Short-changed
The Trailblazers’ High streets report

Trailblazers
Young Campaigners’ Network

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“If I know that there is an area where most of the shops are inaccessible, I will avoid it. I often want to go to little boutique shops but I have to stick to the big department stores.”

**Virginia Butcher, Plymouth**
About **Trailblazers**

*Trailblazers* is a group of disabled campaigners from across the UK who tackle the social issues affecting young disabled people, such as access to higher education, employment, and social and leisure opportunities. We aim to fight these social injustices experienced by young disabled people and to ensure they can gain access to the services they require.

We are part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign.

About the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign

The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign is the leading UK charity fighting muscle-wasting conditions. We are dedicated to beating muscular dystrophy and related neuromuscular conditions by finding treatments and cures and to improving the lives of everyone affected by them.

**Our work has five main focuses:**

- we fund world-class research to find effective treatments and cures
- we provide practical information, advice and emotional support for individuals with muscle-wasting conditions, their carers and families
- we campaign to bring about change and raise awareness of muscular dystrophy and related neuromuscular conditions
- we award grants towards the cost of specialist equipment, such as powered wheelchairs
- we provide specialist education and development for health professionals.

**Get involved**

Take action, campaign, learn new skills. Interested in becoming a *Trailblazer*? We always welcome people to our thriving campaigning community.

- **t:** 020 7803 4800
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Introduction

Since the implementation of the Equality Act 2010, and legislation dating back to 1995, it has been illegal for service providers to treat disabled people less favourably than any other customers. Service providers, including shops, restaurants, cafés and supermarkets, must make reasonable adjustments so that disabled people can enjoy the same services and facilities as their non-disabled friends, family members and colleagues.

Disabled people contribute £80 billion to the UK economy per year, and may account for 20 percent of a business’ customer base (Department for Work and Pensions, Office for Disability Issues 2012). However, service providers may not always consider this when making business decisions.

In 2009, Trailblazers published our Calling Time report on access to leisure activities. We touched on access to the high street in that report, but we continue to hear from Trailblazers about challenges to accessing the high street. At the same time, the Government recognises the demise of the high street, and is trying to encourage its revival.

In 2012, the Government chose 27 English towns to take part in pilot projects aimed at transforming the high street. However, the resulting Portas Review unfortunately failed to consider accessibility for disabled customers, and only briefly mentioned older people. Being able to access the high street is such an important part of daily life, and Trailblazers across the UK thought the subject needed to be put under the spotlight.

Background

From October to December 2013, Trailblazers carried out an investigation into access to the high street. We asked 100 young disabled people to describe what they thought was good and not so good when they attempted to access their high street. They shared challenges and positive anecdotes.

Our research shows that the picture is not a straightforward one. Many of our members told us there have been improvements, however others have told of challenges in physically accessing premises, in staff attitudes and in misuse of, or broken, equipment. All they want is to have the same experience as their non-disabled peers; it’s as simple as that.

“Generally the buildings which are either government-run (libraries, post offices) or owned by large companies (supermarkets, banks) tend to have very good access. The problem often comes with smaller businesses that are perhaps located in older properties.”

James Lee, London

“The main shopping centre and ‘chain’ shops have reasonably good access. However with an interest in art and often wanting to buy something a little different, I find it’s the independent shops that are often small, cramped and have steps.”

Gemma Orton, Norwich

“I have found staff very helpful. Physical access is usually good within shops, but sometimes access from street to shop is not good, as there are stairs to their entrances etc.”

Benjamin James, London

“My local bank said they had access when I talked to them on the phone, so I went all the way down there only to find there was no access at all. The staff did not seem bothered at all. In most places staff don’t care about access for wheelchairs because it does not effect them. Sometimes places have lifts, which is good, but they are too small to fit my wheelchair in so I can’t use them.”

Virginia Butcher, Plymouth
Actions needed

At all locations, complete access for disabled customers, level access at entrances and ramps within, if required.

Disabled customers need to be considered – and consulted – when high street establishments are planning renovations.

Gangways in shops need to be cleared for all customers to shop confidently and safely.

Investment needs to be made into regular maintenance of equipment such as lifts, toilets and changing rooms, to enable equal access to facilities.

Clear opportunities need to be identified for disabled customers to notify staff members when there has been misuse of equipment or facilities intended for disabled people.

More Changing Places toilets are needed in town centres to enable disabled people to enjoy their town centres like non-disabled friends and family members.

Creation of more Blue Badge spaces, and increased monitoring and enforcement of sanctions where there has been misuse.

Disability equality training needs to be provided for staff members working in high street establishments, to improve understanding of and attitudes towards disabled customers.

Clear, accurate and up-to-date access information needs to be provided on high street establishments’ websites.

Active engagement needs to take place between businesses and disabled accessibility websites for better promotion of accessibility.

