

Exploring disabled people's perceptions and use of  
forest recreation goods, facilities and services in  
Scotland, England and Wales

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The views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of Forest Research.

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<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page no.</b>
<b>Executive summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2. Methods</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>3. Literature review</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>4. Research findings</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>5. Conclusion and recommendations</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>75</b>

# **Exploring disabled people's perceptions and use of forest recreation goods, facilities and services in Scotland, England and Wales**

## **Executive summary**

### **Background**

Research would suggest that disabled people are one group of people who are currently not attempting to access woodland areas managed by the Forestry Commission (Openspace, 2003). This study seeks to determine the reasons for disabled people's low participation in this leisure activity. Working from the social model of disability, the research sought to identify the physical, social, cultural and attitudinal barriers encountered by disabled people in their attempts to access the outdoors.

### **Aims**

The over-arching aims of this study were to:

1. Explore disabled peoples' attitudes, perceptions and experiences of woodlands and how they affect use of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services.
2. Explore disabled peoples' physical, information and emotional needs and expectations in relation to woodland, and make recommendations on the ways in which woodland recreation goods, facilities and services can be made more accessible to disabled people.
3. Explore processes of communication and engagement with disabled people and make recommendations about how they can be applied to the planning and provision of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services. This study seeks to determine the reasons for disabled people's low participation in this leisure activity.

### **Methods**

- A range of methods were employed throughout the course of the research including literature search, telephone interviews with representatives of a range of disability and countryside organisations and focus groups with disabled people.
- Site visits to a range of woodland locations throughout England, Scotland and Wales with disabled people were organised as a means of capturing a range and diversity of experience with regard to location, group and country. These site visits were carried out in the summer and Autumn of 2007.

## Findings

- During site visits, participants used terms such as wood, forest and countryside interchangeably throughout discussions. Participants had a positive view of the countryside, echoing earlier findings of the Diversity Review.
- Disabled people value woodlands and wish to have access to them.
- Similar to their non-disabled counterparts, disabled people view woodlands and the countryside more generally as having a number of beneficial aspects in terms of personal identity, social inclusion and feelings of health and wellbeing. Further, they use woodlands and the countryside in a variety of ways being both a place to get away from other people and also to be enjoyed in the company of other people.
- Confidence and self-belief in one's ability to manage a rural setting is a crucial factor in determining an individual's comfort in the countryside. Confidence can be enhanced or degraded through the provision or absence of appropriate or inappropriate services and facilities.
- The majority of barriers to accessing woodland and forested services were not related to the individual's impairments, but rather to external factors which could be effectively addressed. These included physical access, access to information, travel to and from the sites and the provision appropriate services and amenities.
- There is a tendency to view access requirements as being limited to people with a physical impairment and the access needs of other impairment groups are often unrecognised.
- Dominant understandings of disabled people as 'unable', unwell and 'incapable' are informing the development of access policies and practices for disabled people.
- Policy towards disabled people is often dominated by concerns around health and safety. This not only limits disabled people's options to experience the outdoors in a variety of ways but it also threatens people's confidence in their own abilities.
- Disabled people are able to assess risks and make decisions about what they can and cannot do. Like non-disabled people, some are risk takers and others are risk averse.
- Accessibility issues are not woven into the culture and practices of many organisations and policy is not routinely disability proofed. Rather, it is an added extra which is imposed on top of other activities.
- Where organisations have engendered a change this has involved training of staff at all levels of the organisation and engagement with disability organisations at the local as well as national level.
- There was poor availability of information in a variety of formats on a range of issues including access, transport links and amenities. People with a learning disability and those with a sensory impairment were particularly badly served.
- Pre-planning is important for disabled people. Lack of relevant, accessible and easily obtainable information may dissuade disabled people from embarking on a visit to woodlands and forest sites.

- Transport to and from sites and within sites was raised as an important barrier to accessing the countryside.
- The lack of finance presents a major barrier to disabled people's participation and access to the countryside. Accessing the outdoors costs money: for transport, equipment, appropriate clothing and footwear.

## **Recommendations**

### *Training*

- Staff training on disability issues is already fairly well established. However, despite a number of forest staff receiving at least some disability awareness training, all welcomed the opportunity for additional training. Many had received training some years ago and felt that they would benefit from 'refresher' courses. Ideally, such courses should be provided by organisations of disabled people within the locality. By doing so, outdoor providers will foster links with local groups, thus assisting in the requirements of the DED. The nature of the training should be tailored to the needs of staff throughout the organisation and should include all staff.
- Disability equality training should be devised, developed and delivered by disabled people with appropriate training skills, experience or qualifications. It should take account of local issues and courses should be developed in collaboration with local disabled people.
- The Forestry Commission and similar bodies should be approached to provide resources and support to disabled trainers and disability-led training providers in the development and marketing of responsive and flexible training solutions targeted specifically at countryside issues.
- Training should model and promote anti-discriminatory practice. It should promote the Social Model of Disability by emphasising disability as a social construct and raise consciousness of the impact of (negative and positive) language used in everyday settings.

### *Information*

- There is a need to examine the information produced for disabled people and radically rethink how that information is developed and targeted. The amount of planning required by disabled people to organise their leisure time given the barriers faced by them means that they are dependent on good, reliable information to enable them to safely enjoy the countryside. There are numerous projects and schemes available to assist woodland managers to provide accessible information and they should be made aware of these. The content of information should include information on physically accessible trails; sensory trails; accessible toilets; accessible shops café; details of ranger led walk.
- The type of advice and information required varies by impairment group. The Forestry Commission should work with organisations of and for disabled people to establish what it is that each group requires and the appropriate forms of communication. For example, information

sheets prepared for people with a learning disability should be prepared in collaboration with the target audience.

- Working with organisations of and for disabled people, the Forestry Commission should seek to establish a universal system for access guides, developing standards. This should involve not just disabled people but other managers of rural land managers such as the National Trust.
- A central database on access guides should be established.

#### *Barrier removal*

- The Forestry Commission should carry out access audits at all its sites. It must include audits of barriers faced by all disabled people.
- Action on the barriers identified in the above audits should be prioritised with local organisations of and for disabled people.
- A budget should be established not just to remove barriers but also to maintain current provision.
- The Forestry Commission should look at transport issues not just within their sites but also to and from the site and see if they can develop links and partnerships with other local providers to improve this. Access to and from the site should also be audited in terms of safe road crossings etc.
- Health and safety should not be over emphasised. It is of course essential that disabled people should be safe when on Forestry Commission sites, but it should not be used as an excuse for denying access to the site or to activities in the site.
- However, the provision of information and the removal of barriers will not encourage disabled people to use the outdoors. As we have shown throughout the report, many disabled people do not have any experience of the countryside and therefore confidence in the outdoors and think it is not for them. Due to poor information provision, coupled with the barriers identified throughout the report, the problems may seem insurmountable for someone who is keen to get outdoors but is unsure how to go about this. The Forestry Commission should look at the possibility of establishing outreach work/ collaborative work between woodland staff and local disability organisations as one way of opening up the possibility of outdoor environments for disabled people.
- Disabled people want to enjoy the countryside in a variety of ways, and should be seen as a heterogeneous group with a diversity of interests. This involves allowing inclusion in as wide a range of events as possible rather than simply 'bolting on' one accessible walk/event for a group. Disability issues should be mainstreamed and all policies, events and programmed should be disability proofed.

## 1. Introduction

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and its subsequent amendments coupled with the establishment of the Disability Rights Commission in 2000 and more recently the Disability Equality Duty (2006) have radically altered the social experience of disabled people in the UK. They have helped symbolise the need and the urgency for tackling the discrimination experienced by disabled people and enhancing the life chances of disabled people but also have emphasised the need for positive steps to be taken to actively promote the participation of disabled people. Partly as a consequence of this legislation, but also, importantly, as a consequence of the actions of disabled people and their organisations, disabled people are demanding, and to some extent achieving greater inclusion in a range of fields, including leisure (DRC, 2003). The right to equality of access has now become a defining characteristic of contemporary society.

The Forestry Commission are, as this research shows, clearly engaged in tackling the issue of equality of access for a broad spectrum of people currently under represented in users of woodlands (Countryside Agency, 2004 CRN75). Research would suggest that disabled people are one group of people who are currently not attempting to access woodland areas managed by the Commission (Openspace, 2003). There are a number of potential reasons for this and while there is a possibility that this is the result of either informed choice or lack of awareness, the cause is more likely to be the result of other barriers to participation (Openspace, 2003).

This study seeks to determine the reasons for disabled people's low participation in this leisure activity. The work is broadly located within the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990) and explores and focuses on the barriers to participation experienced by disabled people. Put simply, the social model argues that the disadvantage experienced by disabled people is not the result of their impairment but is imposed by a society that is organised so as to exclude them. It argues that disabled people experience discrimination as a result of society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organisation.

This approach has been used successfully previously in a wide range of areas to explore the experiences of disabled people, including work by Tregaskis (2004a and b) with countryside staff to engage with the barriers faced by disabled people. In her work as an access officer Tregaskis used the social model as a way of moving beyond individual explanations for the disadvantage experienced by disabled people. It is important to recognise that these barriers are not solely physical, they are also social, cultural and attitudinal and can impact on access by people with a range of impairments including learning disabilities, sensory impairments and mental health problems.

A strength of the social model is its ability to allow an analysis of the structures which act to exclude disabled people. There is however a danger

that it ignores or downplays the very real differences that can exist between different groups of disabled people and can present disabled people as an homogenous group. We sought to ensure that this did not happen by adopting a research methodology that allowed for an exploration of how impairments impacted on people's interaction with access to Forestry Commission land. This research was grounded in the experiences of disabled people and focussed on disabled people's own views and perspectives.

There is currently much debate about how best to define disability and how to categorise who is and is not disabled (See for example Shakespeare, 2006). For the purposes of this research we adopted the definition enshrined in the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. In this Act a disabled person is defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

## **Research aims and objectives**

Following the research specification, the over-arching aims of this study were to:

1. Explore disabled peoples' attitudes, perceptions and experiences of woodlands and how they affect use of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services.
2. Explore disabled peoples' physical, information and emotional needs and expectations in relation to woodland, and make recommendations on the ways in which woodland recreation goods, facilities and services can be made more accessible to disabled people.
3. Explore processes of communication and engagement with disabled people and make recommendations about how they can be applied to the planning and provision of woodland recreation goods, facilities and services.

The empirical objectives were:

- To make recommendations on the ways in which woodland recreation, goods facilities and services can be made more accessible to disabled people and in so doing make the findings useful for forest managers in the public, private, community and NGO spheres across Scotland, England and Wales.
- To take into account the diverse nature of disability and seek to explore how issues vary between different groups of disabled people.
- To identify the barriers experienced by disabled people in accessing woodland recreation and the opportunities for promoting accessibility.

- To make recommendations on ways the Forestry Commission can effectively communicate and engage with disabled people in order to ensure effective planning and provision of woodland recreational, goods, facilities and services for disabled people.
- To establish the involvement of disabled people in ongoing development of the Forestry Commission's Disability Equality Action Plan and Equality Impact Assessment processes.

## **2. Methodology: an inclusive approach – breaking down potential barriers**

### **Introduction**

Central to this research project were the voices and experiences of disabled people. Following on from recent research with policy and guidance literature (see literature review, section 3), it was our intention to involve disabled people as active participants in the research process and we adopted a research methodology to allow this to happen. To this end we employed a range of methods including telephone interviews, site visits, participant observation and focus groups. We started from the principle that disabled people are their own experts on their own lives and through documenting their views and experiences and placing those at the centre of the research we were able to explore their own feelings and perceptions of woodland and identify the barriers they identified as being key to their use of woodland and forested places. We supplemented these views with those of forest rangers and other key informants.

