

Living in Student Accommodation: Identifying and improving best practice to support students with accessibility requirements at the University of Leeds



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

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Executive Summary

Introduction

Excellent quality of university accommodation and related practice is linked internationally to good levels of academic success,² the existence of a supportive social network,³ and is vital in encouraging good mental health and general wellbeing.⁴ University accommodation therefore has the potential to encourage an environment where students are empowered, included, and supported throughout their time at university. To ensure an inclusive and supportive environment, university accommodation must have the ability to support students with accessibility needs and therefore remain responsive, aware and supportive to a wide range of student needs. However, related research investigating best practice, university accommodation and accessibility needs are surprisingly limited in the current academic literature, and current guidelines on related best practice are vague and under-researched. This research seeks to remedy this gap, with a focus on examining and assessing current practice regarding University of Leeds accommodation.

This research uses a multi-method approach, consisting of a literature review, webpage analysis of accommodation pages partially against Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) guidelines, and staff interviews. Overall, this research finds that establishing best practice must be ongoing, dynamic and university-specific. At the University of Leeds,

² Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama, 'The role of student housing in student success: An ethnographic account.' (2019) 7 *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 2, 15-25; Theophilus Djaba, 'The Impact of Campus Housing on Student Academic Performance, Retention & Graduation' (*University of Connecticut Office of Budget, Planning and Institutional Research*, June 2022) <https://bpir.media.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/3452/2022/08/1.Update_CampusHousing-1-1.pdf> accessed 8th August 2024; Oliver J. Webb, and Rebecca Turner, 'The association between residential arrangements and academic performance in UK university students' (2020) 44 *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 10, 1320-1334.

³ Jean-Luc Mogenet, and Liliane Rioux, 'Students' satisfaction with their university accommodation', (2014) 66 *Nordic Psychology* 4, 303-320.

⁴ Joanne D. Worsley, Paula Harrison, and Rhiannon Corcoran, 'The role of accommodation environments in student mental health and wellbeing' [2021] *BMC Public Health* 21 1-15.

findings indicate that increased training, urgent improvements to accommodation related web pages, and increased formalisation of current processes and roles are needed to enhance best practice. However, impressive strengths in current practice are also found, such as an inclusive and responsive approach to accessibility as also based on emphasis on an individualised approach. This research lastly provides concrete recommendations based on these findings, therefore aiming to enhance current practices for both staff and students.

Research Questions

1. What should best practice include to support students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation?
2. What are the key issues and strengths of current practice supporting students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation?
3. How can support for students with accessibility requirements in University of Leeds accommodation be improved?

Objectives

- To review (and improve where needed) practice regarding support for students with accessibility needs in university owned accommodation
- To ensure that students with accessibility needs in university accommodation are supported to the highest degree possible
- To ensure that University of Leeds accommodation feels like a home for **all** students

Methodology

- Literature review to assess the relevant existing academic literature both domestically and internationally
- Website analysis of three key web pages related to University of Leeds accommodation including residence pages and an AccessAble page

- Interviews with members of staff from various teams in Residential Services

Findings & Conclusions

- Strengths found in current practice were: **individualised care within a positive and responsive culture & large resource availability**, the **importance of specific support roles** to enhance and support accessibility needs or additional requirements, and **good cross and inter-team collaboration**.
- Specific areas to improve upon and consider related to: **a need for formalisation and increased availability of information**, a **training gap**, and **excluded groups**. A need for formalisation and increased availability of information was further divided into three further key areas where this problem was present and had an effect, which in turn affected both staff and students. These related to: obstacles to specialist roles, issues with data sharing, and the need for website improvement.
- Overall, whilst it is extremely positive that a page related to accessibility requirements exists, **University of Leeds web pages were found to be somewhat lacking in sufficient information, in addition to having poor layout in places**
- Ultimately, whilst it is important to have focal points of improvement in mind to work towards best practice, **delivering and establishing best practice regarding accessibility in accommodation should be an ongoing, active process that can therefore never be viewed as complete**. In the context of accessibility requirements in accommodation, standards of best practice will also always change, due to changing student demographics and barriers. Best practice in this context must therefore be tailored to each individual university.

Recommendations Summary

- To alleviate issues regarding the lack of formalisation and availability of information, this research recommends that both roles and processes are officially codified at the University of Leeds. This could involve **the creation of a Residential Services Hub**, that all members of staff in the Residential Services could access. This could also involve **a collection of relevant resources and key training on the power of**

language and issues with accessibility as an umbrella term or synonym for additional needs solely related to disability. This must be mandatory for all staff regardless of the amount of whether they are part time or full time. This could also involve information such as on site plans, and therefore form the basis for accessibility information solely provided by the University instead of relying on external sites. Overall, this would avoid confusion over specific roles and increase knowledge and staff support, whilst ensuring that if things go wrong there are backup plans in place.

- **Employ a specialist in website accessibility** to analyse and improve the usability of web pages. This would potentially increase student knowledge on how the University of Leeds can support accessibility requirements in the context of university accommodation.
- This research recommends **increased transparency and clarity on the relevant accommodation web pages**, to alleviate issues related to availability of information found via interviews and the website analysis. This could include clear information on what specialist roles are available to help students if needed, clear information on what financial support is available - such as rent reductions - and how to apply. This could also include publication of this report, and regular updates on progress made since its publication.

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1. Introduction

Excellent quality of university accommodation and related practice is linked to good levels of academic success,⁵ the existence of a supportive social network⁶, and is vital in encouraging good mental health and general wellbeing.⁷ University accommodation therefore has the potential to encourage an environment where students are empowered, included, and supported throughout their time at university. To ensure an inclusive and supportive environment, university accommodation must have the ability to support students with accessibility needs and therefore remain responsive, aware and supportive to a wide range of student needs. However, related research investigating best practice, university accommodation and accessibility needs is surprisingly limited in the current academic literature, and current guidelines on related best practice are vague and under-researched. This research seeks to remedy this gap, with a focus on examining and assessing current practice regarding University of Leeds accommodation.

This research uses a multi-method approach, consisting of a literature review, webpage analysis of accommodation pages partially against Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) guidelines, and staff interviews. Overall, this research finds that establishing best practice must be ongoing, dynamic, and university-specific. At the University of Leeds findings indicate that increased training, urgent improvements to accommodation related web pages, and increased formalisation of current processes and roles are needed to enhance best practice. However, impressive strengths in current practice are also found, such as an inclusive and responsive approach to accessibility as also based on emphasis on an individualised approach. This research lastly provides concrete recommendations based on these findings, therefore aiming to enhance current practices for both staff and students.

⁵ Nomkhosi Xulu-Gama (n2).

⁶ Jean-Luc Mogenet, and Liliane Rioux, 'Students' satisfaction with their university accommodation', (2014) 66 *Nordic Psychology* 4, 303-320.

⁷ Joanne D. Worsley, Paula Harrison, and Rhiannon Corcoran, 'The role of accommodation environments in student mental health and wellbeing' [2021] *BMC Public Health* 21 1-15.

1.1 Definitions & Research Questions

Ideas of accessibility in relation to student accommodation are at the heart of this research. This research defines accessibility in accordance with the **social model of disability**, and therefore seeks to examine and dismantle certain societal barriers. The social model of disability argues that people are primarily dis-abled by various barriers within society, and therefore disability is socially constructed.⁸ These barriers are commonly architectural, social and attitudinal in nature.⁹ This definition therefore refuses to place blame on the individual and their impairment as a ‘problem’, and instead highlights these barriers as the issue. As this research follows the social model, it also chooses to use terms such as ‘disabled person’, instead of person first language; ‘person with a disability’ could be seen to confuse impairment with disability under the social model, whilst placing an onus or responsibility on the disabled person for their impairment.¹⁰ However, this research also recognises that this may not be the preferred usage of language for some, and encourages further discussions with others where necessary to determine which type of language and descriptors are preferred.

It is important to note that people who have different accessibility related needs may not always be considered as, and consider themselves as, disabled. This is not adequately portrayed in much of the existing academic literature. This research defines **accessibility** as referring to the goal that all are included, and that no one is prevented from using or experiencing aspects of accommodation in a positive manner due to any requirements they may have. University accommodation must therefore be usable and enjoyed by all to the greatest extent possible, which may involve further provision and consideration when allocating and organising accommodation according to their needs. For example, this could involve a ground floor room for someone who uses a wheelchair, an en-suite for someone with emetophobia, a room in a quieter flat for someone who has insomnia, a room with

⁸ Michael Oliver, *Understanding disability: From theory to practice* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018).

⁹ Harlan Hahn in *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back* <<https://icarusfilms.com/fn-vital>> accessed 12th August 2024, as quoted in David Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, ‘Minority model: From liberal to neoliberal futures of disability’ In *Routledge handbook of disability studies*, (Routledge, 2019) pp. 45-54.

¹⁰ Disability Rights UK, ‘Social Model of Disability: Language’ <<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language>> accessed 12th August 2024.

less bright lights for those with sensory related needs, or permission to have a fridge to store medication or food due to dietary or medical needs. This definition overlaps with the concept of **universal design**, which argues that products, architecture, environments and communications should be available and usable to all, also ‘to the greatest extent possible’.

¹¹ Ultimately, this research defines accessibility in student accommodation as relating to the removal of barriers that prevent all students from feeling comfortable, empowered, supported and at home.

Legal definitions are also deeply important to define regarding accessibility. In the UK, in education, organisations have a legal duty to prevent substantial disadvantage and therefore promote accessibility,¹² which can be seen in the requirement to provide **reasonable adjustments** for those considered to be legally disabled. The **legal definition of disability** is in Section 6 of the Equality Act 2010, which states that someone is disabled if they have ‘a physical or mental impairment, and [...] the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [...] their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’.¹³ In public services and education, this duty to provide reasonable adjustments and prevent discrimination is anticipatory,¹⁴ and therefore services must consider in advance what makes their services accessible. This research report therefore partially aids the University of Leeds accommodation services in fulfilling this duty.

Lastly, this research also investigates and seeks to determine **best practice**. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, best practice is commonly understood to relate to a ‘working method, or set of working methods, that is officially accepted as being the best to use in a particular business or industry’.¹⁵ However as Peters & Heron¹⁶ point out, and as this research will also highlight, best practice standards often change and can be dependent on

¹¹ Ronald Mace, ‘Universal design: housing for the lifespan of all people.’

<<https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels2/pdf/80s/88/88-HFL-UDS.pdf>> accessed 12th August 2024, 1.

¹² Equality Act 2010, s. 20

¹³ Ibid, s. 6.

¹⁴ Equality Act 2010, Explanatory Notes, Commentary on Sections Part 16 Schedule 2.

¹⁵ Cambridge Dictionary, ‘Best Practice’

<<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/best-practice>> accessed 12th August 2024.

¹⁶ Peters, M.T. and Heron, T.E., ‘When the best is not good enough: An examination of best practice’ (1993) 26 *The journal of special education* 4, 371-385.

a specific area or in this case, a specific university. This research therefore seeks to inform, assess, and provide recommendations on how to improve current standards of practice to improve accessibility support in University of Leeds accommodation.

Overall, this research asks:

1. What are the key issues and strengths of current practice supporting students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation?
2. How can support for students with accessibility requirements in University of Leeds accommodation be improved?
3. What should best practice include and prioritise to support students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation?

2. Literature Review: University Student Accommodation, Accessibility & Barriers to Best Practice

This brief literature review outlines and examines the existing relevant literature on university accommodation and accessibility.¹⁷ This review identifies and discusses three key major themes or barriers to best practice regarding accessibility within the literature. These are: negative attitudes, issues with physical and digital design, and disproportionate financial costs, which were found to exist both domestically and internationally. Discussions of the use of Universal Design¹⁸ to alleviate these barriers are also a common feature, focus, or recommendation often mentioned in the relevant literature.¹⁹ This review highlights this specifically in the physical and digital design section. Lastly, this review outlines key emerging areas within the literature, before providing a conclusion and some related recommendations. It must be noted that literature exploring accessibility regarding university accommodation as linked to best practice is currently surprisingly limited and, when discussed, is often not the main focus of existing relevant papers. Instead, at least at the time of writing, the literature is primarily situated around discussions of accessibility regarding academic adjustments. Whilst it also draws on other related articles and research where appropriate, this literature review is therefore relatively brief in comparison to other sections.

2.1 Negative Attitudes

Provision of efficient levels of accessibility and inclusion in universities, including within accommodation, are often dependent on attitudinal culture. This can relate to both staff and student cultures and, for students, can operate on both internal and external levels. In relation to the internal aspect, additional requirements often, but not always, derive from the existence of an impairment, and can therefore result in a need to accept a label of

¹⁷ Please refer to the introduction for an in depth definition of accessibility.

¹⁸ Please refer to the introduction section for a further definition.

