

Universal design as a strategy for local and regional authorities

Einar LUND

*Senior Adviser, Department for Planning, Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation,
Norway*

ABSTRACT

Universal design is a long-term national strategy to help make society accessible to everyone and prevent discrimination. The municipalities and regional authorities are in general resources for achieving national goals. Their management and works are crucial to the development and implementation of universal design. The local and regional levels have been focusing on universal design through several programmes and plans. *The National development project of universal design in counties and municipalities* was carried out during the 2009 – 2013 period. This project initiated actions that led to interested and motivated municipalities achieving standards for the implementation of universal design in their strategic and daily activities. Eighty-eight municipalities and 17 regional authorities participated in the project. The results are presented in a common report called *National development project of universal design in counties and municipalities – Experiences and examples*.

Keywords: Planning/Experiences/Methods/Municipal management

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. *What does the subject aim at/what does it comprise*

Universal design is a long-term national strategy to help make society accessible to everyone and prevent discrimination. Universal design is about designing and adapting physical conditions to promote equal opportunities to participate in society. Universal design adds qualities to human-created surroundings that are positive for the entire population and for society.



Ill. 1. We are all different – there is no average person! Ill: Trond Bredesen

1.2. *The municipalities are a resource for achieving national goals*

In 2009, a new programme started on the basis of work carried out with 17 Norwegian municipalities since 2005. By the end of the new programme period in 2013, 88 municipalities and 17 regional authorities had been involved. As in the former period, the project was under the auspices of the Ministry of the Environment. The municipalities and regional authorities have systematically worked to translate the principles of universal design into clearly defined actions. They have explored universal design as a strategy for building local communities characterised by adequate accessibility, equality, participation and freedom of choice for all.

The new programme was called the National development project of universal design in counties and municipalities. The intentions were to fulfil the pilot period strategies aimed at the vision of Norway being universally designed by 2025. The basis was the government's **new Action plan for universal design and increased accessibility 2009-2013**.

The municipalities and counties were inspired to make active use of the planning system and find various working methods and practical solutions for buildings and outdoor areas, in addition to achieving results in other areas through political goals and strategies formed in their own local and regional context.

The new government which took over in October 2013 has decided to continue the strong focus on the theme of universal design, but has not yet stipulated the concrete actions that will be implemented.

Nevertheless, for persons with disabilities, accessibility is an important prerequisite for participating in society. The absence of accessibility appears to be discriminatory. With universal design as a societal value to promote equality, the development of society results in better and more equal surroundings for persons with disabilities. This leads to positive societal qualities for all the inhabitants, contributes to social and economic sustainability and is part of the national sustainability strategy.



III. 2. The Action plan 2009 – 2013 - Norway universal designed by 2012

2. UNIVERSAL DESIGN – FROM A NON-ESSENTIAL TO A KEY OBJECTIVE IN MUNICIPAL AND REGIONAL PLANNING ACTIVITIES

Accessibility for persons with disabilities has been on the agenda in Norway for more than 30 years. For much of that time, efforts were rooted in an overall vision constructed within the framework of health and social policy, with measures designed for individual users provided via the welfare system. Many municipalities were taking active steps to create a satisfactory framework for disabled individuals, but the results they obtained were seldom of a fundamental or lasting nature. There was no cohesive, systematic integration of accessibility principles into municipal activities or the municipal plan.

1998 - The Ministry of the Environment's development programme – "Planning for All"

The Ministry of the Environment launched a development programme to bring accessibility for persons with disabilities into municipal planning processes. "Planning for All" especially utilised two instruments: the designation of planning guidelines and the implementation of development projects in cooperation with municipal and county administrations. In addition, the ministry chose to move away from the traditional view of accessibility for individuals with disabilities, structuring the initiative instead around the broad-based strategy of universal design. The circular "T-5/99 Accessibility for All" issued in 1999 recommended that municipalities apply universal design principles in their planning activities. Twenty municipalities and counties took part in the development programme.