This chapter details the methods employed throughout the research, ethics, recruitment and participation. The research was carried out in 2007.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was sought and gained from the Faculty Ethics Committee within the University of Glasgow. The project was conducted in accordance with the British Sociological Association Ethical Guidelines.

All research participants were provided with full information about the nature of the study and what taking part would involve. Informed consent was sought from all participants. Participants were told that they had the right to withdraw from the project at any time and without giving a reason.

### **Research methods**

The research consisted of two main phases detailed below.

#### *Phase 1: literature review and scoping exercise*

Before carrying out the empirical element of this research proposal we implemented a literature review of all the writing in this area. This allowed us to not only locate the research within what is already known, but also allowed us to design and compile our topic guides for subsequent interviews. In carrying out this literature review we adopted a methodological framework to

chart the data according to key themes which were used as guides for our later work.

The Review drew on international and national literature and included academic as well as policy documents, including both published and grey literature from statutory and independent sectors and other related organisations. We employed two main strategies for this literature review.

- a) Academic literature: We used a broad range of social research bodies, including SPRU, Norah Fry, JRF and Regard and a range of web based search engines such as ASSIA, WoS, Geobase and CINAHL in the preparation of our literature review.
- b) User-led and Voluntary Sector Organisations: As providers of services to disabled people, user led and voluntary sector organisations were a source of grey literature. The following is not an exhaustive list but merely highlights some of the resources accessed for our literature review:
  - Organisations of and for people with mental health problems including Mind and SAMH
  - Organisations of and for deaf people, including, BDA, Deaf Connections and RNID, National Centre for Mental Health and Deafness
  - Organisations of and for blind people, including, National Federation of the Blind of the United Kingdom, Action for Blind People, RNIB, Partially Sighted Society
  - Other impairment related charities such as Scope, Capability Scotland, MS Society, Spinal Injuries Association
  - Generic disability organisations including Glasgow Centre for Independent Living and Lothian Centre for Independent Living, National Centre for Independent Living and British Council of Disabled People
  - Organisations which help disabled people from black and ethnic minorities
  - Organisations which promote access to the countryside including Countryside Access, Countryside Council for Wales and the Scottish National Heritage

Drawing upon the Diversity Review (Countryside Agency 2004) and the work of Edwards and Weldon (2006) we developed and implemented a participatory research approach, described below.

Fieldwork for this study was spread across Britain and included the collection of data from England, Scotland and Wales.

### *Phase 2: Empirical research*

#### Key informant interviews

Key informant telephone interviews were carried out with a range of individuals who work in the countryside/forestry sector throughout Britain. Individuals from a range of organisations at a variety of levels, from policy

development through to practice, were interviewed about their views and experiences of access to woodland for disabled people (see appendix for topic guide). We also interviewed representatives of disability organisations throughout Britain with interests in access to the outdoors by disabled people. Informants in both these groups were identified through their organisation, web searches and through word of mouth. In total, 18 telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations.

Five follow-up telephone interviews were conducted with forest rangers who participated in the site visits, as described in more detail below (see appendix for topic guide). A ranger involved with a group of mental health service users in the development of a woodland site was also interviewed about his views and experiences of outdoor access for disabled people.

Finally, interviews with parents of disabled children were carried out to understand the needs and experiences of families with disabled children in accessing the outdoors. This supplemented information provided by children and young people who accompanied us on site visits (see below, group 4).

#### Site visits: an inclusive approach

The central part of the research methods drew upon the work of Edwards and Weldon (2006) in using site visits as a means to elicit views and experiences of ethnic minority groups about woodland places. By accompanying research participants on woodland walks and discussing issues around access to woodland/forestry sites, it was anticipated that we would have an opportunity to view issues raised by disabled people first hand and also provide an occasion where disabled people could discuss such issues together.

#### *Recruitment*

As stated previously, disabled people are a diverse group and while a social model approach can be used to identify and address common disabling barriers, we felt it was necessary to also explore the specific barriers experienced by particular groups of disabled people. Impairment specific groups are important because although we are looking at the barriers affecting disabled people, people with specific impairments may encounter specific barriers and therefore to engage with the experiences of a group together would allow for a more focused and productive discussion within the pre and post focus group. Impairment specific groups enabled us to more accurately meet the access requirements of individuals to enable them to participate. Given the importance of childhood experiences of access and use of woodland on future adult participation (Openspace 2003) and the lack of research into disabled children's experiences of countryside spaces, we identified a need to include disabled children and their families in this research.

As a result, the majority of the seven site visits were impairment specific with people with a physical impairment, people with a learning disability, people with a mental health problem, people with a sensory impairment and families of disabled children all involved in the site visits. Table 1 provides an overview of the general location, group and country of site visits.

To reflect the diverse experiences and understanding of disabled peoples' access, participation, non-participation and exclusion from woodland recreation goods facilities and services, participants from as broad a range of organisations and sources as possible were recruited, initially through emails sent to a wide range of disability organisations. With the exception of people with mental health problems, it should be noted that we did not struggle to find individuals who wished to be part of the research, rather the research team were somewhat overwhelmed by the numbers of people keen to participate. Whilst access to the outdoors may not be an urgent issue for disabled people compared to access to benefits, housing and appropriate support for example (see Aitchison, 2003), the numbers of people interested in participating in the research highlighted that access to the outdoors is very much an issue for disabled people. In order to capture the ways in which disabled people access woodlands, established groups who access the outdoors regularly were involved in a number of the site visits as highlighted in Table 1. However, the research team were keen to involve people with little or no experience of woodland environments and to this end actively sought out such individuals. In total, 57 individuals participated in the site visits including 41 disabled people and 15 support assistants.

**Table 1. Participant and site visit details**

Group	Impairment	No. of participants	Established outdoor group?	Woodland type	Forest ranger service used?	Country
1	Mental health	5	Yes	Mixed: FC and community owned	no	Scotland
2	Multiple and complex needs	5 [5]**	No	Urban woodland, local authority	yes	Scotland
3	Learning	4 [1]	No	National Nature Reserve	yes	Scotland
4	Visual impairment	9 [2]	No	National Trust	yes	Scotland
5	Sensory impairment (d/Deaf <sup>1</sup> and visual)	7 [2]	No	Mixed: FC utilities	yes	Wales
6	Physical	5 [1]	Yes	Community forest	yes	England
7	Physical	6 [4]	Yes	Urban woodland, county council	no	England

\*\* denotes assistants

Prior contact with participants before the site visit through email and meetings enabled participants to let the research team know of any support and assistance they would require for the visit. This not only enabled participants to feel confident that their needs would be taken seriously and addressed, but also provided a rich source of data for the researchers in identifying the problems faced by disabled people in accessing the countryside.

### *Location*

<sup>1</sup> The use of d/Deaf within the text refers to and acknowledges that many people with a hearing impairment view themselves as part of a community of language and as such refer to being within the Deaf community. Others do not ascribe to this view.

Focus groups/site visits took place in Scotland, England and Wales throughout July-October 2007. It was decided that the variety of woodland spaces available to the public should be reflected in the sites chosen. Sites included urban woodland sites, community forest, national park, mixed ownership and national trust woodland as well as FC woodland (see Table 1).

A brief web-search of Forestry Commission and other visitor locations revealed potential barriers to participation for example, lack of toilet facilities and poor access. Therefore limitations were placed upon the potential woodland areas where disabled people can participate as a basic level of facilities was required in order to facilitate participation i.e. presence of rangers to act as guides or offer information about the location, toilet and visitor centre facilities.

The sites selected were in part dependent upon participants' access requirements and facilities available in relation to these requirements. For example, a site designated by the Forestry Commission as having 'easy access' would be required for individuals with a mobility requirement, whereas this aspect may not be such a pressing issue for people with sensory impairments. Site selection was driven in part by where participants lived, the practicality of getting to specific sites and where participants wanted to go. In one case (group 5) a ramble had already been planned and the researchers accompanied the group on this. The situation differed slightly for group 1, which involved an established group at a site developed and used by the group. In this instance, a researcher visited the group to elicit their views on woodland environments.

### **Data generation: opportunities and limitations**

As stated above prior discussions with participants enabled the team to begin identifying the barriers faced by disabled people before the site visit. The site visit day was divided into three specific sections. On arrival at the site, participants took part in a brief focus group covering a range of issues (see appendix for the pre and post visit topic guide). The second phase involved accessing the woodland space. This allowed researchers the opportunity not only to observe participants use of the woodland and associated facilities, but also to discuss in more depth the meaning of woodland spaces and any issues arising. Participants were encouraged to record their own interactions with the woodland in whatever format they desired. For example, one group sketched and photographed the landscapes; children from another visit collected leaves, whilst others were happy to simply walk through the woodlands. Where possible and practicable, access to woodland was done both with and without the input of a forest ranger. For example, participants in group 3 explored the site in the morning without a forest ranger, being accompanied by researchers. In the afternoon the group came together and participated on a ranger led walk. A focus group was then held to enable participants to share their experiences, to discuss good practice and to identify areas for potential future development. Where appropriate, feedback documents were produced by the research team around the main themes to

emerge from each site visit. This was circulated to research participants and to site management.

The use of specific site visits has its limitations. The contrived nature of the site visits meant that two of the biggest barriers facing disabled people to accessing woodland areas – information and transport - were overcome through provision of these two resources, particularly transport issues. Nonetheless, by doing so, it allowed us to consider first hand the exclusionary and inclusionary practices experienced by disabled people in woodland spaces.

## **Analysis**

Data included the interview and focus group transcripts, field notes and contributions from research participants. These were entered into NVIVO, a qualitative data analysis package, for analysis. Analysis of the data took a grounded theory approach identifying themes and topics of particular importance to participants.

### **3. Disabled people's access to woodland: literature review**

#### **Introduction**

Increasing interest in disabled people's access to the countryside, and more specifically, wooded and forested areas, has emerged within policy and practice circles in those organisations involved in the management and promotion of the countryside and 'the rural'. This interest has been prompted by a number of developments, not least increasing legislation to improve disabled people's rights in all areas of society (DDA 1995), the Countryside and Rights Of Way (CROW) Act (2000), the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and an increasing commitment to improve access for a number of groups under-represented in the countryside (see Countryside Agency Diversity Review, 2005 b,c,d) through the rural white paper. Despite a flurry of guidance set to assist those providing countryside and woodland services to be accessible to disabled people, little is actually known about disabled people's uses, views and perceptions of the countryside, with much of what is written focusing on physical access to the countryside/ woodland (but see the Diversity Review part 1 for some discussion on this issue). Similar to the Countryside Agency's Diversity Review (2005), we have uncovered little literature on disabled people's engagement and views of the countryside, with even less literature identified specifically about access to woodland and forested areas. Much then of what was covered in the Diversity Review will invariably be discussed here.

The review is divided into seven sections. This introduction will detail what literature was viewed and searches carried out. Section two provides background information on numbers of disabled people and definitions of disability. Section three explores the dominant constructions of woods and countryside more generally and how this may inform individuals' uses and perceptions of such spaces. The notion of 'therapeutic landscape' is considered in this section as a means of understanding the experiential aspects of being in the woods as a disabled person. Section four identifies research and dominant discourses within the academic literature about disabled people's use of the countryside. Again, similar to the Diversity Review, much of the literature found in discrete sub-disciplines offers us a particular and limited perspective, focusing on physical access to sites rather than exploring more experiential aspects of 'being' in a wood. Section five will review policy documents and guidance of recent times, highlighting the focus of such documents upon physical impairment, arguably to the exclusion of other bodies who are also covered by the DDA. It is argued that while crucial, an over emphasis upon the physical impairment brings its own set of assumptions about who can and should access the countryside and woodland, how they use these spaces and who with. Section six briefly considers policy documents relating to access to woodlands from a variety of countries. The review concludes by considering the main themes to emerge from the literature.