¹⁹ Eric P Tudzi, John T Bugri & Anthony K Danso, 'Human Rights of Students with Disabilities in Ghana: Accessibility of the University Built Environment' (2017) 35 *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 3 275; Miriam Edwards, Shiralee Poed, Hadeel Al-Nawab, and Olivia Penna. 'Academic accommodations for university students living with disability and the potential of universal design to address their needs.' (2022) 84 *Higher education* 4 779.

disability to access supportive related services.²⁰ However, it is widely reported in the available literature that students may not always be prepared to do this due to the belief that disability in itself is a negative aspect of identity to hold,²¹ with some participants in research studies suggesting that accessibility related support that is not dependent on a label of disability should be offered.²² This is generally corroborated specifically regarding university accommodation by Wilke et al, who have highlighted that students may be less likely to seek out accessibility support due to internal beliefs or fear of stigmatisation, or because they may perceive accessibility support as embracing unwanted dependence.²³ Moreover, internal perceptions of stigma can also negatively affect external interactions with fellow students, reducing feelings of support and increasing feelings of isolation and abnormality.²⁴ Wilke et al also highlight that external influences, such as discrimination or ableist processes of othering experienced from other students within accommodation, can result in increased emotional labour for disabled students as they are forced into a role of 'comforting' others.²⁵ This can hinder or greatly weaken the ongoing effectiveness and strengths of accessibility provisions and support for those with accessibility related needs.²⁶ However in some respects, this could be alleviated by increased education on accessibility and potentially disability within student accommodation. Overall, universities should emphasise inclusion on multiple levels, whilst allowing students to define their own identity in an accepting and educational environment amongst both staff and students. This should be a key aspect of best practice regarding support for additional needs in university accommodation.

²⁰ Carmit-Noa Shpigelman, Sagit Mor, Dalia Sachs, and Naomi Schreuer, 'Supporting the development of students with disabilities in higher education: Access, stigma, identity, and power' (2022) 47 *Studies in Higher Education* 9 1776-1791.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Miriam Edwards, Shiralee Poed, Hadeel Al-Nawab, and Olivia Penna. 'Academic accommodations for university students living with disability and the potential of universal design to address their needs.' (2022) 84 *Higher education* 4 779.

²³ Autumn K. Wilke, Nancy J. Evans, Charlie E. Varland, Kristen R. Brown, and Ellen M. Broido. 'Access and integration: Perspectives of disabled students living on campus.' (2019) 46 *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* 1.

²⁴ Edwards, Poed, Al-Nawab and Penna (n39).

²⁵ Wilke et al (n40).

²⁶ Ibid.

Interestingly, most research has focused specifically on the significance of attitudinal *staff* cultures and approaches in accessibility related practices. In some ways, this can be somewhat complicated by increasing pressures to help consistently unprecedented amounts of students with further accessibility needs.²⁷ For instance, in the literature, it has been reported that it can be complicated by restrictive policy frameworks, and again a lack of legal and disability studies related knowledge in addition to awareness on differing impairments and accessibility itself.²⁸ This can sometimes result in a culture of disbelief regarding accessibility requirement applications, with some staff members viewing reasonable adjustments within accommodation as a competitive process between different groups of students.²⁹ Levels of related knowledge must therefore clearly be actively assessed within student accommodations, and staff should be supported in related learning where needed. This should also be a key aspect of related best practice. However, Wilke et al's research again also importantly highlights a more positive aspect of staff impact, as they emphasise that residential staff can act as an anchor for some students, subsequently providing reassurance whilst inadvertently supporting their academic success and explicitly supporting their overall wellbeing.³⁰ Amongst improvements made by universities seeking to develop best practice, this must not be ignored. Overall, both staff and student attitudes are clearly fundamental in providing efficient and successful accessibility support in university accommodation. This further suggests that staff training and support is necessary to efficiently protect and support students with certain accessibility needs, and should be a key aspect of best practice.

2.2 Issues with physical and digital design

²⁷ Laura Sokal, 'Five windows and a locked door: University accommodation responses to students with anxiety disorders.' (2016) 7 *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1 and Phill Hubbard, 'Geographies of studentification and purpose-built student accommodation: leading separate lives?.' (2009) 41 *Environment and planning A* 8 1903-1923; Mark Holton, 'The geographies of UK university halls of residence: examining students' embodiment of social capital.', (2016) 14 *Children's Geographies* 1 63.

²⁸ Wilke et al (n40).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wilke et al (n40).

Another consistent theme in the relevant literature relates to the importance and influence of both physical and digital design in efficiently meeting accessibility needs. Discussions of the quality of physical architecture within residences are the most evident sub-theme out of the two, which remains consistent across a range of research in countries including Ghana, America, Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom.³¹ This trend is clear regarding both private and university owned student accommodation,³² further highlighting its pervasive importance. Wilke et al³³ and the Global Student Living Insight Report 2024³⁴ have also expanded on this, highlighting that for many students in the United Kingdom and the United States, accessibility of accommodation is dependent on its proximity to the university campus, speed and efficiency of maintenance repairs, the physical layout, facilities - such as appropriate catering if relevant - and room features such as lighting and temperature.³⁵ In general, it is widely accepted that low levels of physical accessibility - such as the existence of ramps, lifts and dipped curves - of university infrastructure and the surrounding campus grounds and buildings affects the enjoyment of university including accommodation for those with related additional needs such as visual impairment.³⁶ Best practice should therefore consider the effect of external environments to university accommodation in considering accessibility. Focus on physical infrastructure both internally and externally to the accommodation itself is imperative to consider when assessing and improving best practice for supporting students with accessibility requirements.

³¹ See for example M. Gayle Wernsman, *The process of designing and constructing an accessible residence hall for people with disabilities on a public university campus*. (DPhil Thesis, Colorado State University 2008) .and, K. G. P. K. Weerakoon, Nilantha Randeniya, and Thumul Wickramarachchi. 'Enhancing Student Housing Accessibility and Affordability: A Comprehensive Analysis of Private Accommodations at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.' [2023] *Proceedings of International Conference on Real Estate Management and Valuation* 7 21.

³² Ibid.

³³ Wilke et al (n40).

³⁴ College & University Business Officers (CUBO) & GSL, 'Closing the Gap: The experience of vulnerable students in student accommodation' < <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/679785213/> > accessed 15th July 2024.

³⁵ Ibid and Wilke et al (n40).

³⁶ Wernsman (n48).

The literature also strongly emphasises the importance of accessibility in digital design, the latter of which broadly relates to the creative process behind, and the final usable version of software, websites and online spaces. Admittedly, this does not generally explicitly appear as a key focus in exploring how accessibility is experienced within accommodation itself in the literature. However, this is surprising as elsewhere it is rightly argued to be foundational in assessing provision of reasonable adjustments, in addition to indicating how inclusive and accessible a university may be overall.³⁷ The importance of this is also suggested elsewhere in the literature, as it has been reported that students may not indicate that they need accessibility support simply because they did not know that this was available and provided by the university.³⁸ This highlights that availability of information is a key determining factor in degrees of experienced university support, whilst suggesting that this should be a key area of focus both in research and practice when considering accessibility support specifically in university accommodation. Moreover, according to research done by Solovieva & Bock³⁹ and Zaphiris, Panayiotis & Ellis,⁴⁰ many university web pages often fail to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), potentially further restricting the availability of information. The WCAG guidelines contain the international guidance on website accessibility, which involve both technical and general requirements.⁴¹ Its core principles focus on making information operable, robust, perceivable and understandable for those with a variety of impairments regarding mobility, vision, hearing, and thinking or understanding.⁴² Considering the current technological age, following these principles are evidently vital to encourage fully inclusive and communicative atmospheres. However, research has highlighted that many universities simply provide website overlays or fail to make in-depth and comprehensive changes to relevant software

³⁷ See for example Tatiana I. Solovieva and Jeremy M. Bock. 'Monitoring for Accessibility and University Websites: Meeting the Needs of People with Disabilities.' (2014) 27 *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 2 113.

³⁸ Wilke et al (n40).

³⁹ Solovieva and Bock (n54).

⁴⁰ Panayiotis Zaphiris and R. Darin Ellis, 'Website usability and content accessibility of the top USA universities' <<https://ktisis.cut.ac.cy/handle/20.500.14279/2863>> (Conference paper, WebNet 2001 Conference, Florida) accessed 17th July 2024.

⁴¹ WCAG 2 Overview, <<https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>>, accessed 25th August 2024.

⁴² Accessibility Community, 'Understanding WCAG 2.2' (*Digital Cabinet Office*, 5 October 2023) <<https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/helping-people-to-use-your-service/understanding-wcag>> accessed 17th July 2024.

in line with WCAG requirements, which is not effective for long term change.⁴³ The usability of university websites and the digital availability of information are therefore key aspects that must be considered when establishing and improving best practice regarding university accessibility.

Regarding university accessibility, discussions of universal design are most prominent under the theme of physical and digital architecture. Universal design is often argued to be one of the best means to ensure accessibility.⁴⁴ As also highlighted in the introduction section of this report, universal design relates to the idea that products, architecture, environments and communications should be available and usable to all 'to the greatest extent possible'.⁴⁵ Universal design involves seven key principles that designs must encourage: equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error (or 'the minimisation of hazards and adverse consequences'),⁴⁶ involve low physical effort, and consider size and space for approach and use by all users.⁴⁷ Wisbey & Kalidova indicate how following these principles can encourage an inclusive university environment, and encourage a cultural movement to support students with accessibility needs.⁴⁸ However, others have importantly highlighted universal design's flaws. For instance, Imrie has pointed out that design authority issues may occur, causing power imbalances and easily encouraging the perception that users are passive and 'external to the professional field',⁴⁹ which in some cases may cause further exclusion. Moreover, whilst seeking to ensure use of products, architecture, environments and communications are usable by as many people as possible, universal design may arguably implicitly encourage a difference-blind approach, which could have a problematic outcome and fail to acknowledge and recognise differing needs and groups if sufficient boundaries

⁴³ See for example Panayiotis and Ellis (n57).

⁴⁴ Eric P Tudzi, John T Bugri & Anthony K Danso, 'Human Rights of Students with Disabilities in Ghana: Accessibility of the University Built Environment' (2017) 35 *Nordic Journal of Human Rights* 3 275.

⁴⁵ Ronald Mace, 'Universal design: housing for the lifespan of all people.'
<<https://mn.gov/mnddc/parallels2/pdf/80s/88/88-HFL-UDS.pdf>> accessed 12th August 2024, 1.

⁴⁶ Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, 'The 7 Principles' (CEUD)
<<https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles>> accessed 18th July 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Martha E. Wisbey, and Karen S. Kalivoda. 'College students with disabilities' In M.J. Cuyjet, D.L. Cooper and M. F. Howard-Hamilton (eds.) *Multiculturalism on campus* (Routledge 2016) 328-349.

⁴⁹ Rob Imrie. 'Universalism, universal design and equitable access to the built environment.' (2012) 34 *Disability and rehabilitation* 10 873.

are not applied. Therefore, this suggests that universal design, if used as a means of ensuring best practice regarding accessibility in student accommodation, must be carefully considered and examined in a collaborative bottom-up manner.

2.3 Disproportionate financial costs

Some key accessibility requirements in university accommodation often involve increased accommodation costs for those who need or request them in comparison to those who do not. For instance, higher costs are often experienced by those who need wheelchair accessible rooms, a phenomenon seen around multiple universities in the UK as larger and therefore more appropriate rooms are marked as more expensive.⁵⁰ This tends to be enforced by a lack of choice due to other potential types of accommodation being inappropriate and thus inaccessible, such as being too far away from campus.⁵¹ Subsequently, this entrenches inequality, especially for disabled people who are statistically more likely to encounter increased costs in multiple areas of life due to their impairment.⁵² It has also been reported that the financial cost of some accessible accommodations sometimes causes students to stay in their original home instead of living in student accommodation.⁵³ Disproportionate financial costs for those with accessible needs can also arise from inflexible renting contracts, that make it very difficult to leave unsuitable accommodation without further costs if the contract has already been signed.⁵⁴ This exacerbates financial worry for many who are already struggling with the cost of living crisis

⁵⁰ See Francesca Hughes, 'Universities 'illegally hitting disabled students with extra housing costs' (*open democracy*, 9 November 2022) <<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/disabled-students-equality-act-adapations-accessible-rooms/>> accessed 15 July 2024.

⁵¹ College & University Business Officers (CUBO) & GSL, 'Closing the Gap: The experience of vulnerable students in student accommodation' < <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/679785213/> > accessed 15th July 2024 <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/679785213/6/#zoom=true>

⁵² SCOPE, 'Disability Price Tag 2023: the extra cost of disability', (SCOPE, 2023) <<https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/extra-costs/disability-price-tag-2023#:~:text=On%20average%2C%20the%20extra%20cost,household%20income%20after%20housing%20costs.>> accessed 19th July 2024.

⁵³ College & University Business Officers (CUBO) & GSL (n68).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and a limited job market.⁵⁵ In addition to the points made in the previous section regarding availability of information, this further suggests that information on financial support should also be made widely and clearly available as a means to provide more robust support regarding accessibility in accommodation. Moreover, whilst this is the smallest section in this literature review due to limited academic literature directly related to university accommodation, considering the available literature, disproportionate financial costs are clearly a worryingly major obstacle to an inclusive and therefore accessible environment. This must be challenged and explored further in both the relevant literature and by universities when considering best practice to support those with accessibility requirements in university accommodation.