2004 - Universal design as a strategy – new national initiative targeting municipalities

The Minister of the Environment and the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs presented the Government Action plan for increased accessibility for persons with disabilities, a plan for universal design in key areas of society, in 2004.

The "Planning for All" programme had now been developed into a pilot municipality initiative called *Increased emphasis on the application of universal design principles in municipal activities*, under the auspices

of the Ministry of the Environment. Importance was attached to ensuring wide variation in terms of the size and location of the participating 17 municipalities, as well as in terms of their experience.

This continued until 2009 and the pilot municipality initiative is described as a giant municipal laboratory by researchers in the Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research. They found that the project reflects the recommendations found in the literature, leaving the pilot municipalities largely free to organise their activities themselves, with structured but limited reporting required.

2009 – The new action plan stipulated the sectoral responsibility and had visions of a society full of acceptable universal design results.

Eleven ministries had projects and programmes with universal design as their main theme. Two Acts were launched with essential content to promote universal design in local and regional activities: a revision of the Planning and Building Act and the new Discrimination and Accessibility Act. The first included universal design as a topic in all urban planning, building design and building approval. The second was for building owners, activities and firms whose premises were for public use.

3. A STRONG FOCUS ON MUNICIPAL STRATEGIES IN THE NEW NATIONAL ACTION PLAN 2009 – 2013.

The positive experience of the scheme involving active pilot municipalities in 2005-2008 led to a continuation of this scheme being placed high on the agenda of the new action plan. The previous pilot municipalities and some of the 19 county councils in Norway were challenged to recruit new active municipalities and counties to work purposefully towards the goal of including universal design in their political and administrative activities and when practising their authority.

This formed part of a wide-ranging programme in the new action plan that had specific national goals for the municipal sector:

- All local authorities should adopt a municipal plan containing universal design guidelines by 2015.
- Universal design should be an integral principle in all regional plans by 2015.
- All county councils and 25% of the municipalities should actively participate in a national development project aimed at the municipalities and counties by 2014.
- All municipalities should actively take part in the guidance concerning the new Planning and Building Act by 2010.

One of the intentions of including the counties was for both the regional political county council and the government's county governor to use their positions to assist the ministry to realise the specific goals and implement the project's intentions in general.

An integrated and cross-sectoral effort

The action plan was sector overarching and included both cross-sectoral and sectoral measures. Cooperation between various administrative stages and levels was important. County councils and county governors were to be more heavily involved.

Municipal efforts

The municipalities' management and work are in general crucial to the development and implementation of universal design. Norway's 428 municipalities have a decisive influence on the design of buildings and outdoor areas and are important players in the fields of passenger transport and the adaptation of ICT and workplaces. Great emphasis is therefore placed on preparing good regulations that the municipalities can adopt in order to achieve universal design in the various sectors. In addition, extensive programmes and measures are being implemented in order to give the municipalities more expertise and resources for this work.

A number of ministries, departments and organisations are involved. The county governor offices have been given the task of monitoring developments and municipal and county councils for people with disabilities have been given a stronger mandate to contribute to the municipal planning and decision-making processes. The government has started to cooperate with the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities in order to ensure good communication.

The programme was intended to make it clear that universal design has been included in the new Planning and Building Act and the new Anti-Discrimination and Accessibility Act as strategies to help make society accessible to everyone and help prevent discrimination.

Key measures in the programme that especially focused on county councils and municipalities were:

- A national development project for county councils and municipalities
- The introduction of regulations concerning the upgrading of existing buildings, facilities and outdoor areas
- Contributions to regional development and innovation funds can be spent on investments and planning in accordance with universal design
- A scheme to improve the expertise of politicians and municipal/county council employees
- The making of arrangements so that polling stations and voting opportunities are universally designed/accessible to people with disabilities

The first of these key measures has been concretised as the *National development project of universal design in counties and municipalities* under the auspices of the Ministry of the Environment.