## Who are disabled people? A question of definition

Throughout the search it became apparent that many documents use the terms disabled, disability impaired and handicapped in often confusing and contradictory ways. In short, what may be classed as a disability in one paper, may be understood as an impairment in another. This confusion is unsurprising given the amount of discussion around the term disability within academia and society more generally. While within the Disability Discrimination Act disability is defined as someone who has a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities; many organisations and local government are adopting a definition of disability, focusing on the social, cultural and environmental barriers experienced by those with impairments. The distinction is not a pedantic one, with many disabled people viewing the social model as a powerful force for change in the fight for disabled people's human, social and civil rights (Campbell and Oliver, 1996). The definition adopted by the DDA is often termed a 'medical' model approach and is clearly articulated in much of the literature referred to below.

Echoing the observations of many academics within disability studies (see Oliver, 1990 and Barnes, 1990) it can be argued that the definition of disability adopted by academics, policy makers and practitioner's structures the way in which the problems faced by disabled people are understood. Access to woodland/countryside can either be viewed then as a problem of the limitations of the person or of the social, cultural and physical environment in which they find themselves and which constructs the individual in a certain way. Adopting a 'medical' definition would assume that disabled people's access to the countryside and experiences of it are restricted by their bodies rather than any external issues of the physical environment or social and cultural attitudes around who the countryside is *for* (see Slee, 2002). Disabled people are often made to feel *out of place* (Kitchin, 1998) through a neglect to consider their needs in urban or greenspace. In contrast, a social model approach emphasises the social, economic, cultural, attitudinal and physical barriers experienced by those with impairments. Access issues in relation to woodland spaces would therefore be an issue of inaccessible physical environments, information being available in a number of formats and disabled people through such physical and cultural cues feeling included in these places (Kitchin, 1999). Tregaskis (2004) observes that the social model, with its focus on structural barriers offers to those working in the countryside a novel way of seeing the issue of access. However, it could be argued that many of the critiques levelled at the social model from within the disability movement can also be applied to its application in the realm of countryside/woodland access, namely that there is an inherent bias towards the experiences of those with physical impairments. As is apparent in both the policy and academic literature, much of the discussion around access pertains to physical access to sites rather than cultural issues, information needs. In other words there is an emphasis on access for the dominant construction of who disabled people are: wheelchair users. Yet, a cursory glance at recent statistics reveals that wheelchair users make up a small proportion on the population of disabled people in Britain. Almost 20 years ago Beech (1990)

warned against parks and recreation services thinking of 'the disabled' solely as a person in a wheelchair and thinking of 'accessibility' solely in terms of parking bays, ramps and a 'disabled' toilet. Physical access is only one component of what Beech describes as 'total accessibility' and wheelchair users are only one section of the 'disabled market'. There must also be 'programme accessibility', which relates to the ways in which programmes and activities are designed to enable people with a variety of impairments to fully participate and have fulfilling experiences of outdoor recreation.

### **What about us? Missing voices**

There are estimated to be around 10 million disabled people in Britain including 700,000 children and 4.6 million over state pension age, covering a range of physical and sensory impairments, learning difficulties and mental health problems (DWP, 2006). Figures vary on the numbers of disabled people in Britain. The RNIB estimate that there are 378,000 people registered as blind in the UK but almost two million people have a difficulty seeing (RNIB website). It is estimated that almost nine million people are deaf or hard of hearing with 688,000 classified as being profoundly deaf (RNID website). There are 23,000 people who are deafblind in the UK. 1 in 4 people will experience some form of mental health problem throughout their lives (SAMH). 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability (Learning Disability Coalition; Mencap).

The term disabled people covers a diverse group not only in relation to impairment but with regard to age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic profile. Attempts to discuss the views of such a diverse group can invariably fall foul of claims to under-representation of certain categories of people, however defined. Nonetheless, throughout the search of the literature there is a consistency in whose experiences are captured and those who are not, with little if anything being said in relation to the experiences and needs of those with learning difficulties access to countryside<sup>2</sup>. In both academic and policy/practice literature there is a focus on the needs of those with mobility impairment, particularly those who use a wheelchair, although there are now some key policy and academic work which is challenging this dominance as detailed below. The Diversity Review, while a significant contribution to our understanding of the needs and perceptions of disabled people around countryside issues, nonetheless focused on three particular groups, wheelchair users, visually impaired people and those with mental health problems (2005b: 26, 51).

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<sup>2</sup> But see the Eden Project's accessible information guide designed for those with learning difficulties. This is the only example of accessible info for this group of people which we have encountered, but more may be available.

## **Woodlands as a therapeutic landscape: shared and contested notions about woodlands and countryside**

Woodlands have a key-role regarding people's access to both recreation and "tranquillity" (Lundell 2005). Trees and woods – especially broad leaf species - represent stability and continuity in our fast-moving contemporary world (Macnaghten et al., 1998; O'Brien, 2005). Previously, forestry was organized in terms of industrial production – trees were primarily considered an economic resource. Today, woodland is also understood in terms of its potential as a social and ecological resource (Macnaghten et al., 1998; O'Brien, 2005; Milligan & Bingley, 2007). Timber production maintains its role in today's post-industrial forest. However, the place for rest, recreation and recuperation that woodland can offer the community is of a higher significance (see Nolan, 2005). Access to green spaces is seen as vital to people's 'quality of life' – time spent in a 'natural' environment can be a tonic to one's physical and mental wellbeing (see Duncan, 2005). The health and wellbeing potential of environments has come to be understood through the concept of therapeutic landscapes. The concept arose from developments in cultural geography and directs attention onto the notion of how different environments mediate the experience of illness and wellness (see Gesler, 1992; Gesler & Kearns, 2002; Williams, 1999). There are three 'main' types of environment – natural/built, social and symbolic. Natural/built environments are places associated with for example spring water, beautiful scenery, temples or spas. However, therapeutic landscapes go beyond these classic associations with health. Social environments are places associated with cultural constructions of health beliefs and consumerism. Symbolic environments are places associated with healing mythology or medical discourse.

Macnaghten & Urry (2005a/b) introduce the concept of "affordances" to understand "bodies in the woods". Affordances are defined as what the environment offers, what it provides or furnishes (Gibson, 1979). Therefore, an environment offers a range of possibilities to different people. Crucially, such possibilities are relative to people's bodily capacities (enhanced by different equipment and technologies). For example, flat ground "affords" a variety of actions - walking, running, sitting, jumping, wheeling – that mirror a person's corporeal capabilities (see Michael, 2000). An environment's characteristics do not determine actions, they merely 'suggest' the range of possible actions. Affordances could be a path that beckons one to follow it, trees that 'ask' to be climbed by children, the shade of a tree that allows rest from the sun, or a lack of something to shade under that prevents a climb to be completed (Macnaghten & Urry 2005a/b). People in woodland areas are active bodies that are afforded various and conflicting possibilities.

Macnaghten & Urry (2005b) point out there is little or no research into how different social groups engage with and perform their bodies in woodland areas. It appears that people experience being in woods and forests as 'natural' and that being within trees bring them closer to 'nature'. It can further be assumed that different social groups will experience the bodily constraints and opportunities that woodland areas provide in quite different ways. However, there is no research to back this up. Macnaghten & Urry held nine

focus groups in Scotland, England and Wales reflecting a diversity of experiences, including gender, ethnic background, class and relationship with the outdoors. Interestingly, disabled people were not included as a focus group and there was no reference to participants being disabled. Little is known about disabled people's view of nature, woodland and the countryside more generally (Countryside Agency, 2005b: 20). The diversity review (2005b) found that disabled people, like the wider population, expressed popular images of the countryside. However, in contrast to other groups researched, disabled people voiced a concern that the physical environment is 'threatening', while the social and human aspects of the countryside are viewed positively. In short rural communities are perceived to be welcoming (2005b: 51). Aside from the Diversity review research, only one study explicitly sought disabled people's preferences for the outdoors scenes (Brown et al., 1999). Brown et al conclude that those with a mobility impairment have similar preferences for certain environments to the wider population (1999:218, see also McAvoy, 2001), their research do not provide any insights into the motivations of disabled people to access certain environments, although they do allude to the health benefits of 'the outdoors' to well-being described earlier (Brown et al., 1999: 210).

Therapeutic landscapes have been framed as a holistic approach to health and wellbeing regarding non-disabled people, focusing on the revitalising effect of, for example, "getting away from it all" by spending time in the countryside. However, in relation to disabled people, therapeutic landscapes are framed as an aspect of rehabilitation, an extension of therapy, helping them 'come to terms' with their disability, making them "whole" (see Gibson, 2000; Milligan et al., 2003; Townsend, 2006.) Historically, rurality and notions of the countryside idyll have often been used as a place of sanctuary and therapy for disabled people, but also as a means of hiding these 'unruly bodies' away from the rest of society. This is especially evident in the field of mental health. Consider the location of asylums for those defined as having mental illness (see Edgington, 1997). Such places housed a multiplicity of uses, from incarceration, medical treatment, health enhancing (Gesler, 1992), educational and residential. There is a forgotten history of such spaces which academics are rediscovering but also disabled people themselves can play a crucial role in exploring the meanings of such spaces. Whilst in contemporary society the role of large institutions has been eclipsed by the drive for community care, it could be argued that at one level the relationship between disabled people and 'the rural' has remained one of functionality regarding perceived benefits of countryside on health and wellbeing. In recent times there has been a resurgence in the use of the outdoors as therapy through the concept of 'ecotherapy' (see Mind, 2007) and 'greengyms'. This over-emphasis on such forms of 'therapy' could turn disabled people off from visiting the countryside. We would argue that there is a subtle, but significant, difference between revitalisation and rehabilitation. The former emphasises agency – rebooting yourself, whereas the latter signifies passivity – attending recovery after a loss.

Another recent development in the therapeutic landscape literature which relates to this project is Baer & Gesler's (2004: 411) assertion that therapeutic

landscapes are often more nuanced and ambivalent than they are presented to be. It is important to recognise that the environments that may constitute therapeutic landscapes can be destabilised. Environments may be therapeutic for some people, but not for others; therapeutic potential may be temporal; and “defilement” is interwoven within them. Thus, people with some impairments may enjoy and obtain benefits from outdoor spaces, while other people with different impairments may not. A wheelchair user may ‘feel good’ when they are using a trail that is accessible, but then feel stress if they encounter an obstacle that puts them in danger. A person with a visual impairment may ‘feel better’ in outdoor places, but only temporarily since they may find their orientation is threatened. Some people with mental health problems may find open spaces ‘beneficial’, whereas others may find such places the extreme opposite. The same can be said for enclosed woodland areas. Moreover, as Baer & Gesler (2004) assert, something that triggered a sense of wellbeing at one time might not in another. People and places alter over time. A person might feel revitalised by a particular space at one point in life. Alternatively, a person might feel better after being in a particular space for a while. The suggestion is not that there are no therapeutic landscapes, only that landscapes have many shades of grey. Thus, ‘being’ in the countryside and ‘being’ in the woods affords different things for different people at different times and different places.

### **More than a (physical) access issue: barriers to outdoor access**

Disabled people have the same need for revitalisation through woodland and outdoor spaces as their non-disabled peers, yet, they can be “locked out” of woodland areas. It is often impossible for them to access ‘natural’, green spaces. Woodland, by its very “nature” or rather its socio-cultural construction, is impenetrable - with its bulbous roots, tangled branches, uneven paths and ‘alien’ sounds and smells. It is “other-worldly”, something viewed from “the outside”, glimpsed through car and bus windows (Lundell, 2005).