2.4 Gaps & developing areas in the literature

Lastly, a key theme that must be highlighted relates to the related gaps and developing areas in the existing literature. More specifically, research on needs relating to accommodation accessibility as linked to support for transgender and international students are a disappointingly notable missing aspect within relevant existing research. Admittedly, it must be noted that research exploring disability, neurodiversity, medical and other health conditions remain optimistically prominent,⁵⁶ and this gap in the literature is gradually improving. For instance, in a rare piece of related research on transgender students at university, academic Leon Laidlaw has highlighted that there appear to be implicit limits to student accommodation, enforcing unnecessary stress and causing restrictions to full expression of identity.⁵⁷ This is also complicated by various American designs in university and American law enforcing binary gender perspectives such as regarding rules on room sharing or dormitories.⁵⁸ Considering the clear importance of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For examples, please see most citations in this literature review, in addition to: Jenny Shaw and Freya Selman, 'An asset, not a problem: Meeting the needs of neurodivergent students' (*UNITE Students*, 2023) <https://www.unitegroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Neurodivergent-students_report_Unite-Students.pdf> accessed 19th July 2024.

⁵⁷ Leon Laidlaw. 'Trans University Students' Access to Facilities: The Limits of Accommodation' (2020) 35 *Canadian Journal of Law and Society/La Revue Canadienne Droit et Société* 2 269.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

including consideration of transgender needs regarding accessibility at university, it is surprising and disappointing that the literature remains sparse in this regard. Nevertheless, the few pieces of research on this topic, as partially highlighted above, suggests that best practice processes regarding student accessibility in university accommodation need to be urgently updated and consistently re-evaluated to ensure that they are as inclusive as possible and support all members of the student population.

Research has also highlighted that international students consider university accommodation as central to their physical and social security.⁵⁹ Yet despite this, discussions of international students and investigations on how adequately any of their potential accessibility needs are fulfilled are excluded from the literature. This is surprising, considering as the obstacles discussed in previous sections may be exacerbated for international students due to language barriers, unfamiliarity with physical and geographical surroundings, and increased financial costs in comparison to domestic students. Regarding accessibility and disability, the latter is also exacerbated by the fact that international students are not eligible for Disabled Students' Allowance, which can financially support domestic students who qualify. This again implies the importance of ensuring information regarding accessibility in university accommodation is widely available and inclusive of a wide range of student groups. International students must be adequately recognised and supported in future assessments of best practice to support students with accessibility requirements.

2.5 Summary & Recommendations

⁵⁹ Toby Paltridge, Susan Mayson, and Jan Schapper. 'The contribution of university accommodation to international student security.' (2010) 32 *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 4 353.

Overall, this brief literature review has highlighted a range of obstacles that face students seeking accessibility support or additional needs that must be considered when assessing university accommodation best practice regarding provision and support of accessibility requirements. This has been conveyed by discussions of existing themes found in the literature relating to attitude, physical and digital design, and disproportionate financial cost. It also highlighted current gaps in the literature, conveying the exclusion of both transgender and international students within the literature.

Drawn from examination of the existing literature, below are the current suggested focal points that *all* universities, including the University of Leeds, should assess to improve current practice and aim for standards of best practice in supporting students with accessibility needs in university accommodation:

- Staff culture, support and training on accessibility knowledge. This should include disability knowledge, but also consider the breadth of the topic beyond disability.
- Active efforts to encourage an inclusive atmosphere amongst university students and staff.
- Re-evaluation and investment in website accessibility practices and investments in employing web specialists to enhance digital accessibility.
- Re-evaluation of university practices to ensure international and transgender student needs are considered in accommodation.
- Consideration of the availability and usability of information on how accessibility needs are supported.
- Consideration of universal design, specifically the seven key principles in all designs of products, architecture, environments and communications.

3. Methodology

This research uses a qualitative multi-method design involving both primary and secondary data analysis to answer the above research questions. This has involved a literature review,

website analysis, and interviews with university accommodation staff. This section will provide further detail on how these were conducted. Unfortunately, this research encountered early ethical issues which prevented primary data collection directly from students, and thus an alternative range of qualitative methodologies were adopted to ensure that the research's outcomes could be as rich and as valid as possible in its absence.

3.1 Literature Review

Conducting a literature review is a necessary aspect of contextualising social research in addition to being a key form of qualitative secondary data analysis.⁶⁰ In the context of this research project, creating a literature review was considered as vital as guided by the work of Bryman.⁶¹ Bryman argues that literature reviews are necessary to establish gaps in the literature, outline key concepts, and contextualise research methods in addition to providing an overview of the academic literature.⁶² They are also key in justifying the importance and need for a research project.⁶³ To conduct this research's literature review, search engines such as Google Scholar and University of Leeds library search functions were used. This involved searching for key terms such as 'accessibility', 'university accommodation', 'university halls', 'best practice' either in isolation or in conjunction with each other. Snowballing citation techniques were also sometimes used, which involved reading and analysing relevant papers found in the references of other key papers. These were collected and sorted into the four key themes found in the literature review.

3.2 Website analysis

⁶⁰ Alan Bryman. *Social Research Methods* (OUP 2016).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

This method was inspired by the findings of the literature review. The literature review highlighted that university website accessibility was a domestic and international issue, which sometimes acted as an obstacle to support for those with accessibility requirements in accommodation. As university web pages are a key form of front-facing communication between the university and student, website analysis was therefore conducted to assess whether these acted as a useful source of information regarding the provision of support for accessibility requirements in accommodation. NVivo was used to capture, analyse and assess each web page with the help of the related Chrome extension NCapture for three key pages. For some pages NCapture could not accurately capture the website, and so analysis had to be done manually. Images of the analysed web pages, with image descriptions, will appear in the following Results section. Please click on the embedded links where indicated below to view the original pages:

- The University of Leeds' ['Additional Requirements' page](#) (which involves one another sub-page titled ['Supporting Your Requirements'](#))
- The randomly chosen University of Leeds undergraduate accommodation Residence Page on [Lupton Residences](#)
- And lastly the corresponding [AccessAble web page for Lupton Residences](#)

Whilst content analysis may seem to be the likely choice for qualitative analysis of data from web pages, this research deemed it more appropriate to use deductive thematic analysis. This method was chosen due to the fact that two key ideal themes were expected - 'usability' and 'availability of information' - as these were the two most common themes directly and indirectly mentioned by relevant articles in the literature review. Thematic analysis was guided by Braun & Clarke's⁶⁴ framework, as also expanded by Byrne,⁶⁵ which involves six key phases. These are not always linear,⁶⁶ but usually occur in the order of: data familiarisation, generating initial codes, generating themes (although this phase was

⁶⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology.' (2006) 3 *Qualitative research in psychology* 2 77.

⁶⁵ David Byrne, 'A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis.' (2022) 56 *Quality & quantity* 3 1391.

⁶⁶ Braun and Clarke (n21).

excluded due to the deductive nature of the web analysis), reviewing themes, defining or naming the theme (this phase was also skipped for the same reason as before), and lastly writing up the results.

Thematic analysis occurred by also adapting and applying relevant aspects of Brugger's⁶⁷ framework for website analysis as a method of coding website elements into themes, specifically during phases two and three of thematic analysis (generating initial codes and reviewing themes). This involved assessing each page on textuality. In this case, textuality refers to analysis of the words and static/moving images included in the web page, which are further broken down into what Brugger defines as three different levels of textuality: the semantic, the formal and the physically performative.⁶⁸ In the context of this research, the semantic level refers to examination of the coherence, existence, and construction of text (including both images and written words), whilst the formal element refers to classical elements of formatting and typography such as headings and subheadings. The physically performative refers to elements such as links where physical interaction is required, although there are some evident overlaps between all three elements.⁶⁹ Within all of these the textual environment must also be recognised.⁷⁰ The 'textual environment' relates to the fact that these elements exist in the context of a web browser, which often has fixed navigation features - for instance, a back button and the use of HTML.⁷¹ Regarding the latter, the WAVE Evaluation Chrome extension tool was used to assess the presence or exclusion of alternative text within the page, as NVivo does not have this feature. This tool was also used to help assess the formal and physically performative aspects regarding usability in the context of web accessibility, which assesses compliance with WCAG guidelines. Sections on usability are therefore relatively shorter than other sections; as also highlighted in the recommendations, for further detail and evaluation of technical elements of the site, a specialist should be consulted as this research only seeks to provide a basic analysis. The textual environment may also include internal ancillary software (such as media players, for instance to convey moving images),⁷² although unfortunately Brugger

⁶⁷Niels Brügger, *Website analysis: Elements of a conceptual architecture* (Center for Internetforskning, 2010, Aarhus University).

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 18.

⁷² *Ibid*.

does not consider external auxiliary software within that. This research therefore seeks to expand Brugger's framework by utilising it from the perspective of accessibility.

Aspects of the webpages were analysed in relation to these above elements and contexts, and then coded - labelled - to apply to the two themes. Overall, semantic elements tended to relate to the availability of information as a theme, and the formal and physically performative elements related to the usability of the web page, although there was also some overlap.

3.3 Semi-structured interviews

As the final aspect of this research project's methodology, remote semi-structured interviews were conducted via Teams. These were with six members of staff from various teams within Residential Services. Inclusion criteria for the participants was that they 1) Were a member of staff from Residential Services, and 2) that they had experience working closely with and supporting students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation. This was in order to gain as close a perspective to student need as possible, considering the fact that students themselves were not able to participate (please see below). Participants were recruited primarily via word of mouth aided by a member of staff within Residential Services. This also therefore involved snowball sampling.

Semi-structured interviews were deemed as the most appropriate interview method. This is due to the fact that, in comparison to other types of interviews, they are extremely beneficial in encouraging an open, more natural conversation whilst also encouraging focus on a specific topic.⁷³ This was also due to the fact that this study could not gain responses from students themselves, due to the time limitation that bound the study. Gaining responses from students themselves would have involved a much longer ethics application, as some may have fallen under the 'vulnerable participant' category. Overall, a key limitation of this method was that interviews were not face to face and were instead online.

⁷³ Bryman (n17).

This sometimes affected the quality of communication due to network connectivity issues, which in turn sometimes affected the flow of the conversation. However, this was also the most cost effective and appropriate type of interview considering the time constraints of the project, and nevertheless produced extremely rich data.

The interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes. The answers were then transcribed and analysed via thematic analysis and NVivo software. Similarly to the website analysis, this again followed Braun & Clarke's⁷⁴ model of thematic analysis, although more phases were included due to this aspect's partly inductive nature. The six key phases were followed in the order of: data familiarisation, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining or naming the theme, and lastly writing up the results.⁷⁵ Fifteen key initial codes were found during the draft stages (see Image 1 below). These were coded and two key themes in relation to the research questions were found: 'Strengths of the Current System' and 'Areas to Improve'.

Image 1: Draft codes

⁷⁴ Braun & Clarke (n21).

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Name	Files	References	Created on	Created by	Modified on	Modified by
Accessibility beyond accom	2	6	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Accessibility knowledge	6	7	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Excluded groups	2	9	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Good cross team collab	4	11	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Importance of specific supportive roles	4	6	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Individualised care	6	12	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Influence of accessibility beyond accom	1	1	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Large resource availability	5	9	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Long wait times for equipment	2	3	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
More resources (overlap with need for formal	1	1	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Need for building or maintenance changes	2	3	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Need for formalisation of info, centralisation	5	22	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Positive and responsive staff culture	5	18	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Training gap	3	7	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP
Website improvement	5	15	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP	08/08/2024 17:25	OCP

Image 1 description: Image shows a screenshot of the early stages of coding from the Nvivo software programme. The page shows fifteen codes found within the interview data, presented as a vertical list. They read exactly as: ‘accessibility beyond accomm, accessibility knowledge, excluded groups, good cross team collab, importance of specific supportive roles, individualised care, influence of accessibility beyond accom, large resource availability, long wait times for equipment, more resources (overlap with need for formal...), need for building or maintenance changes, need for formalisation of info centralisation, positive and responsive staff culture, training gap, and website improvement’.

3.4 A note on ethics

According to multiple social research associations and University of Leeds research policy itself,⁷⁶ an evident key factor to consider when conducting interviews or any methodology

⁷⁶ British Sociological Association ‘Statement of Ethical Practice’ (BSA, 2017) <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf> accessed 19th July 2024 and Research and Innovation Service, ‘University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy’ (University of Leeds) <<https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-excellence/university-of-leeds-research-ethics-policy/>> accessed 19th July 2024.

involving human participants is that of ethics. Ethical approval for this project was passed by the AREA Ethics Committee (approval reference: AREA 21-102), which seriously considered any potential harm or stress to participants in addition to any negative implications of the study. Participant harm was therefore mitigated by a variety of factors as supported by the ethical committee. Firstly, written informed consent was obtained from all participants before interviews were conducted, and all were reminded they could withdraw at any time. Secondly, great lengths were taken to ensure that all data was held and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act, which is the incorporation of the GDPR into UK law. Interview data was therefore anonymised and identifiable elements were removed or edited before transcription. All data was held securely and data that could result in the potential identification of participants was deleted as soon as possible after transcription in line with the GDPR principles. Due to the small sample size and subsequent high chance of identifiability (for instance, due to common knowledge of certain roles), all participant quotes were anonymised to the greatest degree possible.

