." This definition is flexible in that it encompasses separate and stigmatising solutions, as well as broad-spectrum solutions that help everyone.

Applying this definition we ask to what extent counties have implemented measures that address user groups with the following types of impairments: (1) *orientation impairments* such as sensory, cognitive and mental health impairments, (2) *mobility impairments* such as a physical or medical impairments, and (3) *environmental sensitivity* such as asthma and allergy. We also gather information about several elements in the travel chain – infrastructure, material and information – for each of these user groups.

We find that there is a stronger focus on universal design today than in 2004 (Deltasenteret 2004). Since then, the Norwegian National Transport Plan 2006-2015 has introduced universal design as one of its five main goals, and the accessibility project *Better infrastructure, Rolling material, and Active enhanced logistics* (BRA) 2006-2009 has contributed with economic resources. We find that eleven counties have included general goals on universal design or accessibility of public transport in their county plans. There are two kinds of goals in these plans: (a) Universal design is laid down as a value or guideline for the development of the society and the design of the physical environment, or (b) it is expressed as a goal of public transport, and attaches importance to a user-friendly public transport system.

Two counties (Hordaland, Rogaland) have county plans specifically on universal design, aiming to describe the status of elements of a "whole journey": material, infrastructure, and information. Moreover, about half of the counties have mapped

the status of accessibility of public transport e.g. how many stops and buses that are made accessible. This is an important step towards knowing what needs to be done – what measures need to be implemented in order to make the public transport system *de facto* accessible. Nevertheless, most of the counties remain uncertain about how easy or difficult it is to travel for the different groups of people with impairments today.

There seems to have been a development from focusing on single measures towards a “whole travel” approach, at least on some stretches, where bus material, infrastructure for – as well as to and from – stops, and information have each been made accessible to a certain extent. There are several good examples of strategies and concrete measures that aim to make several elements of the transport chain accessible. This strategy differs from the focus on single elements of the travel in a first approach to universal design. Examples of measures or projects in which elements of the whole journey is in focus include the underground and some tram and bus lines in Oslo; the Unibus project in Drammen; and the Metrobus lines in Kristiansand. In practice, however, these stretches are not accessible during the whole year, as winter maintenance may create problems.

Public transport systems are more likely to be universally designed in cities than in rural areas. Indeed, the counties’ best examples are found in cities. This is no surprise as the national government’s accessibility programme BRA, to which the counties and municipalities apply for resources, has cost efficiency as a criterion, which means that those routes with most passengers are prioritised.

Our survey shows that most counties prioritise measures that improve accessibility for people with vision and mobility impairments. Of the different elements of a whole journey, stops and vehicles are the most prioritised. These are consequently the parts of the whole travel chain that are the most accessible.

The counties experience goal conflicts with other political goals of the transport sector, e.g. baby carriages and wheelchairs require space, which could be used for more seats; areas for standing are less safe than seats; use of bus elevators and securing wheelchairs is time consuming and makes the travel time unpredictable. There is also a larger area required by buses turning at high standard stops with tall kerbs than at low kerbs, which may make it necessary to move a stop away from where it would be more suitable from a market perspective.

Several counties mention that economical funding is important in making the public transport system more accessible. The accessibility program BRA, which contributes with resources, plays an important role. Other important initiatives have been to put universal design on the agenda, to set requirements in contracts, to raise consciousness about the topic by formulating goals and initiating projects, to arrange meetings with people with impairments and their organisations, and to develop and communicate a mutual understanding of what universal design involves and means. Although concrete measures have to be implemented in order to give people with impairments the possibility to travel with the ordinary public transport system, the counties also emphasise that understanding, attitudes and communication about universal design are also important in the development of a more universally designed public transport system.

Most of the counties mention that they have formal meetings with user group organisations to gather knowledge and to quality assess their work.

Approximately half of the counties also have informal contact with organisations representing people with impairments.

Only a few counties have discussed a reorganisation of special transport services, e.g. decreasing the need for special transport services by making the conventional public transport system more accessible. Only one county (Østfold) has introduced an arrangement in which the users of special transport services can also use their tickets on the ordinary transport system.

Almost half of the counties which have answered the survey say that they have implemented courses for drivers, and about a fourth have introduced courses for other employees.

To make the public transport system more universally designed is challenging. The counties mention the following as to what they experience as the greatest challenges: Costs, attitudes, competence, trust of people with disabilities, to integrate the many responsible entities of the elements of a whole travel chain, winter maintenance, and the lack of national standards.

The focus on universal design of public transport has become and is getting stronger. The first counties began working on this topic about 15-20 years ago. In the years that followed (1990s) some further counties began their work for a more accessible public transport system. Shortly after the year 2000 most counties began to plan measures – from mapping the status of stops and bus material to make requirements, and implementing measures. Four counties tell that they have only just begun working with universal design of public transport.

The broad-spectrum solution that universal design entails seems to be more prominent today, in 2008, than it was four years ago. The coordination of different actors is still a challenge, but we find several examples on routes where the counties in cooperation with others have tried to design and modify elements of the whole journey, and not only single elements. The work has begun, but all the counties still have a long way to go before the public transport system is accessible for “everyone” – with or without separate and stigmatizing solutions.