However, physical access issues are only the beginning of a litany of barriers facing disabled people in their efforts to be in woodland spaces:

*This lack of provision was generating much frustration in its own right, but it was also taken to be symptomatic of a wider disregard for the most basic needs of disabled people. It led to the assumption that the countryside is simply ‘not for them.’ (Countryside Agency, 2005b: 67)*

As stated earlier the Diversity Review is perhaps the most detailed work on the issue of disabled people access to the countryside more generally. Many of the themes raised in policy and academic literature are reiterated in the findings of the Diversity Review. Lack of information, accessibility of sites, facilities available at the sites, financial costs, transport are some of the structural barriers mentioned within the literature. Attitudinal barriers are also mentioned (Countryside Agency, 2005b). A report by the Environment Agency makes the important observation that while one obstacle on its own

can be overcome, the conjunction of two or more obstacles can be insurmountable (2003: 8). Lack of information at all stages of the 'access chain' has been identified as a major issue for disabled people and other underrepresented groups (see Diversity Review 2005b, Burns and Graefe, 2007).

As we have already stated, there is a scant amount of academic literature exploring disabled people's perceptions and use of the countryside in general, and forest and woodland areas in particular. Notable exceptions are Burns & Graefe (2007) who show that disabled people's use of US National Forests is limited, Tregaskis (2004) who relates the social model to countryside recreation, and Brown et al. (1999) who show that disabled people have similar preferences for outdoor experiences as their non-disabled peers. The search uncovered literature within the fields of travel and leisure studies and therapeutic recreation. The literature makes it clear that disabled people face problems in undertaking recreation activities because of, for example, inaccessible sites, facilities and transport, a lack of appropriate information and attitudinal barriers (see Burns & Graefe, 2007; Parker et al., 2007; Dippenar & Kotze, 2005; Yau et al., 2004; Shaw & Coles, 2004; Israeli, 2002).

Although the literature does acknowledge that disabled people share the same needs and desires for recreation as their non-disabled peers and that they face socio-structural and attitudinal barriers to achieving them, much of it remains wedded to individual and medical views of disability. For example, Yau et al (2004) assert that leisure travelling is more than an issue of physical access, it is about "coming to terms with the disability". Shaw & Coles (2004) point out that social understandings of disability have not yet permeated the travel and tourism literature identified here. There has been an unwillingness to explore the experiences of disabled people, in addition to neglecting the wider social relations between disabled visitors and the tourist industry. Moreover, even questions of access, driven by legislative requirements and duties, have been narrowly defined in terms of managerial and technical solutions, rather than being couched within a wider socio-cultural context. Thus, for example, Dippenar & Kotze (2005) and Israeli (2002) present methods for evaluating site accessibility. Aitchison (2000, 2003) points out that there has been a lack of dialogue between disability studies and leisure studies because of the different (and competing) discourses that dominate each field. She calls for a framework to be established so that both fields can come together to explore what she terms "disability leisure".

Common to much of the leisure/tourism literature reviewed was the need to find ways to interpret and analyse the constraints to recreational activity experienced by disabled people and how they are negotiated (see Shaw & Coles, 2004; Daniels et al., 2005; Burns & Graefe, 2007; Parker et al., 2007). The literature describes three types of leisure constraints - intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. The latter two constraints refer to attitudinal and socio-physical barriers respectively and are consistent with the social model of disability. However, intrapersonal constraints refer to the emotional, psychological and impairment characteristics of the disabled individual which may mediate their motivation and desire to undertake recreation. While

psycho-social, emotional and embodied dimensions are important to understanding disabling barriers (see Thomas, 1999, 2007), there is a tendency in the literature to fall back on individualised and medicalised views of disability and so negotiation becomes a matter of “overcoming disability” or dealing with a “personality flaw”. However as Slee & Jones (2001) point out, there is a complex interplay between personal choice, socio-economic status and socially imposed exclusion which has to be teased out when attempting to understand participation in countryside leisure.

In terms of interpersonal constraints, it appears from the literature that disabled people have to rely on the ‘good nature’ and ‘willingness’ of site personnel and non-disabled to circumvent some barriers. Daniels et al. note the importance that disabled travellers place on the actions and attitude of others. For example, the willingness of staff to push and pull wheelchair users along a forest trail is said by one respondent to have “made the difference between just ‘looking’ and actually ‘seeing’ what was around us.” (Daniels et al., 2005: 925). Although respondents spoke of unpleasantness such as “dirt and sewage that sticks to wheels and hands” and of difficulties with wind and altitude, the ability to forward plan and the ‘creative solutions’ of site staff usually ameliorated such adverse conditions. Alternatively, Daniels et al. (2005) found that a lack of knowledge, poor service provision combined with environmental barriers produced a situation where disabled travellers felt deserted, susceptible to harm, embarrassed and afraid (see Brown et al., 1999). This in turn can lead to perceived stigma and feelings of helplessness and a reluctance to participate in activities again (see Bedini, 2000).

While the literature makes it clear that the help and assistance of staff and fellow travellers are a vital component, disabled people’s inclusion should not be left reliant on the variability of non-disabled people’s ‘good nature’. Daniels et al. note that awareness of accessibility is particularly important in less structured settings, such as natural areas, otherwise disabled people can find themselves relegated to the role of sight-seeing through vehicle windows or from the car park. As one respondent explains, “Several viewpoints within the rainforests had wheelchair accessible paths to give me access which meant I didn’t have to rely on (his) photos at the end of the holiday to enjoy the views.” (Daniels et al., 2005: 929; see also Baez, 2002).

Tregaskis (2004) differs from the literature above not only because she discusses countryside recreation, but also because the constraints and barriers faced by disabled people to outdoor leisure activities are contextualised by placing the social model of disability centre-stage. The social model’s emphasis on overcoming structural barriers to inclusion shifts the focus away from changing individuals (disabled visitors and site staff) onto changing the organisation and practices of outdoor spaces. Applying the social model in practice actually benefits staff. Its depersonalised approach does not blame individuals for the inaccessibility of countryside recreational sites. It frees rangers, for example, to focus on environmental issues which means that they can put their skills and expertise to further practical use, rather than feeling hemmed in by the perceived need to become medical ‘experts’ before they can enable disabled people’s access. It also helps to give staff back a sense

of proportion to the 'risk' involved in 'allowing' disabled people access to the countryside. It frees them from the dominance of the individual model which stifles staff's behaviour towards disabled people by framing them as needing to be 'cared for' and 'looked after'. Tregaskis points out that the constraints faced by disabled people caused by structural and attitudinal relations, health and safety rigidity and an obsessive aversion to 'risk' are an integral part of the pervasive influence of the individual model of disability.

## **Policy, practice and legislation**

As a result of the lack of information relating to access for disabled people to woodland and forested areas, much of this section relates to policy/ guidance for the countryside more generally. In contrast with the built environment (through Part M of the building regulations 1999 Eng, 2001 Scotland) the outdoor environment does not have any statutory guidance to assist in the production of accessible greenspace (Countryside Agency, 2005a). In response to this deficit, a variety of agencies have embarked on providing such guidance. Given the scarcity of research into disabled people's access to the countryside, guidance has often emerged as a result of research by organisations. This section will provide a brief overview of the key guidance documents available.

One of the earliest practice documents available was the BT Countryside for All Accessibility standards (1997), developed by the Fieldfare Trust. A range of organisations were involved in the development of the standards including organisations of and for disabled people. The guide provides physical access standards in three identified landscapes - urban and formal landscapes; urban fringe and managed landscapes; rural and working landscapes, with a fourth landscape, open country semi-wild and wild landscapes, not having any technical specification applied. In addition to this, the guide offers advice on working with disabled people ('networking'), information, transport, and interpretation of guidelines. While a significant and important contribution to the area, the initial 1997 guide did have its limitations, primarily its focus on physical access, and the high standards required of sites within the guidelines. Nevertheless, the Countryside for All standards represents one of the most widely cited and agreed standards throughout Britain. The 2005 edition has addressed a number of these concerns, including guidance in providing accessible greenspaces for d/Deaf people.

In 2001, following a project involving disabled people, the Countryside Agency produced two more standards. These in turn led to the establishment of management zones comprising three zones. Zone A providing access for most people through to Zone C providing access for some people (Countryside Agency 2005a). In 2005 the Countryside agency launched its guide 'By all reasonable means', which incorporated the notion of 'the access chain' and adopted the principle of least restrictive access. Briefly 'the access chain', developed by the Sensory Trust (2005) represents a series of links from an individual's decision to visit a place, for example a woodland, their journey, arrival, actual visit and return home. It is argued that if the chain is

broken then a visit may not take place. While a useful conceptual tool, it could be argued that access to the outdoors begins before the decision to visit, being informed by the values and attitudes of the individual and those around them (references). The principle of Least Restrictive Access (LRA) works on the basis that 'all work, whether planned improvement or ad hoc maintenance, must meet the highest possible access standards for that piece of work' (Countryside Agency, 2005a: 11). Where this is not achievable, it is necessary that a clear reason be given. The concept of LRA was developed to complement the management zones detailed earlier. The document goes through what site managers and owners should be doing to ensure accessibility focusing on the development of policy, training, profiling visitors, consultation and identifying barriers (2005a: 14). Utilising the access chain concept, the document identifies issues to be reviewed for example information accessibility and how this is to be done and providing further sources of guidance where appropriate.

The Forestry Commission have produced the most explicit guidance for those involved in the management of woods and forests in its document Making Woodlands More Accessible (Harrop et al, 2004). The guidance draws on a wide range of sources including the Countryside for All guidelines mentioned above, RNIB guidance (see it right) and various Forestry Commission guidance. English Heritage has produced guidance documents which draw upon many of the guidance documents referred to above in relation to historic buildings and landscapes (2004 and 2005). Liverpool City Council has recently developed an inclusive signage strategy for its parks and greenspaces utilising universal design principles and current practice guidance from a range of organisations including RNIB and the sign design society (Chambers and Farmer, 2007).

Following the commitment in the Rural White Paper (DEFRA, 2000) to undertake 'a full diversity review of how we can encourage more people with disabilities ... to visit the countryside and participate in country activities. Initially we will do this by seeking their views on what they need to enjoy the countryside. Then we will draw up a plan of action', ethnic minorities, people from inner cities and young people were also identified by the White Paper as under-represented groups in the countryside. As a result the then Countryside Agency (now Natural England) began a wide-ranging exercise to explore both providers awareness of such groups and the groups' own perceptions and needs of the countryside (2005b &c). In relation to providers<sup>3</sup>, a number of issues were common for all the under-represented groups. The research found that providers were unsure about the use of language; there was little evidence of an individual whose remit is equal access issues within organisations; all staff need more information and communication within their organisation about diversity issues and the practical application of legislation in everyday encounters (2005c). Interestingly, the research found that the majority of service providers recognised and acted upon the DDA (2005c: 36). However, service providers were very much focused on the dominant

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<sup>3</sup> The Diversity Review covered the whole of England and targeted all providers of countryside services. For more information on methods see the Diversity Review part 2 (2005c).

construction of disabled people as those with physical impairments, addressing the needs of this group to the neglect of other disabled people (2005c: 26).

As a result of the review research, Nature England are currently in the process of drawing up the Action Plan as promised in the White Paper.

More recently, the particular needs and experiences of individuals with sensory impairments have been engaged with explicitly through the work of Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and National Trust. SNH commissioned work into the access needs of deaf visitors (Bell et al, 2006). The report highlights the particular needs of this group around signage, communication and the need for staff training all being raised in the report including examples of good practice throughout Britain and beyond. A joint piece of work by RNIB-National Trust (Hillis, 2005) also highlighted good practice throughout Britain and Europe in relation to visually impaired person's needs in accessing outdoor heritage sites. This report focused on the importance of interpretive information in ensuring access for this group. Good quality information in a variety of formats would improve use of sites by visually impaired visitors, and crucially enable individuals to use the site autonomously. Similar to the SNH report, staff training and awareness was identified as crucial in providing an inclusive environment for disabled people.

## **Legislation**

In recent years there have been several pieces of legislation which have arguably opened up access to woodlands and the countryside more generally for disabled people. The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and updated 2005 (DDA), in Scotland, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act (2003) and in England and Wales the Countryside Rights of Way (CROW) Act (2000).