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Key findings

- Two-thirds of the Trailblazers respondents said physical access always or regularly affects where they decide to go.
- More than two-thirds have been unable to access parts of an establishment owing to broken or faulty equipment.
- Over 50 percent said that facilities regularly don’t have accessible toilets.
- Every respondent said they thought town centres needed more Changing Places toilets, which are more suitable to their needs.
- Sixty percent said that the layout and design of shops/restaurants/cafés/supermarkets always or regularly affected their being able to get around once inside.
- Only half of clothing retailers had accessible changing rooms.
- Eighty-five percent of respondents said they had seen disabled toilets, changing rooms or lifts being misused.
- A third felt they couldn’t spontaneously travel to their town centre and need to plan in advance any trip out.
- A third said there wasn’t enough disabled parking.
- Nearly half said that staff attitudes discouraged them from revisiting a shop/restaurant/café/supermarket.
- Seventy percent said there was inadequate information about access on websites.
- Forty percent felt forced or limited to shopping online owing to a lack of access in their town centre.
- Seventy-five percent said technology helped improve access for disabled customers.
Physical accessibility

Almost 70 percent of Trailblazers surveyed said physical access to facilities always or regularly affects where they go in their town centre. More than two-thirds visited their local town centre or a more accessible out-of-town location rather than their local high street. This reflects general consumer habits of 2013, however many Trailblazers explained how physical access can be a hurdle that requires service providers to address challenges.

Trailblazers found that if there is limited physical access, they have to find somewhere else to go. Miscommunication can also be an issue, where people believe that an establishment is accessible but didn’t consider the step outside, or the lack of accessible toilets. These are huge factors in whether or not a person can physically enter or enjoy the premises in the same way as their non-disabled friends.

“I recently had a trip to Home Bargain which really demonstrated excellent disability awareness. I am a manual wheelchair user and had my PA pushing my wheelchair. We were struggling a bit due to the bulky nature and quantity of the things we wanted to buy, and one of the female staff members noticed we were having difficulties and offered to take our shopping to one of the tills for when we were ready to buy. At the tills, another female member of staff helped with packing our bags, and the male staff member on the till was very friendly and didn’t make us feel rushed when we were looking for my purse etc. The female staff member who helped us with our packing also helped us out to the car with our bags. All of this help was given in a friendly cheerful manner, without making us feel like we were being awkward. I honestly have never had such good disability awareness and customer service as this, and emailed the store to express my gratitude; most places the staff don’t do anything when they see us struggling. I think it highlights how straightforward providing good customer service to disabled people can be; yet why is it so rare to have an experience like this?”

Catherine Alexander, Wirral

Recommendations

- Complete access needs to be provided for disabled customers, with level access at entrances and ramps within if required.
- Installing of lifts where required.
- Considering – and consulting – disabled customers when there are renovations being planned.
- Consulting disabled people needs to take place when improving accessibility.
- Investment needs to be made in solid portable ramps and handrails.

“Although I am a mobile disabled person, steps and stairs are virtually impossible for me and slopes/hills/inclines are not very easy for me. Shops that have a step up into them or within them aren’t ideal. Also in shops that have narrow aisles, I can trip easily.”

Laura Bizzey, East Anglia

“I am often frustrated when one small step can stop me and my friends going into an establishment. A portable ramp doesn’t cost much but can make a huge difference to my day out. If there is no access, I don’t try and get someone’s attention, I just go elsewhere as I don’t think they deserve my hard earned-cash if they can’t be bothered to invest in an accessible ramp or a piece of wood! Some shops are great, if they have a portable ramp there is a bell you can call for attention, which makes it less awkward waiting outside and trying to get attention from passers-by.”

Trailblazer, London

“The Giraffe restaurant in Richmond has three steps to get inside, whereas the Italian place next door has a ramp built into its design. They are both in the same building, so why can’t they both be accessible?”

An accessible high street is not just a right but makes good business sense

All new buildings and all major refurbishments to existing buildings have to meet current building regulations which make good provision for disabled people.

These require:
- a step-free entrance to a building
- a lift or suitable ramp between different levels of a building
- wheelchair accessible toilets to be provided wherever there is any toilet facility provided. If only one toilet, it must be wheelchair accessible
- all doors to be easily opened and wide enough with good handles that are low enough for wheelchair users
- big glass panels or doors to be clearly marked so that no-one inadvertently walks or wheels into them.

As we know many existing buildings and shops do not meet these standards. They only need to meet the building regulations when they apply for a refurbishment, and then only the part that is being refurbished needs to be brought up to standard.

However, all businesses since October 2004 have had a legal duty (the Disability Discrimination Act 1995) to have made reasonable physical adjustments to make their businesses and business premises accessible to disabled customers.

The law (it is now the Equality Act) says that changes have to be reasonable. So a small local business that has a large existing step into the shop may not have the space to put in a ramp, but they still have to provide the service to everyone who wants it. They may offer home delivery, or bring out the item to the customer. If they are a service, they can provide telephone or online service. The considerations of reasonableness include cost, practicability of making the change, and size of business.

For a large business with greater resources, even if they have a small, inaccessible shop on a high street, it is not acceptable to provide poor access. Banks, chains or department stores are expected to have reasonably accessible premises that are step-free, and with step-free access to all the levels of their shop/business that the public use, and with other accessible features such as accessible toilets where toilets are provided, otherwise they are not meeting their obligations under the Equality Act and they can be sued by the individual who cannot access their services.

There is plenty of professional expertise to assist businesses to make their premises more accessible. Access consultants and auditors can carry out audits and make recommendations to improve access. The Centre for Accessible Environments (www.cae.org.uk) has been promoting an accessible built environment for over 40 years and also provides an information and access consultancy service.