Through 29 gatherings during the 2009 – 2013 period, 1,850 persons have met, been informed, exchanged experiences, discussed and drawn up the course for their work on universal design challenges. This was concluded at the national conference called *Du skal få en dag i måra* (Eng: Tomorrow is another day) <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/kmd/tema/plan--og-bygningsloven/plan/universell-utforming-i-planlegging/du-skal-fa-en-dag-i-mara-2.html?id=749202> (only in Norwegian)

Presented their Results and experiences are presented in 37 articles and brief examples in the report entitled *Nasjonalt utviklingsprosjekt for universell utforming i kommuner og fylker – erfaringer og eksempler* (National development project of universal design in counties and municipalities - experiences and examples) Miljøverndepartementet / Ministry of the Environment (2013).

4. A COMMON VISION AND SEVEN UNIFIED GOALS LED TO ACTIVE WORK IN MANY FIELDS

4.1 A cooperation project

In collaboration with the pilot municipalities from 2005, new incorporated municipalities and eight interested counties, the Ministry of the Environment drew up a project description for their efforts that contained a common vision and seven unified goals. This measure was designed to be a collaborative project with participation from other public agencies too, based on reciprocity, dialogue and two-way learning.

Vision:

The municipalities in the new pilot project for universal design will give rise to local communities with adequate accessibility, equality, participation and freedom of choice for all.

Unified goals:

1. To raise awareness and achieve results throughout the entire municipal administration – across sectoral dividing lines and in all municipal activities.
2. To encourage local community measures through cooperation with trade and industry and other actors from the private and public domain.
3. To achieve physical solutions that are satisfactorily accessible, safe, environmentally sound and aesthetically appealing.
4. To further develop targeted collaboration with municipal councils for people with disabilities and other relevant user groups.
5. To increase competence among all parties responsible for the planning, implementation and operation of municipal activities.
6. To serve as a role model and motivate other municipalities to implement more universal design thinking
7. To provide input and take part in the dialogue relating to national universal design efforts.

The efforts of the pilot municipalities 2005 – 2008 have paved the way for the wider incorporation of universal design principles in Norway. Annual reports bear witness to significant insight into, and reflect considerable experience with, municipal planning efforts and the implementation of universal design measures.

The system of policy instruments has improved vastly since the project commenced, and universal design has become a far more integral part of municipal and local community planning and activities. Active participation by the leadership of the pilot municipalities, both political and administrative, also makes it clear that the Ministry of the Environment's development project has gained their full support.

2009 saw the entry into force of an amended Planning and Building Act that includes universal design in its objects clause and other provisions, as well as new anti-discrimination and accessibility legislation that stipulates the application of universal design strategies. The pilot municipalities 2005 – 2008 have forged a path that other municipalities can follow. Their results and experiences were presented in the report entitled Universal Design as a Municipal Strategy – Experience and Results from the Pilot Municipality Project 2005 – 2008 (Ministry of the Environment, 2009).

The efforts of the participating municipalities and counties in the period 2009 – 2013 have involved more than just planning activities. They have also included raising awareness about the principles of universal design, building new expertise and enhancing cooperation with municipal councils for people with disabilities as well as other community-level organisations. The municipalities designed concrete universal design-based procurement procedures, and have been able to see whether the solutions they selected were adequately appropriate. Contact between municipalities, counties and the national authorities has facilitated the development and testing of a variety of tools for use in these efforts.



III. 3. The Norwegian Mapping Authority played an active part in the municipality project by producing an accessibility map with colour coding. Illustration: Ullensaker municipality/ Norwegian Mapping Authority

4.2. Many ways of looking at the issue and many experiences – important results

Working together

Meetings, seminars or conferences held up to four times a year have provided a learning arena. The focus of each meeting has revolved around matters that the municipalities and counties have wished to discuss. Representatives from the different sectors and levels of the municipal and county administration have been selected to attend each meeting depending on the topics to be discussed. Each meeting details specific points to be followed up by both the ministry, counties and municipalities. Some of them have been especially for administrative leaders or the political staff, including mayors, etc.