The DDA applies across Scotland, England and Wales and is a significant piece of anti-discrimination legislation covering all aspects of life including employment, education and access to goods and services. The DDA has recently been amended (2005) and now includes a duty to actively promote equality for disabled people by public bodies, such as the Forestry Commission.

The CROW Act creates a right of access on foot to land or 'right to roam' on a wide range of landscapes and has opened up around 10 per cent of land in England and Wales. Part V of the Act requires relevant authorities including local highway authorities and national parks to establish local access forums to advise on a number of issues, including access to the countryside for disabled people. While the CROW Act has improved rights of access generally, aside from the inclusion of a disability advisor within the local access forums, the needs of disabled people has not been explicitly addressed within the Act.

In contrast, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 does address the access needs of disabled people to the countryside. It establishes statutory rights of responsible access to land and inland water for the purposes of recreation, education, commercial or passage by non-motorised means. The Act does however recognise the need for disabled people to use motorised vehicles in gaining access to the countryside. In discussing exemptions to access rights, the act states that:

*being on or crossing land in or with a motorised vehicle or vessel (other than a vehicle or vessel which has been constructed or adapted for use by a person who has a disability and which is being used by such a person); Part 1, 2, 9f*

Questions arise from differences in the legislation. For example, do the differences in the Acts make for a substantively different experience of access to the countryside for disabled people north and south of the border? What are the implications of working with two separate pieces of legislation for public bodies such as the Forestry Commission in the development of policy and practice around access for disabled people?

To conclude, the development of standards over the past ten years has been biased towards physical access requirements. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the only standards available are from the built environment and these too have focused on physical access requirements (see Imrie, 2006). Standards have been developed with the involvement of disabled people. This is an important and significant development as it acknowledges the expert knowledge which disabled people possess about their own access needs. Despite the emphasis primarily on physical access for those with mobility impairments, increasing recognition is being given to the needs of others covered under the DDA, with information being available on the needs of visually impaired and hearing impaired individuals. It could be argued that the relative scarcity of guidance and information on certain groups access requirements reflects the lack of research into the experiences of disabled people in the countryside more generally, as detailed in the previous section.

## **Legislation and practice in other countries**

Similar to Britain, other countries have recognised disabled people's access to the outdoors as an issue. This brief section considers legislative and practice developments in America and Sweden.

In America, the impetus for such a development has been the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990). America does not at present have guidance for outdoor access, but has recently put out to consultation accessibility guidelines for federal outdoor and developed areas (United States Access Board, 2007). However, it is clear that a number of state parks have already engaged with accessibility as an issue (see Shteir, 2007). For example, California State Park is utilising the web as a resource through which disabled visitors can plan a range of activities (see <http://access.parks.ca.gov/>; also

cited in Bell et al, 2006). Searches of websites for outdoor recreation pursuits for disabled people in America suggest that individuals are gaining access to a wide range of activities.

In Sweden, legislation passed in 2000 has adopted a citizenship approach to disability, emphasising the rights of disabled people to participate in all aspects of social, economic, and civic life. The National Board of Forestry have produced a manual for woodland foresters and managers to make woodland areas and activities accessible for disabled people (Lundell, 2005).

## **4. Research findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents the data collected in the interviews, focus groups and on the site visits. The data are organised under four broad sections. The first section documents disabled people's attitudes to and experiences of woodlands and other rural locations. At times it was difficult when analysing our data to distinguish between woodlands and other rural locations. Many of our informants and research participant did not see woodlands as separate from other rural locations. On walks and other outings they often went from one to the other. They used both terms interchangeably and we follow that pattern, except on the odd occasion that the informant is clearly referring to one location or the other. One thing that is clear from these data is that many people value woodlands and see them not just as an important resource but also wish to have access to them.

The second section of the report focuses on attitudes to disabled people and how these are played out. It looks both at the attitudes of those who work in the sector towards disabled people, but also how disabled people themselves feel they are perceived by workers in the countryside industry. It looks at how disability is defined and the implications these definitions have for disabled people as they attempt to access the woodlands.

In the third section we present data that examines the actual barriers to the country and woodland experienced by disabled people. It looks at the provision of information, physical barriers, and transport and resource issues.

The fourth section looks at recent policy developments and how they have impacted on access for disabled people.

Finally we present recommendations for future work in this area based on our experiences in carrying out this study.

### **Disabled peoples' attitudes, perceptions and experiences of woodlands**

In this section we present data on how our informants described their trips to rural locations, their use of, and their feelings, about the countryside. Broadly our findings echo those of the earlier Diversity Review. Almost all our disabled informants were drawn from urban or semi-urban areas and all had a very positive view of the countryside, even those who were not regular users of it. Those who had not gone into the countryside before all left with very positive feelings about the experience, all stating that they would, in future, be returning.

When our informants were asked what the countryside meant to them we got a variety of answers. Some saw it as a place of refuge, as somewhere pretty, restful, as something to be treasured and protected and as something that was part of their cultural heritage. This claim was made by English, Welsh

and Scots, who all claimed that their land was part of what made them who they are and that being able to access it was important and was a right of heritage. One of our informants for example told us about how through walking along a coastal path and observing Second World War Coastal Defences he was able to connect with an important part of British history and what it means to be British.

It is clear from our data that access to the countryside, to woodland and to other rural areas is very important to many disabled people. Visits to rural locations have beneficial aspects in terms of personal identity, social inclusion and feelings of wellbeing. Our focus group participants who made regular use of the countryside made this clear. We were told by one informant how:

*Being out makes me feel better about myself, it recharges me.*

Another described it as:

*Incredibly exhilarating and very liberating.*

Going to the country is desirable and is perceived to be a positive thing for people to do:

*I want to walk [in the countryside] because I have a desire, an urge to be part of that lifestyle, to walk...I've always aspired to do energetic things and losing my sight hasn't stopped me wanting to do that.*

This is a very important point: some of our informants and research participants were people with acquired impairments and a significant number had been involved in outdoor pursuits prior to acquiring their impairment. They, not surprisingly, wished to continue with this activity. There is not though an easy distinction to be made between those who acquire and those who were born with an impairment. Some of our informants who had had a lifelong impairment were also very keen on rural pursuits. In working with and contact with groups of young disabled people with congenital impairments we found a relatively large number of people who had never accessed the country and would never think of going out to the woodlands for a leisure activity. The families of disabled children we contacted all pointed to difficulties they experienced in accessing and being in rural locations. There perhaps is a need to develop initiatives to encourage woodland use by disabled children or to promote outdoor activities targeted at disabled children and their families.

The countryside is an important refuge as it allows disabled people to

*To get away from the hurley burley of life.*

and

*Get away from people.*

Some of our informants claimed this is particularly important for them as they have to live in a society that often excludes them and being out in the country can allow them to experience a life that is not curtailed by discriminatory practice. Similar comments were made by disabled people regardless of their impairment. So we were told by one participant:

*There's so much denied to us that you get to a level where things that are natural become more important. There's so much else you can't do. You live a very restricted life, getting out is necessary*

For example people with a mental health problem described how being in a rural environment gave them space to '*recharge batteries*' and '*to widen your horizons*'. For some, the opportunity to be alone, to enjoy the silence and express their emotions away from prying eyes in a safe environment was valued highly. For others, the woodlands offered the prospect to socialise with others and provide a distraction from problems. Whilst it was recognised that '*you can't leave your mind and emotions at home*'; woodlands nonetheless afforded possibilities to experience and manage such emotions in a different way. Not only were there similarities between different disabled people there were also differences.

Many of our informants talked about having rather confined lives, limited to:

*Shopping centres or one or two other places.*

Trips out into the countryside offered a complete contrast to this.

There was also a very strong social element in the desire to get out into the country. By being out in the country many of our informants felt more socially included, with many going as part of a social grouping who met regularly and through this contact with other disabled people developed a sense of identity. The trips to the country have become important part of their social life and many of the people they meet there are part of their social network with friendships that extended beyond the walks, often involving weekends away or trips to other events. Walks in the country were as much about the social aspect as they were about being outside. This was particularly apparent in three of the walks we went on where the groups were made up of people who regularly walked together. We were regularly told how '*going walking is a social event*'. Some of the groups went away for long trips or weekends several times a year and the friendships developed had extended beyond the walks.

Not all disabled people of course go as part of a organised group or with other disabled people, with many going on their own or with families and friends. The countryside is a place both to get away from other people and also to be enjoyed with other people.

The countryside allowed disabled people to experience a wide range of sensual experiences. For the blind people and people with a visual impairment we talked to the countryside was about the birdsong, the smells

and the changes in light, for people who were deaf/blind the countryside gave people the chance to experience a wide range of sensory stimulations, the chance to feel the wind, the rain and the sun on their skin and the opportunity to smell and to touch; for deaf people it was about vistas and about being away from an oppressive society that discriminated against them; for people with a mental health problem it provided them with a space for release, somewhere they could let off steam and be themselves outside of the confines demanded by society; for people with a physical impairment it provided them with the opportunity for exercise and for just experiencing the great outdoors.

A number of people had participated in a woodland garden project and found this to be a rewarding and challenging activity, offering the chance to learn more about woodlands, gain skills and confidence and build social networks. However, the routine of participation could be problematic for some given the issues of motivation mentioned below.

Rural locations also afford disabled people the opportunity to take part in activities they would not normally do. This links very closely with feelings of wellbeing. So one parent of a disabled child told us:

*It's a big part because we do, we enjoy it anyway but also for Helen being visually impaired, she misses out on a lot of things like, you know interaction, interactive games for children who can't, she can't share or participate in, she can't run a 100m very well, she can't do jumping, she can't do a lot of actual physical things well, that other children can do, and even just as a form of exercise for her, if she goes to these areas to give her that exercise, and obviously the enjoyment from it. So she's getting exercise without actually knowing that she's doing it sort of thing. And obviously there's the cycling as well the cycling I think is an important part for Helen so we've now got a sort of tandem bike.*

The countryside was also for some, at times, oppressive, dark and foreboding. One person felt that when depressed she found being in woodlands 'overpowering'. People with a visual impairment described how easy it was to get lost, and once lost how difficult it was to find your way again; a woman with a visual impairment told us:

*It's very easy to get very lost and once lost very difficult to find your way again. Being outside is a challenge to your confidence, it takes brass neck to put yourself in that position.*

Confidence in one's ability to manage in a rural setting was, as the above quote makes clear, a crucial factor in determining an individual's comfort in the countryside. It can be both developed and knocked by the provision or absence of appropriate or inappropriate facilities and services. These are discussed throughout the report.

For people with a mobility impairment there is the danger of the wheelchair or scooter breaking down or getting stuck. On one of our visits we were told

about an occasion where one of the participant's scooter had broken down and needed pushing all the way back to the car. Fortunately there were two nondisabled people with them and they were able to get the scooter and the occupant back to the car. All of the members of this walking group felt unwilling to go into rural locations without support from nondisabled people. This was not always the case and at a later site visit one of our informants related to us how they regularly went out on their own or with one or two other disabled people and did not feel the need for nondisabled people to be present to provide support:

*Accidents are rare, very rare, anyway, anybody in the country is at risk. The only real risk is mechanical breakdown and we have a mobile phone. Trampers are now much more reliable, we used to have a lot more breakdowns.*

For some, the danger was an attraction:

*I like a sense of danger, living on the edge for a change, we don't get to do that that often.*

and

*I like pushing [the scooter] to its limits, going as far as I can with it.*

The Disabled Ramblers Association, on occasions, organise rambles across terrain in the knowledge that it may not be passable (<http://www.disabledramblers.co.uk/Routes.shtml>) For some disabled people even this is not enough and they are looking to access the country to take part in extreme sports like downhill biking with organisations such as Rough Riderz. Just being in the country is not enough for this group of people; they want to push themselves to the extreme:

*a lot of younger people don't just want to do that [ramble through the country] – they want to get out and take part in an extreme sport in the countryside, and that's where I, and you know, I'm sure there are a lot of younger, disabled people who would be interested in doing this.*

This view was reflected by another participant in extreme sports who described risk as the whole point of a trip to woodland:

*It's about the thrill, the adrenalin, the risk the skill challenge, the improvement, it's about all of those things.*

Without this risk he made it clear there would be little point in venturing into the woodland. The issue of risk is a main theme that emerged throughout our data collection and is discussed later in the report in more depth.