“The Equality law states that physical changes to business premises need to be reasonable.”

Brenda Puech
Layout and design

The layout and design of a location can both help and hinder accessibility. With some thought and planning, the interior can have space for people to move around freely. Fifty percent of respondents found they always or regularly have challenges getting around owing to the layout or design of an establishment.

In cafés and eateries, high tables and chairs, fixed seats or steps within the establishment make it difficult to move around or to eat or drink in that establishment. A possible way to avoid this is by having a choice of mixed heights for furniture so people can choose where to sit.

In shops, there is often the need to stockpile, which makes it challenging to move around. Clothes scattered on the floor or displays in central areas can be dangerous and cause accidents. Thinking about layout and the needs of disabled customers in advance can allow an access route to be planned. Getting members of staff to continuously check for fallen items can avoid dangerous accidents occurring or damage to goods. Clear signage can also help disabled people to navigate their way around the shop.

“Very small things can make a very big difference to people with mobility impairments. A small step can be hugely prohibitive. A slightly lowered table can make a huge social difference.”

James Lee, London

“If a business is renovating, it is a good opportunity to review the current accessibility, but there can be regular opportunities to improve. The new Itsu near our office built in steps which didn’t exist before; they now have two dodgy looking portable ramps that make me feel unsafe and, when you finally get in, they only have high tables so I can’t actually eat there. They have completely disregarded or ignored a disabled customer base.”

Trailblazer, London

“In Topman, sometimes the racks are too close together, and counters are sometimes way too high or cramped. It shouldn’t be a Top Gear style precision driving challenge to get from one side of a shop to the other.”

Fleur Perry, Wiltshire

“My main issue is with seating in shopping centres and malls being backless so they are very difficult to get off of. Some shopping centres can have very tight lifts which would be very difficult for wheelchair users.”

Dave Gale, Carlisle

**Recommendations**

- Layouts need to be planned with the needs of disabled customers in mind.
- Shops need to provide enough space for customers to move around freely.
- Floorplans and access guides need to be provided where possible so people can plan their routes around the establishment.
- Choice of seating both high and low needs to be provided so people have a choice.
- Lowered payment points and lowered desks are needed.
- Inclusive access design for all, so everyone can enter and exit premises together.
- Staff to maintain clear gangways for all customers to shop confidently and safely.

A new restaurant with rows of high tables and fixed stools makes eating here impossible.

Trailblazer Anthony Price shows how restrictive narrow space can be.
Clare Goodridge
works as an Inclusive Design Officer in Strategic Planning and Regeneration at Islington Council in London. Trailblazers asked her some questions.

Q. Are there any governing bodies’ requirements, regulations or laws that design consultants must adhere to, when taking on a project?
A. In short, and in general, every new development (whether new build, extension or alteration) requires (a) planning permission and (b) Building Regulation approval.

To obtain planning permission the applicant must demonstrate that they meet national (the national planning policy framework NPPF), regional (the London Plan) and local development policies. Building Regulations are national (Part M requires that premises are accessible) and a series of approved documents set out the ways in which the regulations can be satisfied. Where buildings are listed or works are proposed in conservation areas, there will be additional considerations.

Q. Have you ever suggested ramps, disabled toilets or accessible changing rooms to clients of yours?
A. Part of my job is to develop sensible policies and to produce guidance that will enable designers to satisfy those policies. The other part is to advise developers and designers by phone, by email or in person, looking at their proposals and working with them to find more inclusive solutions. We consider every aspect of the proposal from the user-perspective, following a sequential journey: travel and transport, approach, entrance, circulation, functional spaces, sanitary facilities and fire evacuation.

Q. In your opinion is it viable and cost effective to make shops more integrated for customers with mobility impairments or who use wheelchairs?
A. Sometimes it is technically very difficult or impossible to make existing premises accessible but where changes can be made the business advantages are clear. Service providers gain the custom of older and disabled people, children and families, they also win over their friends and colleagues … there are clear financial and reputational rewards.

Q. What do you think could be done to make design consultants and agencies more aware of the need to include wheelchair accessibility in their design or renovation plans?
A. Local authorities should be:
- placing inclusive design at the heart of their planning policies
- employing inclusive design professionals to advise applicants, and
- engaging with groups of diverse users in the development and implementation of their planning policies.

Architectural colleges and professional bodies should similarly place Inclusive Design at the heart of their design philosophy (as synonymous with good design), and where designers do not have the expertise in-house, they should recruit specialist advisors.

Q. What does a high street shop need to do to ensure it has access? Are there any building regulations to ensure minimum access for new and existing leases?
A. Shopkeepers do have a duty to make reasonable adjustments where there are physical features that obstruct access to their services. However, the Equalities Act is civil law and as such there is no enforcement agency. In effect, an existing shop need do nothing, unless successfully challenged by a disabled person under the terms of the Act.

If the shopkeeper wants to make some sort of change, s/he is likely to require planning permission and Building Regulation approval, at which point (depending on the authority in question) s/he should be encouraged to improve the accessibility of the premises. That said, local authorities do have a public sector duty under the Equalities Act and so should be more proactive, encouraging service providers to make a change.