4. Website analysis: Results & Discussion

Considering the findings gathered from the literature review, this section of the report focuses analysis on three relevant web pages to assess levels of accessibility support regarding University of Leeds accommodation. The first page assessed has two key sections or sub-pages: Additional Requirements and Supporting Your Requirements, and can be found via the University of Leeds website. The second, also available via the University of Leeds website, is the randomly chosen Lupton Residences page. It was randomly chosen in an attempt to mimic what a prospective student may see or choose when browsing residences. The last page assessed is again about Lupton Residences, but is provided by an external website called AccessAble - a site that is commonly promoted on University of Leeds pages at the time of writing to provide further details on accessible accommodation. These pages are assessed via the themes of what is *usable* for a range of users in addition to the *availability* of related information, again as key themes gathered from the findings of the literature review. Accessibility of the web pages themselves is vital to ensure that students know about accommodation and the relevant support available. Please view the end of this section for a summary of key findings, and the Methodology section of this report for further information.

4.1 Additional Requirements & Supporting Your Requirements

As the key page outlining means of support for prospective students in university accommodation, this page consists of two parts or sub-pages: Additional Requirements and Supporting Your Requirements. Findings of both sub-pages conveyed incredibly similar issues, and both are therefore summarised together here in one overall section.

4.1.1 Usability

As previously explained in the Methodology section, alongside NVivo, the WAVE Evaluation Chrome Extension tool was used to assess both the Additional Requirements and Supporting Your Requirements sections' physically performative and formal elements with an accessibility lens. The WAVE reports for both sub-pages showed incredibly similar issues regarding these technical elements, although the reports also importantly showed a relatively low number of errors overall. Some clear issues were reported regarding elements in HTML, causing the page to be less usable for those using assistive technology such as a screen reader (See Images 2 and 3). For instance, some form labels were reported as empty, which means that it does not tell people using screen readers what function a field on a webpage fulfils. Moreover, WCAG guidelines state that contrast of web pages should be 'at least 7:1 for normal text and 4.5:1 for large text'⁷⁷ to ensure easy readability. However, low contrast issues and empty heading levels were also reported, which again is likely to cause difficulties for those using assistive technology regarding the readability of the site. Admittedly, these appeared to be exceptions, as the reports also highlighted other positive technical aspects present such as linked images with alternative text in addition to other complete form labels. Overall, although the technical positive aspects of the page shown in the reports must be recognised and applauded, both sub pages need improvement.

Image 2: WAVE evaluation tool results of the Additional Requirements page

⁷⁷ WCAG 2 Overview, <<https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>>, accessed 25th August 2024.

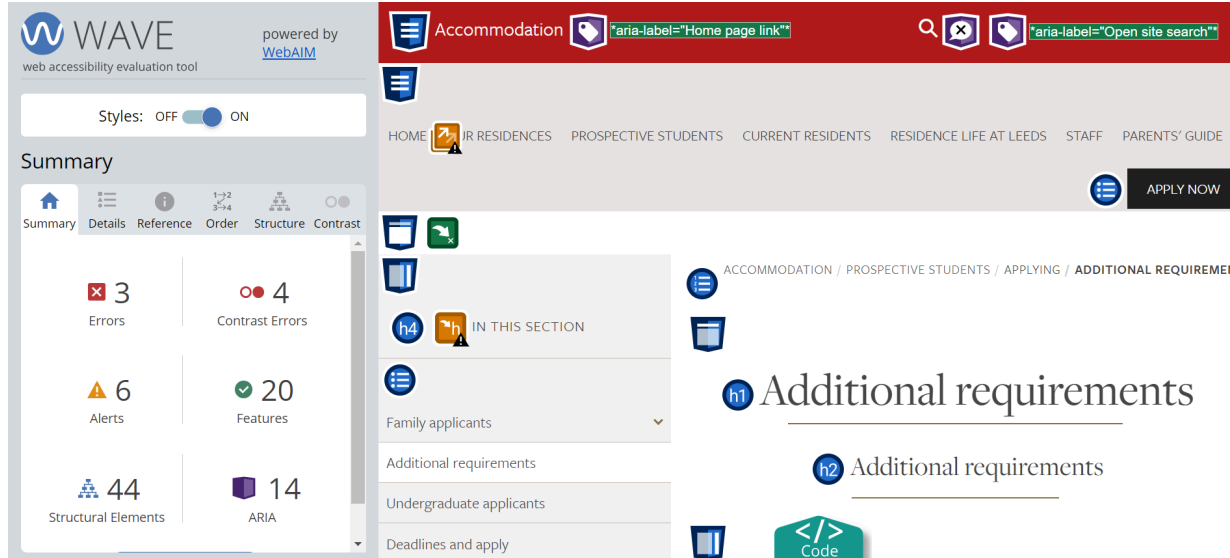


Image 2 description: The image is of a split screen showing the the top of the Additional Requirements page on the right hand side with icons labelled on relevant parts of the page corresponding to the WAVE report. The WAVE report summary is on the left hand side. The summary reads: '3 errors, 4 contrast errors, 6 alerts, 20 features passed, 44 structural elements that have passed, and the existence of 14 ARIA elements'.

Image 3: WAVE evaluation report of the second section of the page: Supporting your requirements

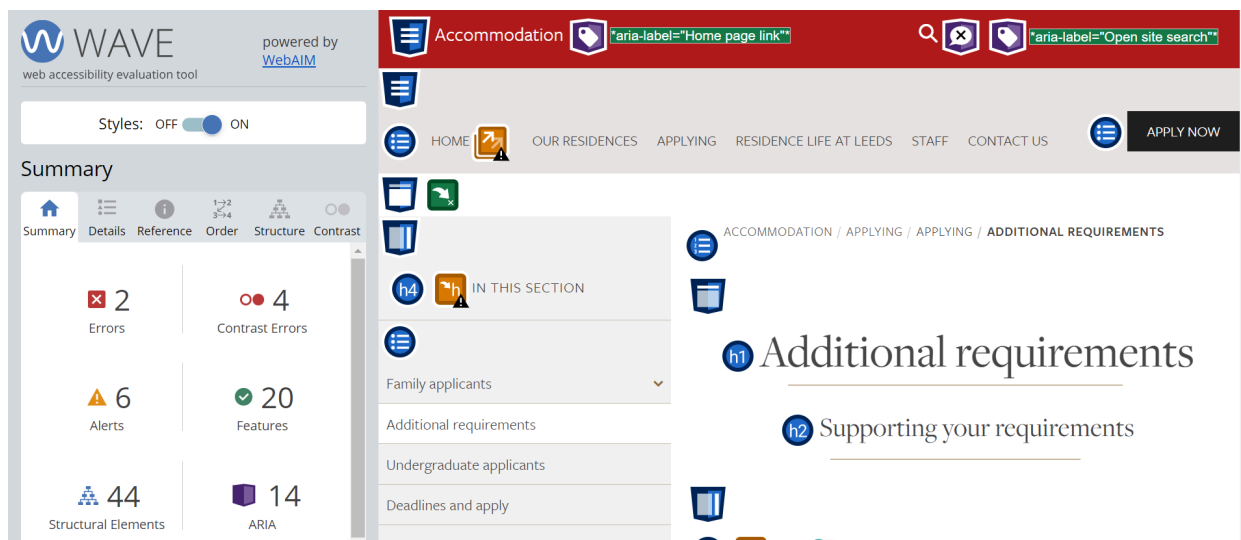


Image 3 description: The image is of a split screen showing the the top of the Additional Requirements page on the right hand side with icons labelled on relevant parts of the page corresponding to the WAVE report. The WAVE report summary is on the left hand side. The summary reads: '2 errors, 4 contrast errors, 6 alerts, 20 features (passed, as represented by a green tick), 44 structural elements, and 14 ARIA'.

4.1.2 Availability of Information

Before examining the sub-pages, and overlapping slightly with the usability of the page sections, it was noted that both the Additional Requirements and Supporting Your Requirements sub pages were quite difficult to find and seemed relatively hidden. They were found to be visible only via either an explicit Google search, which is only more likely to occur if the individual already knows that the page exists, or via the Undergraduate Applicants page via a side menu or a link. It was not visible from the main welcome page, or from the Our Residences page. This was unexpected and unfortunate, as simply having a page outlining that support regarding accessibility needs is something that not all universities have, and should be showcased to the greatest degree possible. A means to change this could be to have links to the sections on each specific accommodation page, on the Our Residences home page, and showcased on the main welcome page.

Some issues regarding the structure of the page sections, in addition to the presentation and coherence of the text itself, were also found. The Additional Requirements sub-page gives brief details on what type of needs residences can try and accommodate, whilst also mentioning that these must be noted on the accommodation application form to gain support. It then provides an entire section on dietary requirements and briefly mentions the Disability team's role. As the second sub-page, Supporting Your Requirements continues to list further types of conditions and disability that may involve a need for further support, before again mentioning the importance of the application form in supporting further requirements. It lastly mentions the possibility of adapted university accommodation. This is all evidently valuable information, yet its presentation therefore appears confused, and the different purposes of each page (with Additional Requirements

presumably intended to outline the definition of additional requirements and Supporting Your Requirements outlining how these can be supported) appear indistinguishable from each other. Moreover, on both page sections, there are no varying types of media used during presentation of information, meaning each page provides blocks of text, although this is sometimes separated into smaller sections or containing bullet points. This makes text feel overwhelming and unappealing, arguably meaning that prospective students are made to conduct more intensive searches on support available than necessary in order to find the appropriate information. Information on available support regarding additional requirements may therefore be easily missed, yet sometimes paradoxically repetitive, affecting both page sections' coherence and efficiency in delivering clear and valuable information.

A method to overcome the above issues could be to adopt a similar approach to the University of York. In comparison, the University of York's Additional Requirements [page](#)⁷⁸ comprises a singular page clearly laying out what an additional requirement is, how the university can help, information on the application process and providing supporting evidence, sharing of information and funding opportunities. Sentences are shorter, clearer and information is clearly laid out in clearly defined separate sections that logically follow on from one another. Moreover, pictures of adapted and wheelchair friendly rooms are provided, in addition to 360 tours of accessible accommodation. There is also a video of a student explaining a lot of the information on the page in an alternative format. This therefore provides a multi-media approach to presenting information, which increases readability and therefore accessibility of the webpage.⁷⁹ The University of Leeds should therefore consider incorporating the above points into relevant web pages to increase the availability of information on what support exists to support those with additional requirements or needs in accommodation.

⁷⁸ University of York, 'Additional Requirements' <<https://www.york.ac.uk/study/accommodation/health/>> accessed 25th August 2024.

⁷⁹ Abdulhameed Jastaniyah, and Christian Bach, 'The importance of multimedia in information revolution.' (2017) *Saudi Journal of Engineering and Technology* 2 2 89-99.

4.2 Lupton Residences - University of Leeds page

4.2.1 Usability:

In a similar vein to the above results, the WAVE Evaluation tool optimistically showed that alt-text was present on this page, increasing the usability of the site for those using screen readers. However it, again similarly to above, also highlighted an alarming range of issues to consider (see Image 4 below). These related primarily to contrast guidelines, and other HTML technical structural elements within the web page. As mentioned previously, WCAG guidelines state that contrast of web pages should be 'at least 7:1 for normal text and 4.5:1 for large text'⁸⁰ to ensure easy readability. However, the WAVE tool found at least seven errors where the Lupton page failed to meet this requirement (see Image 5 below). In comparison, other formal elements seemed successful and showed, for instance, the appropriate use of headings for easy readability for people using screen readers. Unfortunately, overall, as also established in the literature review, the lack of compliance with WCAG guidelines is a common trend across many universities internationally.⁸¹ Again also considering the above section, this is something that the University of Leeds also needs to consider and improve on.

⁸⁰ 'WCAG 2 Overview', <<https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>>, accessed 25th August 2024.

⁸¹ See for example Panayiotis and Ellis (n57).