Those who weren't regular users of the countryside, but who we took out for the first time as part of this research found the experience to be very liberating. They told us how the visit had allowed them to enter a new area for

them and to have an experience that they had not previously considered. One for example told us *'Not been to a forest before, not one like that, you can see different plants... if my Mum says do you want to go somewhere I would now say a wood.'*

The majority of people who we met who did not make use of the countryside were mainly from areas of high social deprivation. Going to the countryside was not part of their culture and it is difficult to be sure how much this was due to the fact that they were disabled and how much due to the fact that they came from an area of high social deprivation.

However, whilst there is a very strong desire for such access it also clear that, for many disabled people, access to rural areas is not an easy option. There are many reasons for this. Some of these are due to impairment issues. For example people with a mental health problem highlighted issues of motivation in accessing the outdoors, with a number noting that even where facilities such as transport were provided, at times, the struggle to 'get out the door' could be too much for many. Participants also noted that depending on the nature of the mental health problem, possibilities to explore the outdoors may not be feasible. One person pointed out that people with agoraphobia may find 'the outdoors' too open; whilst someone with claustrophobia may find the enclosed feeling of a woodland landscape overpowering.

Fatigue and an inability to know how you were going to feel on a particular day was also an issue mentioned by some. This included people with a mental health problem and also with physical impairments such as multiple sclerosis and ME.

There are though many barriers to the woodland that are not related to an individual's impairment and are readily amenable to change. These include information, transport links, structural issues such as policies and practices that exclude disabled people, poorly understood ideas of what disabled people want or need and ideas around risk and danger. Access once in the country was also cited by many as a problem. It is these that this report focuses on and explores. One thing that our research made clear was that many disabled people want access to woodlands and all desire the sense of wellbeing and inclusion which the countryside can provide. It is important to remember however that disabled people are a heterogeneous group with diverse interests and that many of their views are shared with their nondisabled peers.

## **Cultural constraints on disabled people's access to the woodland**

This section documents findings on the cultural values that we uncovered in our research. It refers to both the cultural beliefs that surround disability and disabled people and also how these beliefs impact on disabled people's use of woodlands. These cultural beliefs can act as structures creating what may be described as a 'natural attitude' (Schutz, 1970;72) towards disabled people which can form interpersonal constraints, as discussed in the literature review.

The section starts with a discussion on how disability is constructed and then moves on to explore how this construction is played out, both in terms of health and safety, on which a great deal of emphasis is placed and on the general attitude that surrounds disabled people and woodland.

### *Construction of disability and disabled people*

The individual model of disability is the dominant view throughout society and the outdoor service sector is no exception. Although the prevailing discourse in policy and guidance documents reflects a social model approach to the disability issue this discourse is not always played out in practice. The following quote, from a disability rights activist, when asked if he thought disabled people accessed the country is clearly located within a social model approach:

*Well my perception is that they don't do it. And I can only believe that part of that possibly and this is only a personal view, part of that is possibly because they are concerned, they become concerned about going out to the countryside that when they get there, they're not going to be able to use that path for whatever reason, they're not going to be able to find their way or they're concerned about what the facilities are, and it comes down to even mundane things like toilet facilities, for example. You know and we mustn't forget that.*

In contrast, most outdoor providers at both the strategic level and on the ground expressed medical and social understandings of disability. For example, in the following extract a policy officer defines disabled people as having:

*something which stops somebody from doing something in em... that's it at its most simplistic level, but a more technical definition would be a long term, say anything from a year upwards, which prevents somebody from doing something, or the environment which they are in prevents them from doing something. So be that walking, understanding, sight, a whole range.*

It is both a medical and a social definition. This is to be expected and further it may be argued that it is necessary if the providers are to develop appropriate strategies to meet the needs of particular groups of disabled people. Indeed, many organisations of and for disabled people are organised around different impairment groupings. The danger of this approach is that the focus becomes on the condition rather than on the activity that the group might seek to promote, as one informant told us:

*I think we have often put in trails, but actually networking with the disabled community has been really difficult. And the disabled community itself are linked purely by their disabilities in many ways and I know that sounds a sort of, and that's my experience is that, you know*

*if they're in a spinal injury group or a head injury group, that is their commonality. You know there are a range of, there are a whole range of different people but their link is that they are linked by their particular disability and that's, that means that the sort of things that they talk about tend to be reflect, you know if you look on their websites, the things they talk about are more, are often about the condition that they're linked by.*

In all our interviews with workers, policy makers and in our field trips it was clear that there has been a concerted effort at both the policy and practice level to expand and develop access for disabled people to the countryside. However, although there is recognition that disabled people have a wide range of impairments, there is a tendency to consider the access requirements of people with physical impairments at the expense of the requirements of those with other impairments. As a consequence little attention has been given to the needs of other groups of disabled people. When we talked to policy makers and providers of services in the country nearly all talked about access in terms of access for people with a physical impairment and it was rare for other groups to be mentioned. Whilst there is some evidence of change and progress we did observe some confusion about how best to meet the needs and requirements of people with sensory impairments, people with learning disabilities and people with mental health problems.

The symbol of someone in a wheelchair is the dominant cultural representation of 'disability' in our society and this may inform outdoor providers' expectations about who their disabled customers will be:

*We often get queries from people with a variety of disabilities, and they'll put in big letters, you know, "I don't use a wheelchair" like there's something wrong if you do, and they don't want to be pigeon-holed into that usual understanding of what disability needs – oh it's someone who uses a wheelchair, and that's all it means, and other people will perceive that as the only type of disability there is...*

Also, service providers can believe that they simply need to install a ramp or an accessible toilet or provide parking bays for blue badge holders.

*I get people saying, and still do, "we don't get disabled people here"... I think the expectation is that, you know, you do something, and then suddenly busloads of white canes or wheelchair users appear on the horizon, is a misnomer, and people expect that, though. That's what they expect....because again it's still this view of disability as a physical thing, and I keep saying to people, as far as you know, maybe 50% of the people who've stayed with you or visited your park have a disability that you are not aware of...*

Despite a discourse which eschews individualised and medicalised views of disability, disabled people are primarily viewed as being 'unable' and 'unwell' and so are thought to be 'incapable' of coping with the perceived rigours of

the outdoors. Some attempts at widening access have been built on this premise and so emphasis has been placed on limiting disabled people's exposure to danger and also ensuring that they gain some 'therapeutic' or 'rehabilitative' value from any excursions 'into the wilds'. Most easy access routes are relatively short and are neither adventurous nor challenging. Exmoor provides a typical example, with its website listing three easy access walks, the longest being just over 800m. This makes a trip to the area of little interest to many people with a physical impairment. Many respondents expressed frustration about the assumptions made by outdoor providers about what disabled people can and cannot do, what they want to do and where they want to go:

*That, you know, a forest in the middle of nowhere, disabled people don't want to go there, they want to just go down the road from the house, where it's completely the opposite. They have time on their hands. They want to go and look, you know, at places that are still natural, you know, thicker forest and everything, and a lot of good places, Lochinver, they have a walk out at Lochinver, and it's everything that a walk should be....*

The individualised and medicalised constructions of disability inform health and safety. This has the dual effect of limiting disabled people's options and also of threatening their self-perceived options. It serves to reinforce feelings of dependency. We met some groups of people who would not access woodland without support from nondisabled people. In contrast, some of our respondents viewed the constant refrain of health and safety as a tiresome nuisance, but also as something they found exhilarating to challenge and to flout. For example, some focus group informants expressed views such as:

*...we got out to the country on our own. We'd never have done that before. We take risks we'd never have done.....I did have my heart in my mouth but we managed it...*

*We don't want to stop ourselves doing it because of worry.*

Whereas, for other informants, outdoor providers' constant references to risk and health and safety reinforced their view that the countryside was not for disabled people. It produced a "culture of fear" which limited their self-perceived options: it was not only urban streets that were unsafe and dangerous but also woodland and outdoor spaces. Some respondents expressed the view that they would not go on country walks on their own, they like having a non-disabled 'guide' there and felt more comfortable in company. They felt they needed one person to be at the front to open gates, check the path ahead etc and one to bring up the rear to make sure no one got lost or was in trouble. They expressed a real fear of getting stuck in the country, of having their wheelchairs breaking down. It is clear that the emphasis on risk avoidance creates a feeling of dependency for some disabled people. This is picked up and developed in the next section.

## *Risk and responsibility*

The issue(s) of risk and responsibility loom large in this study. As has already been stated the dominance of a medical construction of disability means that disabled people are viewed as vulnerable and so in need of protection. Simultaneously, the outdoors and woodland areas are socially constructed as wild, unruly and dangerous, requiring individuals to have a large amount of 'self sufficiency' and 'self reliance' to experience them safely. The meshing of these discourses, along with contemporary society's obsession with risk avoidance, results in disabled people's ventures into the outdoors perpetually being viewed, reacted to and managed through the lens of 'health and safety'.

At a practical level, outdoor service providers are pushed into being cautious about where disabled people can go and what they can do for fear of 'putting them in harms way'. Service providers not only see it as their responsibility to 'look after' disabled people, they also fear that they will be held accountable for any 'mishaps'. Our informants who use quad bikes and off-road scooters have expressed frustration about landowners reluctance to provide them with access because of the perceived 'risk':

*Insurance. It's always, they always say insurance. That's the first thing.*

*...There's a stigma about a quad bike, and then people, you know, you go racing them on tracks and stuff like that, and people have that perception in mind, that it's this big racing vehicle that somebody's gonna be whizzing around on, and you know, I sometimes get the response, now, of you know, it's like, well you won't go whizzing round on it, you know, at break speed will you?*

One group told us about a day out they went on where the organisers had arranged a 'nice gentle walk around a lake'. Not happy with this our informants opted for a walk of their own choosing and went up to the hills instead.

Disabled people are clearly viewed as risk to themselves and a risk to other people. They are infantilised by society and so are viewed as 'irresponsible' and incapable of assessing 'risk'. However, our respondents were very aware of the possible risks involved in using the outdoors and sought responsibility for their own actions. They calculate any risks of going into the countryside just as their non-disabled peers do (sometimes more so). They are aware of what assistance, equipment and emergency back-up they may require:

*When we go out we think of distance, battery and food. It's always a problem if the scooter breaks down.*

*We often go out on our own at home, but we have the number of local farmers, we know who to phone for help if the Trumper stops.*

Risks exist for all groups of disabled people and all were aware of it. For people with a visual impairment and those with a learning disability who may not have access to easy read maps there is an increased risk of getting lost. For people with a sensory impairment there was a risk of missing danger signals.

Expressions of risk assessment are not always as formalised as this informant's:

*We clearly have a considerable health and safety issue here, so all the routes are surveyed in advance and then the events themselves supported with rescue and recovery procedures, so in the event of anybody getting stuck, we can make sure they can get out.*

Disabled people also assess risk at a mundane level everyday in their lives. They recognise what they can and cannot do. Some disabled people are risk-takers, whereas others are not and they are their own experts on what they can and cannot do.

There is currently a great deal of debate going on between the Forestry Commission and the *Rough Riderz* over the use of quad bikes. This extends beyond their mere use as a mode of transport (see below). Downhill riders use adapted wheelchairs and need help getting to the top of mountains. Their preferred option is to be towed behind a quad bike. The Forestry Commission is wary of these users in general on the grounds of health and safety and are particularly concerned about the use of quad bikes for towing.