III. 4. Discussing experiences. Photo: Astrid Larsen



Look for the opportunity behind every challenge!

No one would disagree that it is important to work towards an inclusive society that is accessible to everyone. The challenge lies in convincing everyone within the individual municipality and county that this is something each of them needs to focus on and that it will require a targeted, systematic effort. The key is to win understanding for the principles of universal design as an exciting and professionally inspiring area. Nobody has “ownership” of the concept of universal design. It is crucial that planners, building project administrators, procurers, engineers, occupational therapists and others all respect each other’s fundamental professional knowledge and can learn from each other.

Cultivate enthusiasts!

An organisation needs people who understand what can be achieved through the application of universal design principles and who are able to motivate others to see and think about the inherent challenges and opportunities. More than one person is needed to take the lead and promote creative, innovative thinking, especially at first.

Ill. 5 (over), fig. 6 (below).

Some enthusiasts in 2008 have emerged to a great deal in 2012. Photo: Astrid Larsen (besides) and Jon Rune Trengereid



Organisation across dividing lines is a key to success

Universal design is interdisciplinary by nature and must be integrated into the activities of the organisation as a whole. In other words, universal design does not just extend to planning or building matters, but to all municipal service areas. Each administrative unit must be given independent responsibility for coordinating the activities as a sectoral approach. Key personnel must be given enough time to learn about universal design. Cooperation and the integration of project management across sectors and service areas add breadth and cohesiveness to efforts and make the best use of everyone’s knowledge.

Make use of ongoing processes and projects

It is important to incorporate universal design thinking into ongoing projects, and it is not too late even if a project has already started. One good approach may be study trips to see what universal design involves and could mean for a project that is underway. It is wise to plan and conduct study trips of this type in cooperation with the municipal council for people with disabilities and other user organisations.



III. 7. Study trips can provide good inspiration and new ideas. Photo: Olav Rand Bringa/Ministry of the Environment

The Planning and Building Act – best tool for integrating universal design principles

The Act comprises the most important local-level political instrument for the development of municipalities as a community. Universal design is all about equal opportunity. It revolves around shaping the physical surroundings so that inhabitants are able to use their resources and participate actively in society. The new Act in 2009 provides municipalities with even stronger policy instruments in this field. Political guidelines and decisions that are integrated in the municipal master plan provide guiding principles both for how further planning is to take place and for how projects and measures are to be implemented.

Political support is crucial but is not enough on its own!

Universal design is best understood from participation in its implementation and practice. People need to see that universal design leads to effective results. A suitable demonstration project, a simple, easy-to-implement example of universal design that can serve as a source of learning for a wider audience, should be devised at an early stage. Documentation of any (increased) costs incurred due to the incorporation of universal design into the measure should be provided together with information about potential cost-sharing. Universal design does not increase the cost of new buildings if it is included from the onset of the planning activities. When it comes to the renovation and rehabilitation of existing structures, good planning gives higher quality for the money.

Cooperation with the local community is essential

Initiatives vis-à-vis trade and industry and cooperation with schools can lead to political awareness and knowledge that the municipality can exploit in its efforts. Schoolchildren may come up with extremely good ideas; they can help to map things out and suggest improvements. There are advantages to ensuring that local activities incorporate both universal design and inclusion as part of their organisation. Municipal businesses, inhabitants and visitors will benefit from high accessibility for all and information about universal design will reach a wider audience.



III. 8. Street and new entrance. Photo: Raina Kristensen/Sortland municipality

Competence building – a continuous, long-term process

Increased expertise in universal design thinking can only be achieved by building up awareness and understanding. It is especially important when educating politicians and trips around local areas in wheelchairs or using simulation glasses, for example, may prove very fruitful. Competence is needed in the hearts, minds and hands of people at all levels of the organisation – from top-level administrators to maintenance personnel.