Q. Is it true that if there is level access into a café or restaurant then there must be a disabled toilet?
A. This is not true. The provision of level access and an accessible toilet should be expected in the case of new developments. In relation to existing buildings, provision will depend upon the attitude of the café owner, site conditions and the council's determination.

Clare’s top tips
1. Listen to your customers.
2. Sign yourself and your staff up for some disability equality training.
3. Conduct a quick audit of your premises, following the customer journey.
4. Check your observations against national standards, e.g. ramp gradients, width of corridors, counter heights and door weights.
5. Address any barrier identified according to the journey sequence – where there is no physical alteration that can be made then consider in what other ways your service could be delivered.
Equipment

High street establishments have the option to install equipment to make their premises more accessible. Accessible toilets, ramps, lifts and changing rooms are all practical examples of making a service more inclusive. It is easier to get around, and can open up business to many more people. Providing access to all parts of an establishment should not be seen as a novelty or a goodwill gesture; disabled people have the right to access all parts of a building.

Installing such equipment should be a given as it demonstrates how accessibility has been considered and disabled customers valued. However, it is vital that the equipment is checked and fixed as soon as possible if a fault is found. Our research shows that 66 percent of respondents have been unable to access part of a facility owing to faulty equipment, e.g. lifts.

If a lift is broken, there are reasonable short-term solutions that can be put in place until normal service resumes. Staff can offer to bring down items, however if this is used as a long-term reasonable adjustment – it’s absurd and really impractical. I can’t know what I want until I see it, and it’s hardly the same experience as anyone else has.”

Trailblazer, London

"Frequently in central London, stairlifts can be broken. Even in Westfield, lifts inside shops often break down. Occasionally, the staff members are completely unaware of the state of their equipment until I have to use it.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

"The lift was broken in Debenhams – staff apologised and offered help to bring things down to me." 

Jagdeep Kaur Sehmbi, Birmingham

"Very often I find that lifts are broken. And sometimes they are way too small for my average-sized wheelchair and PA/friend." 

Gemma Orton, Norwich

"Sometimes shopping centres have lifts, but they are not really big enough and they are always full on weekends. I completely understand if people are older, have young children or even lots of shopping, but they are full of people who don't need them! The escalators are electric; you don't even have to walk up them! "

Trailblazer, London

66 percent have been unable to access part of a facility owing to faulty equipment, e.g. lifts.
Changing rooms

Accessible changing rooms are often larger than non-disabled changing rooms. They offer more room to move around and sometimes have chairs, full-length mirrors and handrails. Trying on clothes before you buy is often necessary before an expensive purchase. Fifty percent of Trailblazers surveyed found that few or no shops they visited had accessible changing rooms.

But what is somewhat more surprising is to find that when a business has invested in installing an accessible changing room, they are often misused by members of staff. Eighty-five percent of respondents have seen disabled changing rooms, lifts or disabled toilets being misused.

“We have come across several high street shops where the disabled changing rooms are being used as storage rooms: Zara in Covent Garden, Next at the Bury St. Edmunds complex, Next and Forever 21 on Oxford Street. Next staff just said sorry and that it’s the manager’s decision.”

Laura Bizzey, East Anglia

“I think it is the Council’s duty to provide comfortable clean and accessible disabled toilets. My local council removed most of its public toilets, including the well-used facility in my home town. It is difficult for the shops to provide loos, so ASDA and the Health Centre remain the only accessible facility for both able and disabled and I don’t feel it is their job to provide the public with this facility.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

Toilets

Disabled toilets are essential for disabled people when out and about in town. These toilets are often more spacious than other facilities and have space for a wheelchair if required. They have handlebars and call alert systems in place to facilitate use.

When investment has been made in creating a disabled toilet, they need to be free to use, however, Trailblazers were shocked to find many disabled toilets being misused as storage cupboards while some found them inadequate for their needs.

“I have been to a number of changing rooms in town and have found them adequate but sometimes the changing rooms are just not big enough for my carers and me. There is no assistive equipment and hoists are not available.”

Fleur Perry, Wiltshire

Disabled toilets are perhaps the most misused. Fortunately most are secured with RADAR keys but there is the occasional instance where you will come across one that hasn’t been locked securely and all the horrendous havoc of the wider world has been let loose within.”

James Lee, London

There is often not enough space in a ‘regular’ disabled toilet for a wheelchair user and their PA. And why is it that a lot of cafés and restaurants seem to use their accessible toilet as a storage cupboard, containing mops, chairs and even a Hoover?”

Gemma Orton, Norwich

Despite the accessible changing rooms being a bit bigger, it’s usually quite tricky in there as there’s usually not much room for my carer. I always take clothes home to try on. I feel much more comfortable doing this. The changing rooms are very small and I have never seen a hoist or an assistive bed in them. I tend to take clothes home to try on and return if necessary.”

Fleur Perry, Wiltshire
Changing Places toilets

Current regulations for what is deemed an ‘accessible toilet’ may not be fit for purpose for many disabled people.

“The Changing Places Consortium has launched its campaign on behalf of those people who cannot use standard accessible toilets. This includes people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and their carers, as well as many other disabled people. “They need Changing Places toilets with enough space and the right equipment, including a height adjustable changing bench and a hoist.