Much of the concern comes from mountain biking in general and there is some evidence to suggest that there may be a real fear of legal liability, as a Ranger told us:

*we are facing accident claims for people who've been injured up, whilst mountain biking so they're conscious of making sure that anything now, everything meets legal, is, is, is watertight legally, any arrangements about access.*

Having seen these riders in action, there would appear to be very little risk in being towed up the mountain compared to that experienced coming down.

Many of the rangers and other service providers were of course very aware of the risk associated with outdoor sports and activities and of the double edged nature of risk. If they made the area activity too safe it might, for some users, take some of the enjoyment of that activity away or impact on the whole experience of being in the country. As one ranger told us:

*...we have to make sure that our provision is as safe as it can be. .... we have to commit fairly hefty amounts of resources too to make sure that that, our part of the deal is covered. But it also means the type of trails that we're building, we're beginning to sort of think twice about*

*really risky types of trails. But of course that's the adrenalin thrill for the likes of the riders, like the Rough Riderz, you know the down hillers, that's the exact thrill they're after, hence the tension.*

These fears and concerns went beyond health and safety and arise from pre-held attitudes about disabled people. It is to a discussion of these that this document now turns.

### *Attitudes*

There is a strong undercurrent of belief suggesting that disabled people do not belong in the country, that not only is it not safe for them, but that there are just too many environmental barriers that are not amenable to change and disabled people cannot expect the countryside to be made available to them. This belief was found not just in nondisabled people, but in disabled people and in some of their organisations. Many organisations of and for disabled felt that disabled people are not regular users of the countryside and we all experienced this point of view as researchers. When we told friends and colleagues that we were doing this work many expressed surprised and wondered how disabled people expected the countryside to be made available to them.

The orthodox view seems to be that disabled people should not be in the countryside and further and to make it accessible to them requires 'special' interventions. As a ranger told us:

*I think, I think part of the barrier if you like is that it has to be a special thing. And I think when anything has to be a special thing, it's less likely to be taken up if you have to go out of your way to do something. ... I just think generally improving standards or paths, making grades more sustainable, making trails more sustainable, making them better constructed generally is improving access. So it doesn't have to be a special disabled trail that you try and point people to.*

Providing accessible paths, information in accessible formats or other adaptations is not embedded in the culture of many organisations; it is seen as an added extra, as something to be done if resources allow, it is 'special' provision aimed at 'special' people. This not only makes the provision of accessible paths etc less likely it also means that disabled people are less likely to be included within mainstream provision and will continue to be seen as special cases.

Providing access to the country and to woodlands is often disparaged as 'Political Correctness Gone Mad'. The recent debate around 'kissing gates' and stiles clearly demonstrates this. A relatively small campaign which aimed to point out that 95% of paths in the county are made inaccessible to wheelchair users and many other disabled people though the presence of

such obstacles<sup>4</sup> received little support from other countryside users, suggesting that they do not understand nor expect disabled people to be in the country. Janet Street Porter, normally an advocate for wider access made the following comment in the *Independent on Sunday*:

*The latest features of our heritage to come under attack from politically correct public servants are humble stiles and kissing gates. The Disability Discrimination Act requires reasonable adjustments to allow the disabled easy access to the countryside. Although kissing gates are an excellent way of allowing walkers access while enclosing cattle, they are not thought to be wheelchair-friendly. Neither are stiles, and now local councils are being urged to replace them with larger wheelchair-friendly metal gates unless they can be deemed a historic feature... I want everyone to enjoy the countryside, but surely someone somewhere is brave enough to stand up and scream. This is bloody ridiculous! (2/12/07)*

Similar comments were made by commentators in *The Observer* (2/12/07).

Stiles are a major problem for disabled people and they affect not only those with a mobility impairment. They are a particular problem for those who use assist dogs, not to mention those with small children in buggies. Assist dogs are rarely trained in their use and the dogs do not know what to do when the first meet them, so one of our informants told us:

*Many dogs don't know what a stile is, it's not part of their training and they've never come up against one before, it could and should be part of their training – perhaps a reflection that their owners are not expected to access the countryside.*

Barbed wire close to stiles is an added problem; for even if the handler can get over the stile, barbed wire may prevent the dog from getting through the fence unharmed. Dog gates are rarely present. One of our informants, an 80 year old woman with a visual impairment, described a ramble she had recently gone on where she encountered 23 stiles in the course of a nine mile walk. While this did not put her off, others who were walking with her got half way and refused to carry on, opting instead to get a bus back.

The use of easy access, self closing, self latching gates does not mark the end of the outdoors as we know it. They are not an integral part of the British countryside. The arguments above are very similar to those raised when the DDA was first passed with respect to the step (see Madigan and Milner 1999 for a discussion on the step).

For people with a learning disability or a mental health problem attitudes were also a major barrier. There was an expectation that people with a learning disability would either not choose to, or not have the capacity to, access the

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<sup>4</sup> 'Time to say goodbye to the kissing gate?' *The Disabled Rambler* January 2008  
<http://www.disabledramblers.co.uk/NewsletterE.pdf>

countryside on their own and that they would only go as part of a group under supervision. This is clearly not the case and several of our informants regularly went for walks on their own. For some of the people with a mental health problem that we talked to, the stigma that they faced in the urban environment was just as present in rural settings. People's attitudes and responses to their behaviours often made them feel uncomfortable, with some stating that this was even more apparent in the countryside as they did not have the comfort of anonymity that they could rely on in urban settings.

It should be pointed out however that most if not all of the staff we talked to who worked for the Forestry Commission, the National Trust, the Woodland Trust or other countryside agency did not share these views on a personal level. Many of the rangers and other workers were very strong advocates for the countryside and strongly argued for greater provision for disabled people. Many of them were also extremely good working with the groups of disabled people we took out on the study days, supporting Tregaskis (2004) claim that rangers possess the skills to include disabled people.

It is also true that many of the organisations have taken significant steps in recent years to try and improve access for disabled people. The DDA has in part been responsible for this, although there was some concern expressed about how the actual changes have been initiated by workers on the ground:

*[The DDA has] spurred a lot of organisations on to put something out there, publicly, like a particular policy initiative, or whatever but, and maybe do things quite quickly, which is not always a bad thing – whether it's meant that they've gone through it in a consultative process, working with disabled people to find the right way forward because they've been trying to whiz things through, I'm not always sure that every organisation has done it the way that I would think is most appropriate, in my humble opinion/*

### *Training*

The Forestry Commission, the National Trust, the National Parks and most other outdoor service providers have all recognised that they need to implement training programmes to try and change these prevailing attitudes. They recognise that unless such attitudes are changed they will not be able to challenge the discrimination experienced by disabled people. Organisations of and for disabled people were very keen to promote disability equality and disability awareness training as the means to resolve this issue, so one provider of training told us:

*Able-bodied land managers need disability awareness training, to understand what people's aspirations are and also to get some view as to what people can reasonably do, which is where the work we're doing with the National Trust is an exemplar, I think, of good practice, cos we go to various National Trust estates, we take part in talks and then we*

*go out and look at the site and we go round and show people what can and can't be done.*

There are many organisations who now provide such training but there is wide variation in the different philosophies adopted by these organisations. In a recent mapping project on disability equality training in Scotland over 50 such groups were identified in Scotland alone (Watson and McFarlane 2006). There is some evidence to suggest that rural organisations are having trouble locating local groups and are relying on national organisations:

*I mean this guy told my wife, he didn't tell me he told my wife that he'd searched all over the place to find someone who could advise him. Now we've been here for years. But if they don't know we're here and they don't know where to go, it's a great general lack of knowledge and information.*

Whilst national organisations are capable of providing training they often fail to understand local issues, and if they are large organisations for disabled people they tend to have less focus on rights. For example when we were discussing access issues with different organisations of and for disabled people who provide training we got very different responses. One group, for example, who do not have a rights based approach, felt that people with a learning difficulty were unlikely to try to access rural areas on their own and that there was little need to create services for them and, as a consequence did not include access for people with a learning disability in their training courses. Not all training is equal and some may actually serve to reinforce stereotypes and attitudes in workers.

There are other issues related to equality training. It can, for example, be seen as a one off and as a means by which organisations can meet a legal need. Many of the workers we spoke to were aware of this and took steps to try and ensure this did not happen:

*Not just a one-off, it was done, that tick box, move on – it's very much not that. It's how we then make sure it doesn't become that, which is not what I'm gonna allow to happen.*

Those organisations who felt they had been successful in this cited continual co-operation and engagement with local groups of disabled people. As a result of this continual engagement with disabled people they had been able to produce courses which allowed them to take in to account local issues and develop a content that targeted the appropriate people at the appropriate level. This they argued was the main reason for their success.

*And it seems that the best way forward is to train through experience, so what I'm trying to put in place through our National Nature Reserve managers is training that ensures that we've trained through engaging with disabled people. They are the customers, they are the experts, which of course we've got to get breadth of disabilities covered in this,*

*and through that working with disabled people, what happens is awareness gets raised and training takes place.*

This can be achieved relatively cheaply:

*we've all got to make a bigger effort to make people aware of what can be done, moderately, you know we're not asking everybody to spend £300,000*

The recently passed Disability Equality Duty (2005) and the requirements of continual involvement with groups of disabled people has strengthened this relationship and there is clear evidence that this is now becoming the norm.

### **Barriers: experience in accessing the woodlands**

This section explores the barriers disabled people faced as they attempted to access countryside. It presents data on information, on transport to and from the woodlands, on resources and other barriers encountered whilst in the countryside. It looks first at information needs it then moves on to look at the barriers people experience when in the countryside. It may be argued that many of these barriers exist because disabled people are not expected to access these areas and that by their existence they reinforce to disabled people that they should not go to the country and that it is not a place for them.

#### *Information*

Provision of information about access to a rural area was cited by almost all of our disabled interviewees, representatives from organisations of and for disabled people, and members of our focus groups as a major problem and a huge barrier to disabled people's ability to enjoy and access rural areas. So, a Chair of a national disability organisations told us:

*Well, I think one of the biggest issues, I think, for disabled people, is lack of useful information – and that, I think, restricts many of the opportunities.*

It was, many stated, hard to get detailed information about basic issues on access, on transport and on amenities and facilities. Many commented on the poor availability of information prior to departure on topics such as how to actually get to and access the site, what facilities were available at the site and once at the site, how to negotiate their way around the site. For many disabled people preplanning is essential and without such information many people choose not to go. Where information was available it was often not in a format suitable for all to access; for example whilst some sites host good internet guides these are often not fully accessible by people with a visual impairment. Photographs were often not described in the text and there were no written descriptions of maps or walking routes made available. A lot of

printed material was not produced in a format that was easily accessible to those with a specific learning disability or those who were colour blind:

*A lot of statistics show that many corporate websites are not accessible to disabled people, and I've just got something from, I had a note from the Forestry Commission, and all the printing, which I've just printed out is a very mild, brown colour, on a very pale, sort of orange colour, and this particular logo is a mix of brown and green and all those colours, for some people with colour blindness or dyslexia, for instance, they wouldn't be accessible.*

Information on access, when available, was often confined solely to wheelchair access. Advice and information for those with other impairments was scarce, this included information for people with other mobility impairments, people with a sensory impairment and people with a learning disability:

*You know, the public tends to view access in terms of wheelchair access, but you know, they forget that people with visual impairment and people with a hearing impairment have completely different issues but just as important.*

Access to information in suitable formats was at the top of many people's wish list.

On our field trips it was, again, rare to find information available in alternative formats. In organising these visits this lack of useful information became apparent. In one case, when we had to change a venue due to an outbreak of foot and mouth disease we encountered substantial problems in getting access information about other sites in the locale and one of our participants had to volunteer to do a pre-visit to the site to check on the suitability of alternative venues. In our site visits we found no leaflets in either Braille or large print, neither did we find information produced in an easy read format suitable for people with a learning disability. Many of our informants with a visual impairment commented on the lack of information about features.