Image 4: WAVE evaluation tool results

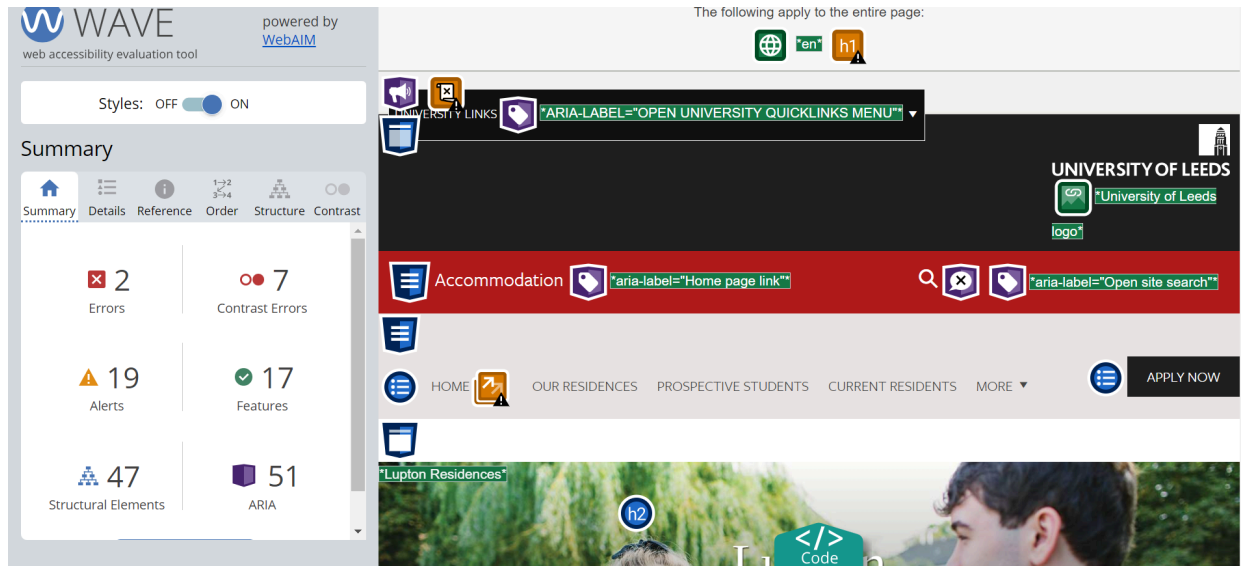


Image 4 description: The image shows a split screen, with the Lupton Residence page taking over two thirds of the page on the right. The Lupton page is highlighted with symbols corresponding to the WAVE report shown on the left hand side of the page. It reads: '2 errors, 7 contrast errors, 19 alerts, 17 features (passed, as represented by a green tick), 47 structural elements and 51 ARIA elements' identified.

Image 5: Example of the contrast issue

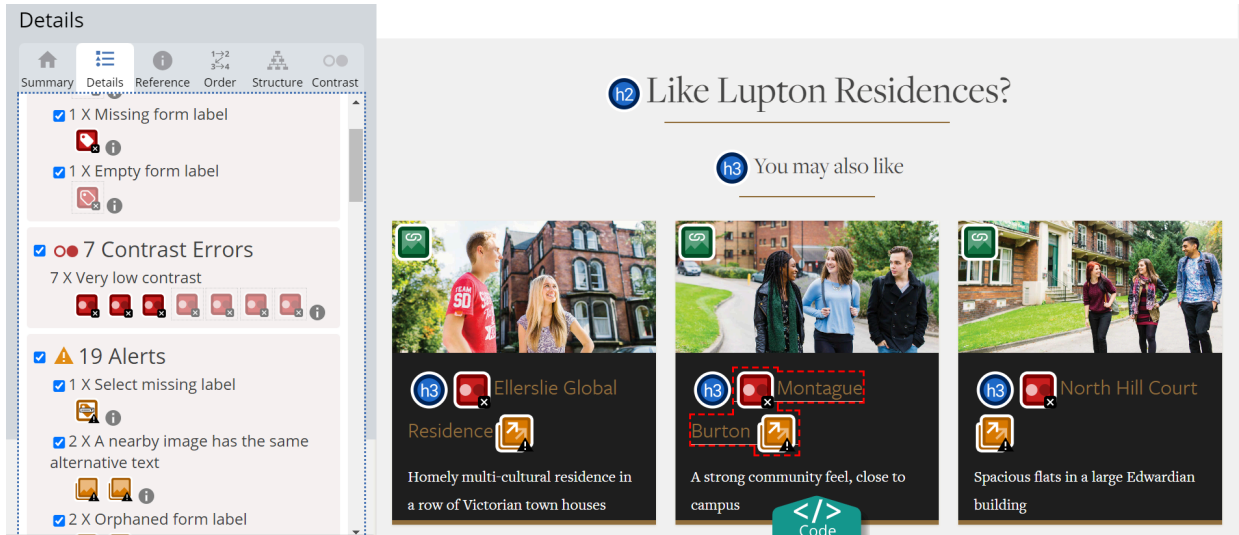


Image 5 description: The image again shows a split screen, with the Lupton Residence page taking over two thirds of the page on the right and the WAVE report on the left. On the Lupton section, three images of students outside the corresponding residences with text below them are present. They are implied as links to pages as they appear under a 'You may also like' heading. They are titled 'Ellerslie Global Residence', 'Montague Burton' and 'North Hill Court'. The heading titled 'Montague Burton' is highlighted by the WAVE software. As is also the case for the others, the font is light brown on a black background, therefore causing low contrast, with the brown text almost blending into its black background.

4.2.2 Availability of Information:

On one hand, the Lupton page was found to contain many necessary semantic elements in order to convey basic information. For instance, lexical constructions clearly conveyed imperative information on location, price, and furniture included. Semantic elements clearly overlapped with formal elements, adding to coherent constructions of information via appropriate use of headings and font size, meaning that information was visually clear and organised. Images were also a key vital part of portraying further information, which was clearly understood by, for instance, the large introductory picture of Lupton Residences used at the top of the page. In comparison to the two sub-pages analysed above, this is an improvement.

However, whilst the Lupton page contained the basic semantic elements expected to express essential information regarding the accommodation, it is questionable to the extent that this is truly accessible overall. This was exacerbated via the lack of image and audio descriptions accompanying the web page and website in general, and evident via the more technical issues mentioned in the above section. Access to further information on provision for accessibility needs was limited. For instance, at the time of writing, whilst a link to the AccessAble site was present halfway down the page, there was no further descriptive content on what the AccessAble site provided and/or who else to contact if specific information was needed regarding accessibility requirements related to Lupton Hall specifically. This is exacerbated by the issues regarding availability of information of the sub-pages mentioned previously. This is again worrying as it somewhat suggests alignment with some of the findings of the literature review, in particular regarding the fact in general many students are not aware of accessibility provisions at their university.⁸² An easy means to remedy this could be to simply provide further contact information, a link to the accessible map provided on other pages such as on the ResLife 'Accessibility on Campus' page, or simply a clear link to the Additional Requirements page.

Other ways that the above issues could be improved is to adopt a benchmarking approach looking to the University of Sheffield, who have a [page](#)⁸³ dedicated to website accessibility and transparency. This includes an up to date list of website amendments over the years to try and comply with changing guidelines, in addition to areas where they are working on improvements. The page also contains a feedback form which can be sent to the head of the Digital Accessibility team, in addition to guidance and resources on how to access the site according to a variety of needs. These elements not only seek to incorporate students into improving their own version of best practices regarding accessibility, but also open a dialogue for all users accessing the site. However, it must also be noted that it is also difficult to find information about accessibility specifically related to student

⁸² Wilke et al (n41).

⁸³ University of Sheffield, 'Accessibility' <<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/accessibility#how-accessible>> accessed 14th August 2024.

accommodation at the University of Sheffield, as it is implied that it is expected that the individual will fill out their needs on the accommodation form. This is potentially where Sheffield and Leeds overlap in their approach, in which case both would benefit from the above suggestion of ensuring higher levels of inclusivity by more clearly signposting relevant information on their home pages.

4.3 Lupton Residences - AccessAble page

[AccessAble](#),⁸⁴ previously named DisabledGo, is an external site used by the University of Leeds to provide more detailed information on most of its accommodation sites. It seeks to provide accessible guides for varying places in a certain area or specific location to provide 'the detailed information you need to work out if a place is going to be accessible to you'.⁸⁵ As mentioned previously, the Lupton Residence AccessAble page is linked towards the bottom of the University of Leeds Lupton Residence page.

4.3.1 Usability

When performed on this site, the WAVE test showed eighty-two errors (the overwhelming majority of which were related to lack of alt-text), twenty-two alerts and one contrast error (see Image 6 below). This is evidently worrying, enhanced by the fact that the site states it complies with WCAG 2.0 guidelines at Level AA, yet this version of guidelines were released in approximately 2008, and current WCAG guidelines are now at a 2.2 level. It must also be noted that the WAVE site itself clearly warns against total reliance on the WAVE tool, stating that 'only a human can ensure accessibility'.⁸⁶ Therefore, admittedly, it is difficult to determine how many of these errors are a genuine issue, without a further thorough examination of the site from a specialist.

⁸⁴ AccessAble, 'Home', <<https://www.accessable.co.uk/>> accessed 14th August 2024.

⁸⁵ AccessAble, 'About' <<https://www.accessable.co.uk/pages/about>> accessed 14th August 2024.

⁸⁶ WAVE, 'Home' <<https://wave.webaim.org/help>> accessed 14th August 2024.

Image 6: WAVE evaluation report of the AccessAble Lupton Residence page

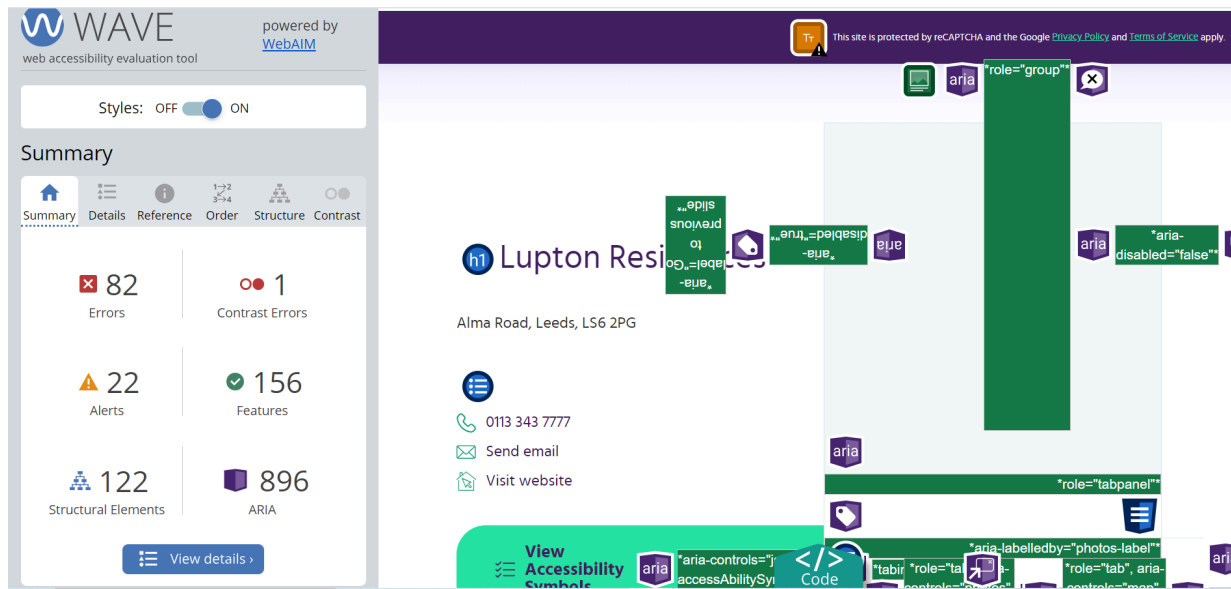


Image 6 description: The image shows a split screen, with the AccessAble Lupton Residence page taking over two thirds of the page on the right. The WAVE report can be seen on the left hand side of the page, and reads: '82 errors, 1 contrast error, 22 alerts, 156 features passed, 122 structural elements and 896 ARIA identified'.

However, when examining other physically performative and formal elements other issues clearly arise. Firstly, relating to physically performative elements, arguably the most evident issue relates to the available images. When clicking on them, images do not enlarge and do not seem to have alt-text. Moreover, when zooming in at 200%, they are evidently low-resolution. Both of these are an issue for those with visual impairments, and were also reported as such in 2022 via reviews of the app version of the site.⁸⁷ AccessAble had replied that they were seeking to offer bigger images as part of developments,⁸⁸ but this is yet to be seen.

Furthermore, the site uses many collapsible tables which arguably affects formal coherence. Whilst useful in the sense that they can prevent excessive scrolling, those with

⁸⁷ See Appendix A.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

manual dexterity issues may find them difficult to navigate.⁸⁹ These types of menus can also be difficult to navigate depending on whether they are being viewed via a laptop or mobile phone. Moreover, the site also uses an overlay provided by ReciteMe, which may admittedly potentially complicate the effectiveness of the WAVE report, as it may not recognise the existence of an overlay. In this context, overlays are a tool that can be used to try and challenge and address a range of issues in the code of the site itself that prevents full accessibility.⁹⁰ However, these are often ineffective at providing full accessibility, and are arguably primarily used as a tool to delay or disguise the need for change of the site itself.⁹¹ Therefore, overall, this research found that the Lupton Residences AccessAble page, and use of the AccessAble pages overall, may not sufficiently help in providing support for those with accessibility requirements, and its use should be re-evaluated. Ultimately, the University of Leeds should consider making the internal arrangements to ensure that they are not reliant on external sites to provide information on accessibility of accommodation. This change would also mean the University has the option to be in control of making any changes that need to be made regarding web pages, and this is currently not the case.

