IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS AMONG FOREST MANAGERS OF ACCESSIBILITY TO SCOTTISH FORESTS BY DISABLED PEOPLE

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Background: the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act

• The purpose is to establish equality between those who are and are not disabled, and to ensure that … no-one should be disadvantaged in carrying out their normal everyday activities by reason of their disabilities.

• The aim of the law is also to end the discrimination which many disabled people face, by establishing their rights in the areas of:
  – **Access to goods, facilities, services and premises**
  – Employment
  – Buying or renting land or property
  – Membership of trade or professional institutions
  – At school
  – In post-16 education
Objectives

• To undertake qualitative and quantitative research with forest recreation managers in order to assess their knowledge and skills in relation to the provision of access to forests for disabled people.
Objectives

- To develop a suite of information and training materials to help them improve their knowledge.
- This research was undertaken to find out what forest managers knew, did not know and needed to know.
Methods

• A scoping meeting with key figures from the forestry sector was followed by three forums with forest owners, managers and recreation managers around Scotland.

• Together these formed the qualitative element.
Methods

• This was followed by a questionnaire to a larger sample group where some quantitative analysis was possible in order to assess the magnitude of the issues raised in the forums.
Findings of the forums

• There is confusion about the meanings of terms often used in the field by different people: disabled access, all-ability access, inclusive access.

• It is impractical to make everywhere equally accessible. Disabled users wanted the same nature and quality of the forest experience as other users and that this might be compromised with extensive modification to sites.
Findings of the forums

• It is clear that most people focus on the physical accessibility of trails, especially surfacing and gradients, to make them wheelchair accessible.

• Few managers had given thought to the information available for the recreation facility or service and the concept that disabled people could use this to decide for themselves whether somewhere was worth visiting.
Findings of the forums

• The level of awareness and knowledge of the DDA appears to be quite low, especially among owners and managers of private estates.

• Few people apart from access officers, recreation managers and others with a specific recreation responsibility had been involved in trying to apply the requirements of the DDA.
Findings of the forums

• Access auditing can be a helpful but complex and time consuming process.
• The main barriers to providing access to forests were seen as:
  – resources – both money and people
  – physical limitations of sites – topography, slopes etc
  – lack of information for potential visitors
  – lack of resources to maintain access
  – lack of public transport to get to places
Questionnaire survey

• The content of the questionnaire was developed directly from the findings of the forums. The issues raised by those concerned in the subject were reflected in the rest of the research.

• The questionnaire was designed to be filled in on-line. The respondents were selected from lists of people supplied by each FC area in Scotland.
Who responded?

58 out of 258 invited to participate!
Fig. 3 "It is better to concentrate resources for developing access where there is a proven demand"
Fig. 4 "Everywhere in the forest should be equally accessible to everyone regardless of ability or disability"
Fig. 5 "It is more important to provide information about how accessible a forest or woodland is than to spend money on paths"
Fig. 6 "It is preferable to focus on the development of key trails for disabled people"
Fig. 7 Level of awareness/knowledge of DDA

- I have never heard of it
- I have heard it but not know nothing about it
- I am generally aware of its requirements
- I know it quite well
- I am very familiar with it
Figure 9. Main obstacles facing landowners in providing equal opportunities for disabled access in forests.
Fig. 10 Preferred topics for training in requirements of DDA legislation
Fig. 8 Degree of implementation of DDA requirements in relation to recreational access to forests

- Not started
- Started but limited progress
- Considerable effort but implementation difficult
- Audits/access improved pending resources
Conclusions

• Understanding of the terminology surrounding accessibility is poor and confusing. It needs to be clarified and simplified, especially if more information is to be provided.

• Respondents generally prefer to see limited access to parts of the forest where there is a demand rather than trying to make all places accessible or putting in access where there is no obvious demand.
Conclusions

• The obstacles to providing access are seen as financial and staff resources, and the physical limitations to the land. The extent to which these are real barriers should be explored and guidance provided to overcome them.

• Three main points recurred during analysis of the survey: the focus on making areas accessible; the lack of awareness of the importance of information; and the accessibility of many places without the need to lay out paths suitable for wheelchairs.