“Without these facilities, families have to change the person they care for on a cramped and dirty toilet floor. The alternative is to limit outings to a few short hours – or to not go out at all.”

w: changingplaces.org

Every Trailblazer surveyed believed there needs to be more Changing Places toilets. When asked whether town centres should invest in more, Trailblazers offered their opinions.

“I am unable to weight-bear at all, so need a changing table and hoist to be able to use the bathroom safely and with dignity. Otherwise I have to wait until I go home, which often means I have to cut short my trip out.”

Catherine Alexander, Wirral

“Please make this happen. It means that I can do things that most 26-year-olds do. Also it’s good for the economy as if people are out for longer, they could spend more and they’ll be with other people who too will spend more.”

Rupy Kaur, Sale

“This would make going out a lot easier and allow me to stay out for longer without worrying about when I will need to use the toilet and just have the chance to enjoy myself.”

Matilda Ibini, London

“I cannot use any other type of toilet. The only CP toilets in Northern Ireland are in public office buildings or universities. This is a HUGE PROBLEM!”

Michaela Hollywood, Northern Ireland

RADAR

The RADAR National Key Service (NKS) offers disabled people independent access to disabled toilets across the United Kingdom.

The key can be purchased for a small fee, and toilets can be found in cafés, bars, restaurants, shopping centres and department stores and stations across the UK.

w: www.radar-shop.org.uk/Detail.aspx?id=45

Recommendations

- Investment in equipment such as lifts, toilets and changing rooms to enable equal access to facilities.
- Regular maintenance of equipment to ensure it is in full working order. Zero tolerance of equipment or facilities being misused by members of staff or the public.
- Clear ways for disabled customers to complain or notify when there has been misuse of equipment.
- More Changing Places toilets in town centres to enable disabled people to enjoy their town centres like non-disabled friends and family members.
- Larger disabled toilets.
In my experience...

Trailblazer Dave Gale, from Carlisle, shares his experiences of shopping

I am a fan of going to towns and shopping centres and have been to numerous up and down the country. From Aberdeen to London I have visited shopping areas and I have noticed a number of issues, the first of which is seating in town centres and shopping centres.

A lot of new designs have backless seats, which make it difficult for me to get myself off a seat if I choose to sit down. The problem occurs due to needing something to hold on to propel myself off a seat. They are also usually placed in the middle of a walkway, which means there are also no walls to use to help myself up either. Obviously, during a busy day shopping it would be nice to sit down and have a breather from time to time.

Access in and around shops is the next issue I will highlight. There are still plenty of shops on the high street which have a very steep step to negotiate to enter the premises. This makes it difficult for me to enter shops but for wheelchair users it makes it pretty much impossible. Then you have escalators that move too quickly, this makes it very stressful to go on to different floors within a shop. One of the main things that annoys me is that unisex shops nearly always have the men’s clothes on the higher level. This isn’t difficult if the shop has lifts or escalators, but if the only option is stairs I will more than likely not even bother going up to menswear. It’s not a problem in a shopping centre because you can usually access the upper floor when you go up a level in a lift. But in a high street this is not an option so this not only makes the shops inaccessible for male disabled people, but it’s also sexist.

The layout of shops is another issue; an example of this is a shop like Sports Direct, which usually has no room to swing a cat in because it’s rammed with too much stock, which makes it difficult to move around in, and I bet there isn’t much room for wheelchair users to negotiate these shops. Then we have Primark, which is fine on a weekday but go at a weekend and it’s like the apocalypse has happened. I remember going to the one in Leeds on a Saturday and it was like a bomb had gone off. Clothes and shoes scattered everywhere, which made it an accident waiting to happen for me, plus if I got in the way of someone wanting some shoes I’m sure I would have been walked over.

“One of the main things that annoys me is that unisex shops nearly always have the men’s clothes on the higher level.”
Q. We are currently in the process of doing a campaign on access to the high street and shops. What provisions do the Intu group put on shopping centres and the shops relating to disabled access?

A. Everyone at Intu takes all aspects of disability access and care very seriously. We wish disabled people to feel comfortable and welcome at our centres. Our Health and Safety Policy includes the following specific reference:

Disability Discrimination
Intu endeavours to ensure that disabled persons are not discriminated against. Intu has carried out an access audit for all properties, by an independent specialist advisor. An action plan was drawn up to implement the audit findings.

This included steps to:
- remove physical barriers as far as was practicable
- alter them so they are no longer a problem
- find a way of avoidance
- provide services by another reasonable means.

Intu recognises that this was not a ‘one-off’ project to achieve compliance. Compliance is a continuing duty year-on-year, which will take into account that expectations will continue to rise and what is considered ‘unreasonable’ today may not be seen as such in the future.

Q. What do you do in relation to disabled customers? I have visited the sites at Braehead, Trafford Centre, Arndale, Eldon Square and the Metro centre numerous times. The centres I have found on the whole to be accessible but some of the shops within the premises still have some issues.