⁸⁹ The World Wide Web Consortium, 'Fly-out menus' (2022)

<<https://www.w3.org/WAI/tutorials/menus/flyout/>> accessed 14th August 2024.

⁹⁰ Kelly Chan, 'Accessibility Overlays: What are they and their challenges' (*Ability Net*, 19th April 2024)

<<https://abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/accessibility-overlays-what-are-they-and-their-challenges#:~:text=Accessibility%20overlays%20are%20third%2Dparty,realty%20is%20not%20that%20simple>> accessed 14th August 2024.

⁹¹ Niklas Egger, Gottfried Zimmermann, and Christophe Strobbe. 'Overlay tools as a support for accessible websites—possibilities and limitations.' In *International Conference on Computers Helping People with Special Needs* (Springer International Publishing, 2022), 6-17.

Image 7: Example of AccessAble image issue

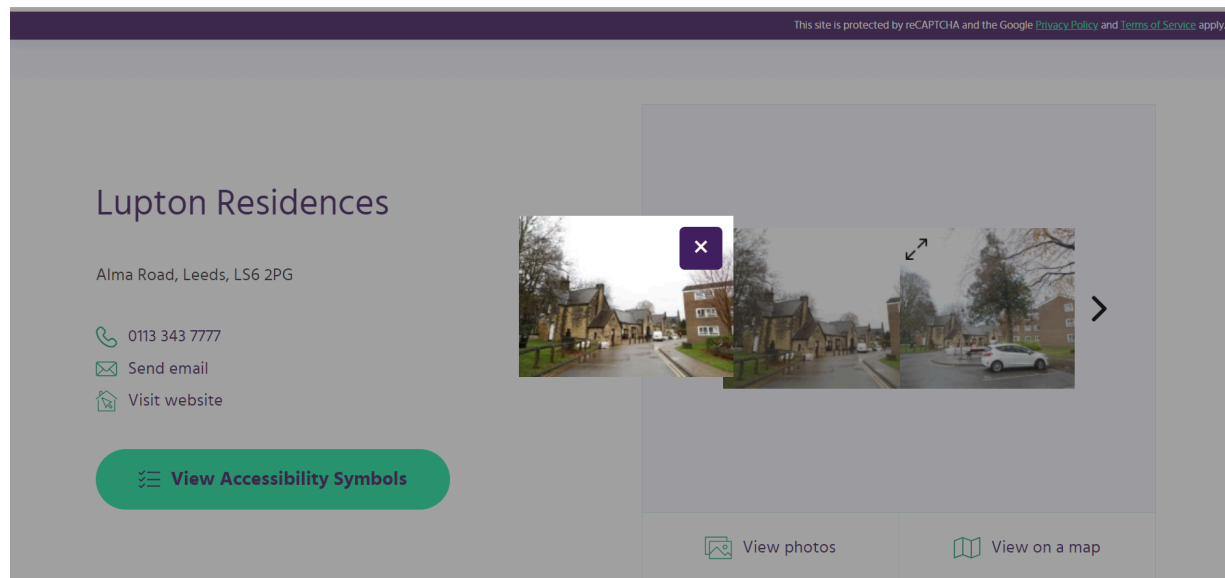


Image 7 description: The screen shows a small thumbnail picture of Lupton Residences at the centre of the screen. The main AccessAble page for Lupton Residences is in the background.

4.3.2 Availability of Information

It must firstly be noted that AccessAble has had an incredibly positive effect on many people's lives by helping people assess which places and areas may or may not be suitable for them to visit. However, whether this site is the most appropriate means to highlight information related to accessible accommodation at the University of Leeds is deeply questionable. For this web page, availability of information was found to be largely hindered by issues with usability of the site, as mentioned above. Alongside the above issues, further issues were found that prevent clear and coherent information on accessibility options within student accommodation. Firstly, relating to more semantic elements, issues were found with the way that the site provided information itself. For instance, information was mainly presented in bullet point format which could feel excessive and messy for some, although perhaps preferable to others, whilst room dimensions or floor plans with image descriptions were either not available or hidden

amongst a large amount of other information. This may be an issue for those with cognitive impairments or issues with memory, for instance. It must also be noted that Lupton Residences are not considered as accessible by the University, which is misleading considering the fact that the AccessAble site is linked on the University Lupton Residences web page. However, the above issues are also present on other AccessAble web pages that the University does consider as accessible accommodation, such as on the Charles Morris Hall web page. Either way, these issues present further obstacles for students searching for relevant accessibility information, and are likely to encourage confusion during accommodation searches. Overall, further clarity, layout and signposting is needed to help students during their accommodation search regarding accessible options.

4.4 Summary & Recommendations

This section of the report has discussed the results of website analysis conducted on three key pages (including two-sub pages). It has also included recommendations throughout. Please see below for a summary of key findings and recommendations.

4.4.1 Summary of key findings:

- Overall, whilst it is extremely positive that a page related to accessibility requirements exists, University of Leeds pages were found to be somewhat lacking in sufficient information, in addition to poor layout in places.
- Findings indicated extremely similar issues for the University of Leeds web pages regarding their usability. Whilst extensive errors were not found, the WAVE tool highlighted clear issues primarily related to contrasts, headings and slight problems with HTML.
- The page with the most significant issues identified was the AccessAble site, potentially due to its use of an accessibility overlay which may not register on the WAVE tool.

4.4.2 Summary of related recommendations to improve current practice:

- Employ a specialist in website accessibility to analyse and improve the usability of web pages. This would potentially increase student knowledge on how the University of Leeds can support accessibility requirements in the context of university accommodation.
- Summarise the Additional Requirements and Supporting Your Requirements into a singular page, incorporating enhanced coherence, clearer layout and multimedia forms of presenting information in accessible formats. This could potentially mimic the University of York's Additional Requirements page. This page should be showcased on the website, and therefore placed on the home page and each specific residence page of University accommodation. It should therefore be more visible on all areas of the website.
- Reconsider reliance on external sites such as AccessAble in providing information on accessibility in accommodation. An alternative would be to provide similar information from internal efforts.
- Consider adding a page similar to the University of Sheffield, which highlights efforts and issues regarding website accessibility. This would increase transparency and accountability, and emphasise the centrality of inclusion as a focal point of the University.

5. Interviews: Results & Discussion

As further highlighted in the Methodology section of this report, interviews were conducted with six members of staff from the Residential Services' teams, all of whom are involved in accessibility support or supporting those with additional needs⁹² at a range of stages spanning the entire accommodation process. Overall, two key overarching themes were found in relation to the research questions: Strengths, and Areas to Improve and Consider. Within these, multiple sub-themes emerged. This section provides a summary and discussion of the findings, with a subsequent summary of findings and recommendations at the end of the section. Please note some quotes are edited slightly for clarity.

5.1 Strengths of current practice

5.1.1 Individualised care within a positive and responsive culture, & large resource availability

Overall, the most striking and moving aspect seen in all staff interviews was the genuine care, concern and willingness to go well beyond expectations in caring for students. All interviewees were clearly both professionally and personally invested in ensuring that students feel as at home and supported as possible within accommodation. This was further reflected in participants' willingness to go beyond interview timings if needed, and genuine concern and care they expressed for their students. Clear efforts by Residential Services' teams to provide individualised care within a positive and responsive culture were the clearest strengths found within the interview data. This was seen in all stages of the process, including applying to accommodation and whilst living in accommodation. For example, within the initial stages of applying for accommodation, students fill in a form that may potentially outline their needs if they wish to disclose them. In the case of students who may not involve an explicit request or clear means of support, staff members highlighted that collaborative discussions are held to try and find appropriate support:

⁹² For a specific definition of these terms, please refer to the Introduction section of this report.

“So basically, things like eating disorders comes into that a lot. So it's, you know, do you want - would you feel better with the catered room or or a self catered room? And so - sometimes that's a case of me and [...] will just have a meeting with them and kind of say here's what's available - what do you think aligns with what your needs are?” - Participant F, staff member of Central Accommodation Office.

Others within the Central Accommodation Office supported this, indicating that with an individualised approach came a natural familiarity with students which encouraged a high degree of flexibility and understanding regarding accessibility related interactions. This was reported to prevent overall frustration, and increase levels of experienced support. Others emphasised that accessibility needs were taken into account well in advance where requested and needed, with preparation for students sometimes occurring months or even years in advance. Meanwhile, answers from members of staff from ResLife highlighted that this individualised approach also went beyond the solely administrative side of accommodation, reporting that:

“[...]but [we take] time to listen to student feedback and then make adjustments so that events are available to everyone - if we have louder events, making sure that we have quiet spaces available if the student is neurodivergent and needs to sort of step out those, those kinds of things I guess is what we're trying to do in terms of accessibility” - Participant C, staff member of ResLife.

This type of individualised, student driven approach was also found to positively correlate to a broad degree of accessibility knowledge found in all interviews. When asked, participants often stated that accessibility was something that was dynamic, about not treating everyone the same, often affected by language, and something that should challenge both physical and societal barriers. This seemed to support and drive the positive type of approach highlighted above. However interestingly, most participants often instinctively linked accessibility to disability. It must be noted that whilst it is beneficial to have increased focus on how to provide disability related support, this must not automatically exclude other groups who may have additional needs, as explained in the final section of this part of the report. Nevertheless, overall, support of accessibility needs in student accommodation appeared student-led and needs based instead of generalised,

and this was recognised and explicitly supported on multiple levels within the accommodation application process and beyond.

The ability and willingness to provide individualised care and consideration regarding accessibility needs of students in accommodation also appeared to be reliant on the existence of a positive and proactive type of attitudinal culture in the workplace itself. This further highlights the findings of the literature review, which partially emphasised the importance of attitudinal culture within institutions in general. Most participants mentioned that this type of proactive approach towards students, and the organisation needed behind it, would not be possible without the support of their team. For instance, some reported that:

“Again, it's very much down to the kind of the team that you work with as well and [...] has just been really, really supportive of everything, which is really good. So having support of your manager and of the General Services are really, really important things - and we do, so, yeah - it's good.” - Participant A, staff member of the Central Accommodation Team.

“And then I think for my team, I think just their willingness to want to learn and to move those adjustments for students. You know, it's - there's not a tonne of stuff where we've said we can't make any changes to this, and if we can't we'll look at the next thing that we're running that that could be a good alternative, or [we'll] build something else into our programme to to meet those needs.” - Participant C, staff member of ResLife.

It is important to note that the ability to provide individualised responses to accessibility needs in addition to the existence of a positive and responsive culture was also found to be made possible and encouraged by a large resource or budget availability. Consistently genuine and efficient individualised care in this context can evidently only occur in positive and responsive cultures where there are the means to provide it. However, many importantly emphasised that the existence of a large resource and budget availability did not influence attitudes to the extent that it enforced a costs based analysis of accessibility needs. This is a further clear advantage of current related practice at the University of Leeds, considering the fact that there has been much criticism of excessive

commodification trends in the higher education sector.⁹³ For instance, one participant emphasised that:

“[...] the willingness to make accommodations and to work with students so far in advance is really, really astounding to me. I haven't seen that in a lot of other places, and [...] their willingness to sort of make adjustments and not care about the, I mean, maybe people do, but it never feels like it's cost related, you know - it revolves around the student experience, not how much that's going to cost the service.” -

Participant C, staff member of ResLife

Overall, this research found that individualised care within a positive and responsive culture and as supported by large resource availability was the strongest and most impressive strength of current practice.

5.1.2 Importance of specific supportive roles to enhance and ensure accessibility

The importance of supportive staff roles to specifically support students with additional needs within current practice was also commonly reported, with some explicitly saying that they believed it was a vital aspect of current practice. This also links with the above sub-theme, as it clearly enhances a supportive and responsive culture. The most highlighted specific roles reported as vital in supporting students with accessibility requirements in accommodation were the **Support and Liaison Officer** roles, which are the key contact for prospective students with accessibility requirements primarily during the initial stages of the application process. It is surprising that these roles are not highlighted on the relevant web pages, emphasised by the fact that staff members were greatly appreciative of staff members in this role, whilst also recognising that this is not a role that most other universities have. For instance, a staff member of an onsite team stated that:

⁹³ See for example Akemi Nishida, 'Neoliberal Academia and a Critique from Disability Studies' in Pamela Block, Devva Kasnitz, Akemi Nishida, and Nick Pollard (eds) *Occupying disability: Critical approaches to community, justice, and decolonizing disability* (Springer Netherlands, 2016), 145.

“I definitely think it’s a well done service, I think having two accommodation Support and Liaison Officers - that’s great. I know a lot of universities don’t do that and they don’t think it’s necessary to put money towards it. And I think the fact that we are so strong on that - I think that’s great.” - Participant D, member of an onsite team.

