

Access for disabled people

It's more than a year since new disability access laws came into force. But our research shows that disabled people are still being let down by poor facilities and inaccessible toilets



FURTHER INFORMATION

Ricability is an independent research charity that publishes guides for older and disabled consumers. www.ricability.org.uk

The Disability Rights Commission is an independent body set up by the government to help secure civil rights for disabled people. www.drc-gb.org

Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee advises the government on access to transport for disabled people. www.dptac.gov.uk

The Disabled Living Foundation helps older and disabled people to lead independent lives. www.dlf.org.uk

Tripscope helps with planning a trip door to door and provides advice about planning a trip in the UK or abroad. www.tripscope.org.uk

The National Key Scheme provides access for disabled people to around 4,000 locked public toilets. www.radar.org.uk

Imagine deciding what restaurant to eat at because of its toilets. Or where to buy your clothes on the basis of the size of the changing rooms. It may seem ridiculous, but these are the sorts of decision that disabled people have to make every day.

THE DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT

There are between eight and 11 million disabled people in the UK, depending on the definition of disabled. Three quarters of these have a mobility impairment; a third have some loss of hearing; and a fifth have some form of sight impairment.

But it was only a decade ago that legislation was passed to ensure that disabled people weren't discriminated against. The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was implemented in stages and, by October 2004, all service providers had to make 'reasonable adjustments to their premises to overcome physical barriers to access'. For example, this has meant business owners installing ramps, lifts and handrails to ensure access to buildings. The legislation should also ensure that everyone can access information and services.

We asked five volunteers to give personal accounts of the challenges that face them in everyday life to test whether the law has made a difference.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The DDA has set minimum standards for future public transport. All new buses, trains, trams and coaches must now be accessible, and existing ones should be adapted or replaced. However, it takes time to replace fleets of buses and trains and it will be years before the benefits are felt by all.

This was certainly the case for some of our volunteers. Jill Millhouse, from St Boswells in the Borders, has multiple sclerosis and uses a wheelchair. She managed to catch a bus to get into Edinburgh, but only with the help of the driver. 'He lifted the chair on to the bus and helped me on. He even told me about a companion bus pass for my

friend, who was helping me. The bus wasn't wheelchair friendly but the service provided by the bus driver more than made up for this,' Jill said.

Russell Butcher, who uses a walking stick, and his wife Monica, a wheelchair user, live in Essex. They couldn't find an accessible method of public transport that would take them to the National Trust house in Suffolk they wanted to visit. Their local train station is not fully accessible and they can't rely on flagging down an accessible bus. They were forced to drive instead.

PHYSICAL ACCESS

Under the DDA, places such as shops and hotels must take 'reasonable steps' to ensure equal provision of services. What is perceived to be 'reasonable' will be defined only as cases come to court. This July, Debenhams became the first retailer to be sued under the DDA for failing to provide access, such as a ramp or lift, to the menswear department in its Derby store. The case is still ongoing. The Disability Rights Commission says that, while it might be acceptable for a corner shop not to install a ramp, Debenhams should definitely invest in better access.

Jill also had problems shopping for new clothes. 'The first shop's changing rooms didn't have enough room to swing a cat. It was impossible for

'The bus wasn't wheelchair friendly but the driver made up for this'

Jill Millhouse, wheelchair user



PHOTOGRAPHY ROBIN BECKHAM, ANDREA CRINGEAN, PAUL FRANCIS

'Disabled people choose a venue depending on whether they can use the loo'

Scope

SENSORY DISABILITIES

As well as covering access for those with a physical disability, the DDA aims to ensure that people who have problems with sight or hearing are equally well served. We asked Sam Balkwill, who is profoundly deaf and depends largely on lipreading, to spend a day at a hairdressers and health spa. Generally she had a good day and remarked how staff were eager to help. 'The receptionist at the hairdressers was very clear and made sure that she faced me when speaking to me,' she told us.

However, she did encounter some lack of understanding when she tried to buy tickets for a West End show. 'I asked for tickets for a performance with captions,' she said. 'I was advised to contact the National Union of Deaf People. I told them I hadn't heard of it. The staff admitted "making it up" and laughed.' Sam gave up and went home.

Sam's day out mirrors the experiences of other people who are deaf or hard of hearing. In 2004, RNID (a charity representing people who are deaf or hard of hearing) asked deaf mystery shoppers to visit tourist attractions across the UK. They found that 'there is still a considerable lack of deaf awareness among frontline staff. Many staff appeared to lack simple training in how to help deaf people'.

STAFF ATTITUDES

Encouragingly, most of our other volunteers told us that staff treated them well. However, when Russell and Monica visited a pub, they were made to feel very uncomfortable. 'The pub's door wouldn't open very wide. The landlord made no effort to help us, but then shouted at us and accused us of scratching the frame,' Russell told us. But this instance, along with Sam's experience, was the exception to the rule. All of our volunteers said that generally they were treated the same as everyone else. In fact, where our volunteers found poor access and basic facilities, helpful staff often compensated for them.

But disabled people shouldn't have to rely on goodwill. The experiences of our volunteers show that the DDA has led to improvements, but there's still some way to go.

which? says

Good access is essential for work, leisure and independent living for disabled people. A single inaccessible loo or a gap in the transport chain can be the weak link that makes a journey or task impossible or unreasonably difficult to complete.

The DDA is a comprehensive piece of legislation that has made a positive difference to the lives of millions of disabled people. But it's not a

panacea. As Russell, Monica, Anna, Sam and Jill all found, some service providers are still failing disabled people. And it's often the cheap and easy improvements that are slipping through the net. The Disability Rights Commission provides lots of useful advice for service providers – this must be put into practice. Everyone should have access to services as a right, not as a favour.

When they visited a pub, the landlord made Russell and Monica Butcher feel uncomfortable

me to try the clothes on,' she told us. She also encountered other problems with access, probably because the level of work needed wasn't considered 'reasonable'. 'The café I visited in Edinburgh had a high step at the door and no sign of any bell,' she said. 'Access to the toilets was round the back, and again there were steps to negotiate. I couldn't take the chair in as the loo was too small.'

However, Russell and Monica did come across instances where the DDA had clearly been complied with. 'The National Trust had obviously put in a lot of time and effort to make sure the house was accessible. There was a stairlift up to the main entrance, and staff available to help. Inside, they had their own wheelchairs for use in the shop and the restaurant and you could swap into a motorised one to visit the beautiful grounds.'

'Many staff appear to lack training in how to help deaf people'

RNID

All our volunteers reported that various simple, inexpensive adjustments still hadn't been made. Many problems, such as no handrails or no signs to indicate a further accessible entrance, could be easily solved. Other problems were due to carelessness. Russell told us about a café with an accessible toilet where the pull-down bar was installed on the wrong side of the toilet, and a ramp which had no safety rail.

TOILETS

Toilets were a key issue for all volunteers. Anna MacCorquodale, a guide-dog owner from the Highlands, went shopping in Oban and was told that there weren't any accessible public toilets in that part of town. 'Luckily, the staff at the tourist office invited me to use their office loo any time I wanted,' she told us.

Last year, Scope, a disability charity, found that two thirds of venues across the country didn't have an accessible toilet – one of the main barriers to equality. 'Most people choose a restaurant because they like the food or the atmosphere,' a Scope campaigner told us. 'Disabled people often choose a venue depending on whether they can use the loo.'

Guide-dog owner Anna MacCorquodale couldn't find any accessible toilets when out shopping

Sam Balkwill, who's profoundly deaf, had problems buying tickets for a West End show