A. Our Policy is delivered in an ongoing and very practical way and is given extra momentum by regular, externally-provided, Access Reviews carried out from the users’ perspective. These reviews are thorough and our centre teams pick up on action points highlighted. Further, all our directly-managed and three joint venture shopping centres offer access to Shopmobility or equivalent as a minimum. As all the centres’ websites demonstrate, we see a Shopmobility offer as just one way in which we can welcome disabled customers to our centres. A number of our centres have specifically sought to work, as part of their community outreach, with organisations helping disabled people access their wider community. The work carried out by Intu Metrocentre with the Percy Hedley Foundation and the partnership between Intu Bromley and Bromley Mencap are just two award-winning examples.

Q. What regulations, related to disability, need to be met when someone takes up a shop in your centres?

A. As responsible landlord’s we (and our technical advisors) seek to comply with all relevant legislation, BREEAM, Equality Act 2010 (previously DDA), Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, CDM, Fire Precautions etc as we handle projects across our centres for common areas. We apply the same principles and standards to shopfit applications and general tenant alterations brought to our attention. Our standard leases each contain a clause which obliges the tenant to comply with all prevailing statutes. Should any breaches come to our attention, we would advise the tenant, but ultimately the HSE has the power to enforce action. Older centres will have old shop fittings which may not meet the DDA’s requirements. While, as I have noted, there is in general a provision in most modern leases to redecorate and always a requirement to comply with statute, it is the tenant’s responsibility to meet these requirements.

We have conducted a number of exercises over the years identifying shopfronts/shopfits that are in need of some attention and upgrading and encouraged the responsible tenants to refurbish. However, ultimately we cannot force the retailer’s hand. Despite the responsibility laid on individual retailers to own these issues, Intu is further encouraging best practice by commissioning new Retail Design Guides (RDGs). The Guides will include a new section on INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS, noting that every application for new shopfronts or new shopfits will be expected to include an Access Statement to address all the requirements for accessibility. Our consultants always encourage retailers to go beyond the statutory minimum, particularly in relation to access doorways. It is hoped to have completed the new RDGs by the end of this year.
Parking

Disabled parking is an important aspect of being able to access your local high street. Customer drop-off points can be useful; however this is not so useful when a disabled driver needs to park. Accessible parking close to your destination can make all the difference to the quality of your high street experience.

The Blue Badge Scheme provides a national arrangement of on-street parking concessions, enabling people with severe walking difficulties who travel either as drivers or passengers, to park close to their destination. However, Trailblazers have continuously found Blue Badge spaces being misused or there are not enough spaces to meet the demand.

More recently, local councils have started charging for parking when it used to be free, and this can be a challenge for disabled shoppers who heavily rely on their cars as public transport is inaccessible for their needs.

Trailblazers surveyed found that over a third of respondents said their high street did not have adequate disabled parking in and around the town centre.

**Recommendations**

- Monitoring the use of Blue Badge parking bays, as they may not be used if the assigned Blue Badge holder is not present.
- Enforcing sanctions and penalties if Blue Badge parking bays are being misused.
- Clear directions to disabled bays in and around town centres so that they are more easily identified.
- Increased number of Blue Badge spaces.

“Disabled parking spaces should be made more widely known – I’ve had to resort to Google Map Street View to find out where the spaces are!”
Mathy Selvakumaran, Worksop

“Most of the time, there is good disabled parking available in and around Redbridge.”
Romla Kadir, London

“Where the area is generally accessible, they usually do have disabled parking. Sometimes there are only one or two spaces so it can feel like luck if you do find a space.”
Matilda Ibini, London

“Disabled spaces are few and far between in Plymouth. They’re often filled with non-disabled people who see me but still park there anyway. Disabled parking is also not as close to the destinations as it should be.”
Virginia Butcher, Devon

“It’s limited on main street parking with only two disabled spaces. It is a busy main street and very difficult to park as it is impossible to get the wheelchair out on the roadside and just your luck if you can safely cross lanes to park with the driver’s door on the kerbside.”
Trailblazer, Inverness
Staff attitude

Good customer service and staff understanding a customer’s needs is an important part of an experience of the high street. A positive attitude and some basic training can make a huge difference for customers when they are considering a purchase or considering visiting an establishment again.

If a shop doesn’t have the resources to make an environment completely accessible, the right staff attitude can minimise physical accessibility issues by offering to assist where necessary. The law protects disabled people from service providers treating disabled people less favourably than any other customers, but it also makes good business sense to offer a friendly, welcoming service regardless of disability.

Trailblazers were shocked with the findings relating to staff attitudes and customer service. Forty-seven percent of survey respondents said staff attitude and lack of awareness had discouraged them from revisiting certain establishments.

“I was refused entrance to a restaurant in Northern Ireland. The restaurant’s floor plan made it difficult for me to get to a table. The waiter at first tried to get us to wait but after a while he just came back to us and said there was nothing he could do. He said he didn’t want to disrupt already seated customers.

There’s a café I go to regularly because of the great service. Any time I visit I’m always asked whether or not I would like to sit at a round or square table. This kind of courtesy keeps me coming back. I think it’s important for staff to be well-trained in better engaging with customers with physical needs and should feel confident enough to ask customers what they need or where they would like help, as it is not always easy asking for help. Word of good practice spreads quickly.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

“I am much more likely to return to an establishment that doesn’t have perfect physical access if the staff are flexible, accommodating and aware.”