Another specialist role highlighted as foundational to good practice regarding accessibility was that of the **Occupational Therapist**. If needed, students will have an assessment with the Occupational Therapist often in advance of their arrival to accommodation. This is another key role that is not highlighted via the website, perhaps to avoid unnecessary assessment requests. However, as interviewees also pointed out, this is again another positive aspect of current practice that most other universities do not seem to offer. At the University of Leeds, staff reported that this involved a process that occurred in advance to ensure that the accommodation was appropriate for the student, even if there were doubts on whether they would join the university. Care and concern therefore appeared unconditional and independent of whether the prospective student had accepted their offer at the accommodation. This importantly indicated that making sure that support for the student was in place in advance was paramount. For instance, one member of staff from an onsite team stated that:

“They’ll [occupational health] come. And we find out all the details there and then - that student might not even come in September [in the end], it might be a different student. We might do it with, like, five different students. So somebody will go around, show them the room, [...] and then that student would say ‘right I’d need this in there, I’d need that in there’, so we will sort of obviously make some sort of, like, report or a note. So it’s usually [...] the managers deal with it because I’ve seen it - they deal with things like a few months in advance. So when that student is basically moving in, hopefully, everything’s there and ready.” - Participant E, member of an onsite team.

Another role that was less mentioned but also reported as significant regarding the ongoing provision of accessibility in accommodation was the **Refurbishment and Development Manager** who, amongst other things, carries out Equality Impact Assessments. These assessments ensure that any developments to rooms or the building does not affect accessibility where possible. The role of **external disability consultants** were also briefly mentioned in a positive sense, suggesting that they were useful in keeping

the University accountable, although they were not in detail. Overall, the above specialist roles are a clear positive aspect of current practice supporting students with accessibility needs in student accommodation.

5.1.3 Good cross and inter-team collaboration

Another key strength or sub-theme found was the reported collaboration both between different teams and within teams. This type of collaboration is vital in effectively reducing barriers and improving accessibility support for students at university.⁹⁴ Cross and/or inter-team collaboration was the third most recorded element found in the data relating to strengths of current practice. Perhaps most importantly, staff members mentioned good communication and cohesion with other areas of Residential Services, therefore again supporting the existence of a supportive culture behind accessibility provision in University accommodation. For instance, Participant A mentioned that:

“We link in with our wider team pretty well as well, like, in residences. We have good relations with them and we do with a lot of different university areas.” - Participant A, Member of the Central Accommodation Team.

Interestingly, Participant A went on to suggest that these ‘good relations’ served a wider purpose within accessibility. They suggested that good collaboration between teams meant that signposting to the relevant teams was a relatively smooth process. They also recognised that this was particularly important, and also helped staff provide further support as a service, due to the fact that students who were either applying for or researching accessibility provisions in accommodation will already have to deal with multiple other administrative tasks that come with applying to, or starting, university. They stated that:

“So I think I think with us, we're quite good at being a bit of a hub sensor for students potentially as well, because university bureaucracy for somebody is really hard to navigate, and when there's all these kind of departments that potentially

⁹⁴ Mitra Gorjipour, ‘Improving the capacity for collaboration between accessibility services and college faculty.’[2020] *The Organizational Improvement Plan at Western University*, 133.

students with disabilities can get things from they may not immediately know about them.” - Participant A, Member of the Central Accommodation Team.

Other staff members supported this perspective, particularly highlighting efforts to create a support net for students not only by working with other staff teams but also with other students, such as specific societies, to enhance continued support in accommodation for those with accessibility requirements. This work, some reported, informed aspects such as the helpful ResLife website resources, whilst suggesting that this also enhanced flexibility and individualised approaches to accessibility in accommodation. For instance, Participant C mentioned that:

“We've got those guides [on the ResLife website]- we actively collaborate with services on campus. And you know, student societies and LUU - we work a lot with the neurodivergent society and LGBTQ+ society, with lots of different teams that have expertise [...] We do a lot of working with Disability Services too and we send a lot of our stuff to them just to see if they'd be willing to look it over and make recommendations, which has been super helpful.” - Participant C, member of staff from ResLife.

Overall, a motivation to continually acquire new knowledge about accessibility to increase levels of available support therefore appeared to be a key stimulant to cross-team collaboration. Within their interview, Participant C also hinted at the challenges that come with consistently changing student demographics and therefore needs, highlighting that the most important aspect was to remain actively trying to improve the service and therefore accessibility practice. This conveys that staff are perhaps either consciously or subconsciously aware that delivering and establishing best practice regarding accessibility in accommodation is an ongoing, active process that should never be viewed as complete. In Participant C's words, “[...] there's always more to do, but it's, you know, a conscious effort to talk to the right, talk to the experts and then listen to what they're saying”. Therefore, to view best practice as achieved in this context would be to reject space for progress.

5.2 Areas to improve and consider

5.2.1 The need for formalisation and increased availability of information

Whilst there are evidently clear and important strengths within the current system, the most mentioned aspect of current practice overall related to a need for the formalisation and increased availability of information. This was an apparent issue for both staff and students. For staff, this resulted in obstacles to specialist roles and confusion related to data sharing, whilst for students this related to issues with the current website. According to Universities UK, a collective organisation of which the University of Leeds is a member of, formalised policy is a key factor in protecting student interests.⁹⁵ However this research has found that, sadly, in some areas the current lack of formalised policy or availability of information regarding accessibility within Residential Services has been detrimental for both staff and students.

A) Staff Aspects - Obstacles to Specialist Roles

Perhaps most importantly, considering its already previously mentioned significance in accessibility support, lack of formalisation and easily available information was reported to be an obstacle to specialist roles. Some tactfully reported that their role needed to be more clearly defined to other teams or within the organisational structure in general, and potentially made more accessibility focused. Some mentioned that if this occurred, they would have more ability to solely focus on more accessibility related projects as they would have more focus, with Participant F pointing out that a current obstacle to that was due to the fact that:

⁹⁵ Universities UK, 'Policy: an overview' <<https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/policy-overview#:~:text=Our%20policy%20work%20has%20been,interests%20and%20regulating%20higher%20education> > accessed 25th August 2024.

“Sometimes people will come to us with stuff that anyone could pick up really, or it's operational stuff that we don't really have any oversight on. But it involves a piece of medical equipment or a disabled student. And so it just - it default goes to us.” -

Participant F, staff member of the Central Accommodation team

Others reported that not only roles but also processes within specific roles needed to be formalised and clearly defined, as without this sometimes processes solely relied on memory or the knowledge of experienced staff. Subsequently, this meant that when new staff arrived, training was not as streamlined as it could be. The key issue preventing a smoother process was that, as a different participant from the Central Accommodation Office mentioned, “a lot of what we do isn't really kind of written down anywhere as a big kind of handover Bible document”. Moreover, some also highlighted that when certain aspects failed or problems were found in current practice, lack of formalisation of processes meant that there was no back-up in place. One participant, again from the Central Accommodation Office, pointed out specific areas where this lack of formalised information could be improved:

“[It would be good to] Get site plans pulled together and layouts of things so that we can just refer people to it - instead of relying on me going and taking a picture of it and sending it to somebody, we could just go ‘here's the dimensions’, ‘this is what it is’ - like, a proper kind of architectural floor plan -‘this is what the diameters of things are’ instead of [...] having to ring the site and go and do it. And again, that's a big job, so it will be done in the future, but it's just something that kind of does need doing at this point.” - Participant A, staff member from the Central Accommodation Office.

Importantly and optimistically, they also went on to say this area was already being examined and progress was gradually being made, and that with time the situation was likely to improve. Nevertheless, this remains a current key obstacle in accommodation accessibility support practice which should continue to be prioritised. This research urges that the University of Leeds takes advantage of this research project to ensure that research-based policy is created that will benefit not only students but also staff.

B) Staff & Student Aspects - Issues with Data Sharing

Another related potential issue preventing the highest level of accessibility support as highlighted by interviewees related to data sharing, and specifically the current complexity around it. This was reported by multiple teams within Residential Services, suggesting that this is a widespread issue, and also a potential challenge to good cross and inter-team collaboration. Some staff reported that students were required to repeatedly disclose accessibility requirements or related information and documents to multiple teams, suggesting that related processes could be more straightforward. Whilst recognising the complexity surrounding this due to GDPR rules, some interviewees pointed out that this may cause frustration and unnecessary labour for both staff and students. Regarding the latter, some staff from the Central Accommodation Office reported that:

“Sometimes students are disclosing [...] and evidencing specific needs to [the] disability [team], and then the onus is on them to do it to us as well. You know, giving us essentially the same documents that they've already given disability [...] In the NADP conference [we went to], particularly with international students – one of the major complaints from disabled students was ‘I feel like I'm having to disclose information to to different services within a university, even though from my perspective, I've already told the organisation what my circumstances are’ - you should just be able to tell person and then that's it.” - Participant F, staff member of the Central Accommodation Office.

Members of onsite teams and ResLife also highlighted an overall issue with how data was shared, with some members of onsite teams highlighting that some staff members were not always able to view accessibility requirements, including disclosure of disability. Whilst some participants recognised that it was not always necessary to know a student's accommodation related accessibility needs, this also meant that sometimes other staff did not instantly know what accessibility needs they may have or need further assistance with and therefore whether to offer support. For instance, one mentioned that:

“[...] when you go into the StarRez, onto their account, [...] obviously we can't see that [information on medical issues]. So we don't 100% know - I don't even think the managers can see that - only certain people that can see it, so the only thing that I'm

always bothered about, [...] is can they collect their own parcel?" - Participant E, staff member of an onsite team.

The issues highlighted above would be greatly alleviated by more defined and streamlined processes, which would benefit both staff and students. For instance, whilst evidently some students may prefer to disclose related information to each team individually, there should be a clear option to disclose it to multiple teams at once to streamline processes where appropriate. This research therefore recommends closer examination of current data sharing processes and guidelines to improve accessibility support in student accommodation.

C) Student Aspects - the Need for Website Improvement

As directed by the findings from the literature review and website analysis, interviewees were asked about their opinion on current related web pages. Overall most interviewees reported concern with the way that information regarding accessibility support was currently presented or with the ways it was made available. Ultimately, as highlighted by this report's literature review and website analysis sections, the availability of information is in itself a key aspect of ensuring support with accessibility needs on multiple levels. Website information and social media is also a key way students ascertain how supportive an environment may be, especially regarding universities.⁹⁶ Yet participants who appeared to have more in-depth knowledge of the web pages were mostly critical, mentioning the general Additional Requirements page and the AccessAble site. For instance one said that, in general, regarding the University of Leeds website:

"I think it lacks a little bit of information and again this feeds on from relying on third party things like AccessAble and things like that, it's just - it's not a good website at this point to have to rely on. So maybe having a kind of in house - things

⁹⁶ See for example Kurt Schimmel, Darlene Motley, Stanko Racic, Gayle Marco, and Mark Eschenfelder, 'The importance of university web pages in selecting a higher education institution', (2010) *Research in Higher Education Journal* 9 1.

like that, like 'this is the layout of an accessible room, you can access these here' would be a really good thing to have. Because [...] if AccessAble shut down, what would happen then?" - Participant A, staff member of Central Accommodation Office.

Other participants also mentioned issues with navigating the AccessAble site, and were concerned that overall this meant that students had to directly reach out to determine the level of support on offer. Considering the high level of support available, this is disappointing, suggesting that students may not be fully aware of the support available. The impact of this was also powerfully emphasised by Participant A, who stated:

"I think the kind of information on the website and our media channels is really, really important for certain students [...]. I had a student who was mute, but it was psychosomatic - so they just froze in any situation where they had to speak to a stranger, and that was for our email as well. So they actually came to an open day with the parents and they said, 'ah, it's really good that I've been able to be here to speak to you in person because otherwise my child would have basically never even been able to make the application, because they didn't know what you could do.'" -
Participant A, Central Accommodation Office.

However, interestingly, most participants were not fully aware of what exactly current accommodation related web pages conveyed regarding front-facing information. This was largely understandable, as the site is not necessarily designed for staff, and participants recognised this. Admittedly, whilst some were fiercely critical of the AccessAble website, one participant was also explicitly in favour of the site when asked their opinion, stating that it helped counter a lack of inclusive and accessible information seen via the University of Leeds' own website. Dissatisfaction with the general University of Leeds accommodation web pages was also implied by others. Some particularly emphasised the lack of information surrounding rent reduction offers. For instance, Participant F reported that they'd experienced frustration from students regarding this, stating:

"I think they've got to e-mail and ask for it and then we'll send it, which is just.... To me, the optics of it is quite bad. It looks a lot like we're just trying to hope - you know, we're hoping that people won't do it. I don't think that is the sentiment really, but that is what it looks like." - Participant F, staff member of Central Accommodation Office.

Discrepancies between the amount of support available and the amount of support that is publicised by the University of Leeds are therefore surprisingly present. Increased financial costs are a clear and consistent issue for students with accessibility needs in university accommodation, and disproportionately affect some groups such as those who are disabled and/or have lower financial means or income.⁹⁷ Information on varying types of support available is therefore vital for some; the lack of this type of information may even prevent some from applying to University of Leeds accommodation if they believe they cannot afford it. As also mentioned in the website analysis section of this report, the availability of information or lack thereof is an area of current practice that must be improved and re-evaluated.