Knowledge is needed about how best to apply the statutory framework in planning activities, building matters, development contracts, tender processes and procurements.

Universal design need not be synonymous with uninspiring standard solutions

Both natural elements and artwork can be used to help people negotiate their way through their surroundings with greater ease. Competence-building measures do not need to be time-consuming. Breakfast meetings with invited speakers can provide interesting input. Joint visits or study trips in connection with ongoing plans and projects may provide useful insights along the way. Mobilising cross-sectoral participation for testing new tools results in effective learning and creates a useful foundation for the planning and implementation of projects. It is beneficial if several staff members of the same organisation pursue these as a group.

Good advice may be had for free - experience and expertise add to quality

The council for people with disabilities should be included in the start-up and development phases as it can provide special insights and input. The council will need some time to define its role as a promoter of development together with the municipality and its own “grassroots” - the user organisations. Concrete cooperative projects lead to constructive learning for the municipality and council alike. Dialogue with the municipal council for people with disabilities and user organisations has led to many innovative, creative solutions.



III. 9. Active dialogue with the municipal council for people with disabilities. Photo: Kjersti Berg/Porsgrunn municipality

Learn from others – and share what you have learned

It is wise to consult other municipalities or county authorities that have more experience. It may often be constructive to establish more formal lines of communication with neighbouring municipalities or between neighbouring counties. Some municipalities and two of the counties worked together as partners and found this to be very much the case. Seeking information and assistance at a regional level or “stealing” methods from others is highly encouraged. Experience at the local level will enable the regional authorities to strengthen their own expertise in the respective spheres of responsibility.

Universal design efforts touch on many subject areas.

The project managers in the participating municipalities and counties are a diverse, interdisciplinary group in terms of their educational backgrounds and their work experience within the municipalities. Most are engineers and occupational therapists, but there are also architects, landscape architects, nurses, pre-school teachers, physical therapists, agricultural economists, economists and anthropologists. A few have had a full-time position as a designated project manager for universal design, but most have combined this task with their ordinary activities within relevant technical, planning or health care sectors. This has created a good basis for learning and integration into their organisational structure.

National inspiring and challenging methods. The storage of examples

The main aim of the National Project of Universal Design in Municipalities and Counties was to support the municipalities and counties in creating local actions and doing the local way-finding. The support in addition to national gatherings was funds or resources given to those participating in the programme (“members”) as limited financial support. They could spend the money on activities or coordination measures, without any strong

restrictions being imposed by the ministry. As a supplement to this, they were in 2013 challenged to create more dedicated local projects that had to be based on special project descriptions for realisation within the year. This created a level of activity and innovation that reached further than the “normal” activity. The ministry supported 25 projects, with a spread of topics and methodology. The reports from these projects will successively be presented in the main source for examples from the national project, an interactive website created as a timeless supplement: http://uu-k1.no/?page_id=8 (only in Norwegian).



III. 10. The project managers represent a wide range of educational expertise. Photo: Astrid Larsen

CONCLUSION

Basically, the municipalities are a resource for achieving national goals. The national actions have shown that the municipalities' management and work are fully capable of including universal design as a strategy. The municipalities have created local guidelines and solutions and implemented universal design in their planning, building activities and procurement, all as good examples that are useful for others. Together with the counties they have shown that they are important players in a wide range of community activities. The participating municipalities and counties have a decisive influence on the design of buildings and outdoor areas as well as in the fields of passenger transport and the adaptation of ICT and workplaces. Other municipalities outside the project are also working in a similar way or copying examples in their arenas.

A national-level emphasis on preparing good regulations that the municipalities can adopt is helpful but not critical in order to achieve universal design in the various sectors. At the municipal level, there are many professionals that understand the strategy. When their conditions for working on the topics are supported, as done through national actions, they are able to develop the perspectives and solutions.

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