Carrie-Ann Lightley, Cumbria

“Sometimes I visit restaurants and it seems they want me out of the way. They think they are helping by offering a table in the entrance or in the corner, so it’s easy to get to. But all I want is to enjoy the atmosphere and have a romantic meal out with my husband. I think they may panic, it may not be intentional.”

Trailblazer, London

“Staff have not had a plausible excuse when explaining to me why they have no facilities and access.”

Dean Yorke, Maidenhead

“There was a restaurant I wanted to go to, but staff were unsure of my access needs and did not make me feel welcome so I left.”

Damian Brady, Wirral

Recommendations

- Treating disabled customers in a friendly, polite and dignified manner.
- Providing disability equality training for staff to improve understanding.
- Asking disability equality questions during recruitment to identify champions.
- Speaking with disabled customers for feedback and listening to complaints or compliments.
- Encouraging feedback from customers based on their experiences via feedback cards or social media.

47 percent said staff attitude had discouraged them from revisiting certain establishments
Online information

Up-to-date, relevant online information is vital when planning or deciding where to go. Service providers often have websites, which include information on opening times, photo galleries and offers. Including information on access is really helpful and does not have a high cost associated with it. Providing an ‘access statement’ makes sense as it would allow disabled people to make informed choices on where to go.

Seventy percent of Trailblazers surveyed felt that facilities didn’t have adequate online information about access.

Recommendations

- Providing clear, accurate and simple information that can be easily found on a service provider’s website, for example such information can be on the ‘Contact details’ page, or ‘Find your nearest branch’ page.
- Providing a key of symbols on websites to illustrate the kind of access that shops/branches have.
- Updating access information regularly, which also forewarns of any disruptions or equipment repairs being undertaken at particular stores.
- Asking more websites like squaremeal and tastecard for access related information when restaurants register.
- Asking web designers to consider accessibility when creating and updating websites.

“Every physical business that has regular customers visiting should have an access statement online.”
Carrie-Ann Lightley, Cumbria

“It would not be difficult for all places to have disabled facilities listed on their websites.”
Dean Yorke, Maidenhead

“70 percent felt that facilities didn’t have adequate online information about access.”

“Im a professional software engineer of many years experience, I know my way around the net, yet I regularly struggle when trying to find access information. Often for a major event it is there, but far from easily accessible.”
David Gillon, Medway

“It varies enormously; some tell you everything you need to know and more; some tell you very little.”
Fleur Perry, Wiltshire
Technology

In some ways, technology and innovation have opened up more avenues for disabled people to lead more active lives by breaking down past barriers and creating a sense of control.

Wireless payment, online shopping and social media have levelled the playing field for some disabled consumers and allow information transactions to flow more easily.

However, Trailblazers found that with some technological advancements, innovators hadn’t necessarily considered a disabled customer base.

Seventy-five percent of Trailblazers surveyed said they thought technology had made life easier and actually improved access for disabled people.

75 percent said they thought technology had made life easier and actually improved access for disabled people

“Reaching card machines can be difficult, as often they are not low enough for me to type in my PIN number without other people seeing, which is a security concern.”

Josh Langley, Surrey

“I feel a lot of businesses aren’t using social media enough, it's free to set up profiles on most types of social media and it actively encourages self-promotion, there are far more benefits for businesses especially for them to be able to reach and engage with more customers.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

“Online shopping greatly helps. Social networking can be a useful alternative if adequate accessibility information isn’t available. Self check-outs assume you are physically able to use them, which isn’t necessarily the case!”

David Gillon, Kent

“Social media allows you to bring any problems to the attention of businesses, without having the confrontation which happens in shops. The shop assistants may not be able to take action anyway. Also, if others can see problems online, they are far more likely to feel embarrassed and act quickly.”

Trailblazer, London

Chip and PIN machines often don’t detach, so I show the world my PIN or yank out the connection! Businesses should always have one machine which is portable or detachable. And now that I have a wireless payment card it’s going to make my life so much easier.”

Trailblazer, London

Recommendations

- Investing time in social media as a way of engaging more directly with customers.
- Lowering self-service checkout points to enable access for disabled people and someone always at hand to provide assistance if necessary.
- Investment in solid portable ramps.
- Active engagement between businesses and disabled accessibility websites for better promotion of accessibility.
- Clear access maps online so people can plan ahead.
- Genuine consultation with disabled customers and disability groups like Trailblazers.
Shopping online is convenient for most and enables people to shop from the comfort of their home. Disabled people should have the freedom to choose whether or not to shop online, as opposed to feeling dependent on it because of lack of physical access or negative attitudes. We were disappointed to find that 40 percent of Trailblazers surveyed felt forced or limited to shopping online owing to a lack of physical access in and around their town centre.

“I think there are two issues. One is the physical shopping environment just being too large for me to cover with limited energy because of my disability. The second is venues I know that have products which interest me, but I am physically constrained by their internal layout – generally because of steps, or entire flights of stairs.”