5.2.2 Training gap

Another key finding relates to a training gap, which has subsequently revealed the effect and importance of accessibility knowledge. This was highlighted both explicitly and implicitly via interviews. For instance, some participants explicitly highlighted that a training gap was present, and suggested that this was because not all staff were required to do accessibility training. They suggested that this was due to the fact that related accessibility and disability training was mainly prioritised or required for those working full time. Some also highlighted that related resources were not widely available. This also related to the previous sections, again emphasising the lack of formalisation or organisation of both guidelines and resources within the current system in addition to a lack of availability of relevant information. This is disappointing, particularly considering that staff and their teams appear more than willing to engage in further learning. As one participant importantly highlighted:

“[...] having that information [further resources] easily accessible would make things ... it feels like a quick win - just knowing stuff and then being able to mindfully work

⁹⁷ See Francesca Hughes, ‘Universities ‘illegally hitting disabled students with extra housing costs’ (*open democracy*, 9 November 2022)<<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/disabled-students-equality-act-adapations-accessible-rooms/>> accessed 15 July 2024.

around that. Same with ongoing training and development. I work with a team that always wants to sort of pick up professional development experiences, and that includes expanding our knowledge on accessibility in that field. But just knowing where to look for that training or having it recommended, I think can make it easier than trying to seek it out yourself.” - Participant C, staff member of the ResLife team.

Although overall all participants seemed to be part of a team that was generally inclusive and positive, others highlighted some gaps in accessibility knowledge within the workplace on a more implicit level. For instance, some participants powerfully pointed out the importance and power of language and need for sensitivity when dealing with both potential and already established accessibility needs. They pointed out that this was an issue on two levels: both administratively and on an individual level. Administratively, some participants pointed out that within PEEP forms (personal emergency evacuation plans), language used could be perceived as insensitive. For instance, using ‘carer’, which has a more infantilizing connotation, instead of ‘personal assistant’. Some also tactfully pointed out that, on a staff or individual level, there should be more training on sensitivity or awareness of how to speak to and about students who may not have or want a specific label or diagnosis, and on how important it is to avoid presumptions about people. This is particularly important when considering and recognising that when students request accessibility requirements, they may not also necessarily want a label with it. For instance, some participants mentioned that sometimes, but seemingly rarely, presumptions were made regarding onsite ongoing support based on behavioural or attitudinal aspects of students. This also related to a lack of accessibility knowledge both amongst students and some staff - one participant mentioned that there had been confusion for some about what neurodivergence meant, although as also reported above most staff most participants displayed a detailed and nuanced view of accessibility. Admittedly, this aspect of training is something that should be encouraged university-wide and amongst staff and students, as also highlighted previously in the literature and by participants. Overall, as mentioned above, whilst there is a clear positive and responsive culture present regarding accessibility support in accommodation, there are also some improvements to be made. This again relates to the fact that related best practice should involve an ongoing drive to improve, and in this sense best practice should be seen as almost unattainable but worthy of pursuing.

5.2.3 Excluded groups

A final area that should be considered in conceptualisations of best practice regarding accessibility support in university accommodation, not only for the University of Leeds but also all universities, relates to potentially excluded groups. Based on the findings of the literature review, participants were asked their opinion on whether they thought all groups of people, not solely disabled students, were included in current perceptions and practice related to accessibility support in accommodation. Responses were mixed - some participants stated that they thought all groups were included well within the current system, whilst some expressed doubt and suggested ways to improve the system. For instance, some participants emphasised the need to consider transgender students within accommodation and check that all were comfortable with their living arrangements, with some participants highlighting that efforts to do this were already in progress. For example, one participant reported that some students had been placed in a flat together after discussions were held with them regarding their preferences and needs. This therefore involved an impressive degree of staff initiative, where acknowledgement and care was placed at the centre of their approach, again highlighting the individualised approach identified previously. However, participants also recognised that current accessibility guidelines themselves did not explicitly include or consider all groups, such as transgender and international students. Ultimately, recognition is a vital aspect of challenging othering behaviour and policy,⁹⁸ and this research therefore calls for explicit recognition of the excluded groups mentioned in this report in current University of Leeds policy. Within this, current perceptions and practice of accessibility support in accommodation must be broadened and developed.

Some participants also suggested that current practice may favour those of higher socio-economic status in addition to domestic students. As also mentioned previously, the way rent reductions operated were highlighted as a potential key obstacle for some

⁹⁸ Sandra Fredman, 'Substantive Equality Revisited' (2016) 14 International Journal of Constitutional Law 3 712, 712.

students. This was reported to be particularly due to the fact that the system follows an approach that relies on medical evidence. As again highlighted by Participant F:

“And I think that impacts people differently - particularly international students, maybe, are likely to have a bit of an issue navigating that [the emphasis on medical evidence within the system]. So I would like a discussion around how equitable that is, and how much it does - to kind of close the gap for people that need it. You know, some students will have access to private healthcare where they can get stuff squared away really quickly with forms and documents and stuff like that, whereas other people might have to go to their local GP and request something that costs [...] and they might not have the best means to do that.” - Participant F, staff member of Central Accommodation Office.

Considering the incredibly long waiting lists for some diagnoses on the NHS, going private to gain medical evidence when needed is a key method used by those who can afford it.⁹⁹ This is therefore evidently problematic as those who do not have the financial means to do this are at higher risk of not getting the support they need. As Participant F mentioned, this may also exclude some international students, who may also be less familiar with NHS processes and therefore means to gain medical evidence if needed. Admittedly, as mentioned by some participants, international students may be less likely than domestic students to request accessibility provisions or report additional needs. However some participants also suggested that this may be due to differing cultural factors or potential perception of stigma. This again supports previous sections, suggesting that clear and encouraging information regarding accessibility is pivotal in being able to access accessibility requirements in the first place. Overall, this research calls for a re-evaluation of current practice, whilst considering the aforementioned groups.

⁹⁹ See for example Lucie Heath, ‘ADHD: ‘I had no choice but to spend £950 on a private assessment due to long NHS waiting lists’, (*Inews*, 17th May 2023) <<https://inews.co.uk/news/adhd-private-diagnosis-long-nhs-waiting-lists-2344856?srsId=AfmBOoo14g843zgiqA1QkgmT-oqISocPdaUg3IQwHJ7n3S6o2RKfMEIb>> accessed 1st September 2024.

5.3 Summary & Recommendations

Please see below for a summary of key findings and corresponding recommendations gained from the above examination of the interview data.

5.3.1 Summary of key findings:

- This research found two key overarching themes from the interview data. These were: strengths of current practice and areas to improve upon and consider. Overall, the University of Leeds appears to provide a positive, responsive and individualised approach regarding support for students with accessibility needs or additional requirements in accommodation. However, there are significant areas of improvement that must be made in current practice, as further identified below.
- Within strengths of current practice, sub-themes or specific strengths found were: individualised care within a positive and responsive culture & large resource availability, the importance of specific support roles to enhance and support accessibility needs or additional requirements, and good cross and inter-team collaboration. Specific areas to improve upon and consider related to: a need for formalisation and increased availability of information, a training gap, and excluded groups. A need for formalisation and increased availability of information was further divided into three further key areas where this problem was present and had an effect, which in turn affected both staff and students. These related to: obstacles to specialist roles, issues with data sharing, and the need for website improvement.
- Ultimately, whilst it is important to have focal points of improvement to work towards best practice, delivering and establishing best practice regarding accessibility in accommodation should be an ongoing, active process that can therefore never be viewed as complete. In the context of accessibility requirements in accommodation, standards of best practice will always change, due to changing student demographics and barriers.

5.3.2 Summary of related recommendations:

- Issues with the availability of information also presented in this aspect of the methodology, in line with the findings of the website analysis. Drawn from the interview data, to alleviate this issue, this research recommends increased transparency and clarity on the relevant accommodation pages. This could include clear information on what specialist roles are available to help students if needed, clear information on what financial support is available and how to apply - such as regarding rent reductions. This could also include publication of this report, and updates on progress made since its publication.
- To alleviate issues regarding the lack of formalisation and availability of information, this research recommends that both roles and processes are officially codified. This could involve the creation of a Residential Services Hub, that all members of staff in the Residential Services could access. This could also involve a collection of relevant resources and key training on the power of language and issues with accessibility as an umbrella term or synonym for additional needs related to disability. This must be mandatory for all staff regardless of the amount of hours they work. This could also involve site plans, and therefore form the basis for accessibility information solely provided by the University instead of relying on external sites. Overall, this would avoid confusion over specific roles, increase knowledge and staff support, whilst ensuring that if things go wrong there are backup plans in place.
- This research also recommends re-evaluating current practice in line with the potentially excluded groups of students as outlined by this research, which involves transgender and international groups, in addition to those with lower incomes.
- Again regarding issues with the formalisation and availability of information, how data regarding additional requirements or accessibility needs are processed should be re-evaluated and streamlined. For instance, whilst evidently some students may prefer to disclose related information to each team individually, there should be a clear option to disclose it to multiple teams at once to streamline processes where appropriate.

6. Conclusions

This research report has sought to identify and investigate best practice, and assess current practice, regarding support for students with accessibility needs in University of Leeds accommodation. As also outlined in the beginning of this report, at the centre of this research was the aim to ensure that University of Leeds accommodation feels like a home to all students, to the greatest extent possible. To do this, this research conducted a brief literature review of the existing academic literature and research, a website analysis of web pages related to accessibility support in University of Leeds student accommodation, and lastly conducted interviews with staff members of Residential Services. The literature review found that, internationally, negative attitudes, issues with physical and digital architecture, and disproportionate financial costs were reported to be obstacles to best practice in supporting students with accessibility needs in student accommodation. It also identified a gap in the literature regarding excluded groups within practice, specifically international and transgender students. Subsequently, it also highlighted key areas that should inform best practice for all universities including the University of Leeds. The website analysis revealed that the relevant web pages need to be improved to enhance usability and availability of information regarding accessibility support, and cautioned against the use of external sites to provide this on the University's behalf. Lastly, findings from the interviews indicated both impressive strengths in the current system, in addition to vital areas of improvement. Within strengths of current practice, sub-themes or specific strengths found were: individualised care within a positive and responsive culture & large resource availability, the importance of specific support roles to enhance and support accessibility needs or additional requirements, and good cross and inter-team collaboration. Specific areas to improve upon and consider related to a need for formalisation and increased availability of information, a training gap, and excluded groups. A need for formalisation and increased availability of information was further divided into three key areas where this problem was present and had an effect, which in turn affected both staff and students. These related to: obstacles to specialist roles, issues with data sharing, and the need for website improvement. **This research therefore recommends that related practice regarding accessibility in accommodation at the University of**

Leeds should follow the recommendations made at the end of each section of this report to improve current practice.

Yet, ultimately and in general, best practice in supporting students with accessibility or additional needs in university accommodation, must be viewed as flexible, continually changing and university specific. Whilst this report has identified key focal points that would encourage a form of best practice currently for the University of Leeds throughout this report, it is potentially ideal to perceive best practice as a just out of reach ideal to continue to inspire constant reflection. This is emphasised by the fact that student demographics and external factors are constantly changing, and therefore 'best' practice is difficult to pin down at one moment.

Appendix

Appendix A: Comment on the AccessAble app from the Google Play store (accessed 20th August 2024).

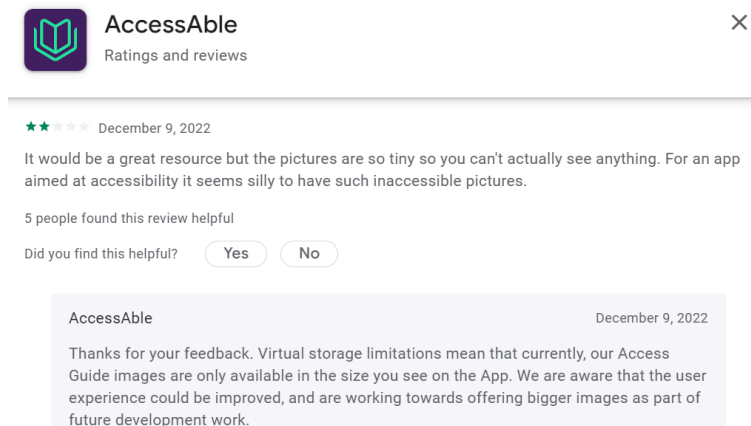


Image description for Appendix A: The screenshot shows a review from the Google Play store regarding the AccessAble app. The review is from December 9th 2022, and the reviewer (whose name is not visible) has given the app two stars. The review reads: “it would be a great resource but the pictures are so tiny you can’t actually see anything. For an app aimed at accessibility it seems silly to have such inaccessible pictures”. Five people have found this review helpful. Below the review, a reply from AccessAble is visible. It reads: “Thanks for your feedback. Virtual storage limitations mean that currently, our Access Guide images are only available in the size you see on the App. We are aware that the user experience could be improved, and are working towards offering bigger images as part of future development work”.

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