David Gillon, Kent

“Getting around my town centre can be really tiring so there are benefits to shopping online. If there is a shop I would like to go to but can’t because of their access, I usually check online to see if they have a website or an online store. There are benefits to shopping online, as it’s generally less time consuming and you don’t need to exert as much energy as you would going out. However the downside to shopping online is not being able to try on clothes or feel the material on your skin. For example I am wary when I buy things online like headphones, as I can’t try them on until they arrive and if they don’t fit comfortably on my head, I’ll have to return them which too takes time and sometimes money. So online shopping is great in some ways and not in others.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

“Though I prefer to order online and pick up instore, I do feel forced in the sense that I can’t try clothes on instore.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“Sometimes I feel I benefit from being able to shop online as it saves time and energy instead of having to go out. For shoes or face products I tend to want to go in person to see for myself the products, especially as you can’t always trust what you see online.”

Matilda Ibini, London
Hints, tips and helpful technology

Trailblazers’ ideas for improving access to the high streets include a combination of more consultation and feedback, more local authority regulation, which requires access information, and an increase in the provision of loaning mobility equipment short-term, for example by extending the Shopmobility scheme.

Trailblazers’ top tips to getting the most out of your high street

- Google maps have proven helpful in checking street parking and sometimes, where possible, external access to shops, restaurants, or cafés.
- Some banks offer PIN-less debit cards that are easier to use and just require a swipe during transaction and your signature as authorisation. Ask your bank if this is an option as this card is not available in all banks and building societies.
- Some supermarkets have trolley scooters for those with mobility impairments, where you can sit in a scooter with a trolley attached to it, to place your groceries in.
- Another option of online shopping in some supermarkets is you can shop for your groceries online and collect your groceries instore; you simply arrange a suitable day to pick it up. If you inform them about your mobility issues, most supermarkets are more than happy to place your groceries into the boot of your car for you. The advantages are that you save money on delivery costs and if there is a substitution you are not happy with, you are able to get a refund then and there.
- Shopmobility is also a useful scheme, where you can borrow a wheelchair or scooter to use in and around your local high street, mall or sometimes even town centre. Some schemes are free while others may charge a small fee. Have a look at their website to find the scheme nearest to you.

“Regulation is the most important factor for physical access problems. The United States should be a model for this, because this regulation has been strictly enforced (with heavy fines and penalties particularly for larger chains) for decades there now, which means every new business factors it in and the old ones must adapt. If there was a way to raise awareness among staff to make them aware and considerate of the needs of disabled customers, this would be very valuable. No disabled person wants extra special treatment, but merely the ability to have equal access and be treated fairly.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“I think there should be more effort from authorities to help businesses make improvements in access.”


“I think the major thing that could be done is to make it a council responsibility to actively enforce access provision. We’ve had DDA/EA since 1995; that’s 18 years, and it’s been going on for generations. It’s about time we started enforcing access, and not simply hoping people will change.”

David Gillon, Medway

“Places that have steps need to be ramped and all shops, retail outlets and restaurants need to organise their layout so a wheelchair user can move around easily.”

Trailblazer, Northern Ireland
Useful links

ABLEIZE Disability and Mobility Directory
www.ableize.com
ABLEize is the biggest UK disability resource directory offering the largest collection of disability, mobility and health resources in the UK and Europe.

British Chamber of Commerce
www.britishchambers.org.uk
Network of accredited businesses across the UK.

Ceiling Hoist Users Club
www.chuc.org.uk
Lists and reviews hotels which provide ceiling track hoists.

Cinema Exhibitors Association
www.ceacard.co.uk
Information about the CEA cinema discount card.

Citizens Advice
www.adviceguide.org.uk/consumer_e
Consumer Rights

Changing Places
www.changing-places.org/
Changing Places toilets are different from standard disabled toilets with extra features and more space. Providing these toilets in public places would make a dramatic difference to the lives of thousands of people who need these facilities.

Direct Enquiries
www.directenquiries.com
Provides nationwide resources for disabled people.

DisabledGo
www.disabledgo.com
Lists accessible entertainment and retail facilities around the UK.

Disability Rights UK
disabilityrightsuk.org
Organisation that represents and supports the rights of disabled people.

Federation of Small Businesses
www.fsb.org.uk
A business organisation that represents industry.

Find your Assembly Member
www.assemblywales.org/memhome/member-search.htm
If you live in Wales, search here.

Find your MLA
www.niassembly.gov.uk/members/constmap_res.htm
If you live in Northern Ireland, search here.

Find your MP
www.findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons

Find your MSP
www.scottish.parliament.uk/apps2/msp/msphome/default.aspx
If you live in Scotland, search here.

National Federation of Shopmobility
www.shopmobilityuk.org
Provides information on the scheme UK-wide.

Northern Ireland’s consumer advice website
www.consumerline.org

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission
www.equalityhumanrights.com
The home of campaigning for equality in the UK.

Tourism for All
www.tourismforall.org.uk
A national charity.

The Institute of Customer Service
www.instituteofcustomerservice.com/1849-6440/
Gathering-customer-feedback-offline-and-through-social-media.html Details five ways in which you can gather important customer information.

The Centre for Accessible Environments
www.cae.org.uk
The Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) is the UK’s leading authority on inclusive design. We aim to help secure a built environment that is usable by everyone, including disabled and older people.

UK Government
www.gov.uk
The website to find government services and information. This website replaces the DirectGov website.
Get involved

Take action, campaign, learn skills, make friends. Interested in becoming a Trailblazer? We always welcome people to join our thriving campaigning community.

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w:  www.muscular-dystrophy.org/trailblazers

Thank you for your support