Audio description was also rare. Through good audio description it is possible to, as one participant described it '*paint pictures with words*'. The National Trust have developed very good audio guides for visually impaired people at a large number of their sites, although these tend to be confined to the houses and their use in the outdoors is rare.

Whilst many Visitors Centres make use of videos and other new technologies again it was rare to find these with subtitles or audio-descriptions.

Basic information on accessibility of paths was often missing. One parent of a child with a mobility impairment for example told us:

*I think people, there's not enough information about accessibility see it's only through experimenting that I've known that things are not*

*accessible, for example, if I wanted to take my daughter to go from the centre of Edinburgh to Balerno on that route, it's only because I've cycled it myself and had to lift my bike up some steps or whatever that I know which parts of it are accessible and which aren't. What I would actually like to be able to find that out before I went if you see what I mean if I was taken there.*

Preplanning is important and is very much part of the lives for many disabled people. Going to the countryside without planning was, for those with a physical or visual impairment 'a waste of time'. So we were told:

*What is a waste of time is just going out in the countryside with your scooter and hoping to do a ramble. 90% of the time you won't be able to. You've got to know where to go, and that information, a database of accessible places is hugely needed.*

There is no current data base and although programmes such as *Countryside For All* exist there is no central database which holds information on access guides. Many local groups have produced their own access guides to their own immediate locale. In the North East of England for example, Shopmobility, have produced an access guide to walks in the area as part of what they call a 'Break Free' pack, these are currently only available to local people. Acquiring these if you are not from the area, or not connected to Shopmobility, would be difficult.

There is also currently no universal signage on the access guides that are and the different agencies all use different signage and terms. This can be particularly confusing, as an officer with the National Trust told us:

*And, if you're trying to go on a trek across a site that goes onto somebody else's site – so, say from a National Trust property, going straight onto a British Waterways tow path, going onto the Environment Agency site or something, we might be using different symbol sets, we might be using different terminology to mean different things, and that just gets very confusing for our visitors and they're like "Well I don't even know what I'm gonna get here. I'm not sure I actually want to go."*

As a consequence, many disabled people only go to those sites where information is available. Some, particularly parents, did take chances, and were caught out, however they felt that unless they took such risks they would never be able to access the countryside. Some of our informants however did not take the risk, simply electing not to go. Others, who go, often go despite the paucity of information. So a Deaf person informed us:

*Not tried phoning ahead to get an interpreter because expectations are so low and you don't find this sort of thing elsewhere. Rest assured, you get tired of this.*

For preplanning to work, information must be readily available. If it is not, people with little or no experience of the country may choose not to go:

*Yeah, I think they do, but I think it depends on the disability and on the provision that's there, because they're gonna have to know, well depending on the type of disability, there may be information available before they get there, which, I think, is not always available – so it does mean that people will tend to go to sites where they can get that information, or they're limited to sites that they can get to.*

Where information was available, many expressed concern about its actual quality and felt unable to trust what information they were given. So, a parent of a disabled child told us:

*I think sometimes people think if they've got a disabled toilet or and it's reasonably flat, it's accessible, but sometimes when you actually go and test it out, you find that things that maybe people haven't noticed like just, you know a slope that's too steep for, to safely you know go down in a wheelchair or use in a walker, but because it's not got steps or something like that, you know that there's a lot of things that there's a sort of discrepancy between them saying it's accessible, you know I would be a bit suspicious...*

This lack of trust is often based on very real experiences:

*We hadn't been here very long, my wife and I, when we learnt about a forest walk that was supposed to be accessible ..... you started with a very steep decent, a very steep decent, and then you went on the walk and it was up and it was down and there was only one seat around the whole walk, which I guess was about 900 meters perhaps, maybe longer. And I'm, on one of the gradients, it was very steep and I was having to push my wheelchair and my wife was pushing and after a bit she said, 'well when is it my turn in the wheelchair?' And I just stopped and collapsed with laughter cos it was so funny. And there was a toilet half the way round which Sherpa Tenzing would have been pleased to be able to get in. It was up a gradient you wouldn't believe. Anyway we completed this walk, we did complete it, we met a couple another disabled guy with his wife and they'd given up.*

Members of the Disabled Ramblers Association argued that rather than simply describing a route as accessible, pictures of the paths and descriptions of the slopes, particularly where access might be an issue, should be made available on line so that disabled people themselves could judge what they felt was accessible rather than having to rely on the views of people who have little or no experience of what disabled people need, want or are capable of doing. One example of information provision that the DRA felt was particularly good was that provided by the South West Coast Path (see <http://www.southwestcoastpath.com/main/walks/index.cfm?fsa=dspWalkSearchShort>). By using photos disabled people are able to judge for themselves whether routes are actually accessible to those with a high level of skill or those who use scooters, provided those scooters are of a high quality.

Poor information provision is a well recognised problem by most of the people who work in this area and they all agreed that there is room for a great deal of improvement. Almost all our informants told us it was 'On the list of things to do'.

*But what we're working on, at the moment, is to create a pre-visit leaflet which will have that information on it, and then that'll be available on the website as well, and then they'll have more detailed interpretation will be available on some of the sites, when they get there.*

Some organisations do appear to be further down the line than others. The National Trust, for example, have a well established set of guidelines and most, if not all of their properties have access guides, although these are often confined to the house and do not always give full guidance to walks etc within the grounds of the property. The Trust do engage with their members and do advertise what is available widely. Many of our informants were full of praise for the work of the National Trust in this regard:

*The National Trust Handbook is full of information like this, and they do a special bulletin on accessible places to visit too. The National Trust does extremely well, and I can rely upon... when I want to go and visit a National Trust site, I can get a very good idea by just reading the booklet as to what is possible to do there. And they do a wonderful job, and this kind of standard of the document is something I'd like to see much more widely available.*

Our research uncovered a training need in the provision of this information. Not only was it clear that there was a dearth of such information it was also apparent that many of the workers and organisations were unsure how best to fill that void. They were unsure what access information it was that disabled people wanted or how best to provide that information. There was however some evidence that this sort of knowledge is available, it is just that it is not well known, as one ranger told us:

*I came across on the Forestry Commission's intranet, a document that was produced in 2004 by the Fieldfare Trust, and it was how to do access audits on trails. And I didn't even know that document existed. And all the people I've spoken to that obviously it's limited since then, nobody knew that we'd even got this thing.*

The type of advice and information wanted by our informants varied by impairment group. Those with a mobility impairment, for example wanted to know about physical access issues, such as the presence of steps, styles, gates etc and also, for those with a mobility impairment but who didn't use a wheelchair, access to seating along the paths. Seating is important both to those with a mobility impairment and those who may be with people who use a wheelchair. People with a visual impairment wanted information on what was available to them at the site and the types of walks they could go on. If sites are to ensure that they are fulfilling the needs of their disabled clients

they must consult with them and ask them what it is that they want and in what format.

Information needs of course extend beyond information about access. Many of the Rangers we met had excellent knowledge of their particular area and were skilled communicators and employed a range of methods to provide participants with a full experience of their environment, as described in the researcher's fieldnotes:

*As we walk along Charlotte notices a distinctive smell, Stephen [ranger] tells us that it is ground elder. He comes over to Mandy and Matthew. 'How's your sense of smell?' he asks Mandy. She grins as he rubs a small bud and places it under her nose, she smiles and says she can smell it. He moves over to Matthew, who can smell it a little bit.*

Some of the forest rangers clearly have most of the skills they need but often don't have the confidence to act in an appropriate manner. Further not all visitors to woodlands interact with rangers in the way that many of our informants did on our site visits. In these visits the rangers were able to provide the information which was so clearly lacking and was one of the main reasons why the participants enjoyed the days so much.

### *Transport*

Transport to and from the site was one of the other principal barriers to accessing the countryside cited by our informants. This was true for all groups of disabled people regardless of their impairment. One of our disabled interviewees put this simply:

*It's not access in the country that's the problem, it's access to the country.*

This was true for many people across the range of impairments groups. Many disabled people either do not own cars or are unable to drive and as a result are dependent on public transport. Not only does this add to the cost of a visit, transport links to many woodlands and rural areas are poor, information about them is generally not easily available, very few are accessible and it is often difficult or impossible to find accessible public transport. This affects all disabled people, but in particular those who could not drive:

*When you're blind you can't drive a car and public transport [to the countryside] is so poor. I'm only 4 or 5 miles from a woodland but can't get there.*

Whilst some transport might be accessible to wheelchairs, it is often difficult to find public transport that can interface with scooters. Scooters and large powered wheelchairs are very difficult to accommodate in any transport including privately owned cars:

*Getting to the Forest with any equipment, including a powered chair or a scooter is very difficult, even a powered chair requires a very big car, which not everyone can afford to either buy or run.*

Even specialist transport providers, such as Dial-a-Ride or Handicabs can not always accommodate scooters and even when they can it is rare for them to travel beyond city boundaries (Blenkinsop 2007).

Information about accessible transport was also often difficult to find. Where there was transport, this often dropped off some distance from the actual park or access to the park was difficult, as a parent of a disabled child told us:

*Well I mean sometimes if it's a matter of getting off the bus and a mile walk or something, I mean you don't mind that too much. But if it's a long walk to get there and then you've got all the woodland trails and then a long walk back, it's maybe it's a bit much.*

On one of our site visits there was a fairly regular bus, albeit serviced by an inaccessible bus, which dropped off on a very busy road without a pedestrian crossing. This meant that, despite public transport, the site was inaccessible to people with a visual impairment.

Again, most of those who worked in the industry were aware of the problems associated with transport:

*I know that, certainly, we get transport [put] to us, as a big barrier for people accessing sites.*

*And so it's really folk with cars that can get [here] the easiest.*

### *Obstacles to inclusion*

There are a number of other barriers that deny disabled people access to rural areas. While some of the access issues faced by disabled people are the result of the material make up of the land, there are a lot of barriers and obstacles that are the result of human action and many of these can be removed or at least ameliorated. We have discussed the issue of stiles and kissing gates already but there are a number of other barriers, which we describe below.

Accessible toilets are now much more widely available than in the past and almost all visitor centres have them. However, access to toilets still remains a big problem for disabled people, in particular wheelchair users. If people access the country by using scooters these can make it impossible to use the toilets as, whilst they might be built to accommodate wheelchairs, scooters are larger and require a much larger floor space and have a much wider turning circle. Toilets built to current standards for wheelchairs access may not be suitable for people who use scooters. When we took a group of disabled people, who all used scooters, to a park this was a major problem

that we had not foreseen. It not only affected access to the toilet but also access to the café and the visitor's centre.

Toileting raises another problem for disabled people. If nondisabled people need to use the toilet in the country when they are away from a visitors centre or similar building, there is always a place to go, for disabled people this is not always the case and a lack of accessible toilets can prevent some people from venturing too far off the beaten track. The Disabled Ramblers Association have got round this problem by buying their own portable toilet which they pull behind them on a trailer. This has opened up many areas and trails that would have otherwise been closed to them. Whilst this is a very good solution it is not an option that is open to all.

The use of assist dogs by disabled people can also create problems.

*They don't recognise hearing dogs, people don't talk about assist dogs they talk about guide dogs.*

There are areas designated dog free, often for very good reasons, but almost all of these allow assist dogs for the blind. Many people who are deaf and hard of hearing also use assist dogs and these can be essential in the country. They warn of approaching cyclists and other potential hazards (see below) that deaf people might miss. Their use is however not widely known and we were told of examples where they and their owners had been refused access.

Other users of the countryside can also impact on disabled people's ability to access, and enjoy, rural environments. One particular group that caused problems were cyclists, particularly for people with a visual or hearing impairment:

*Sharing trails with cyclists is a big issue. It's difficult when you can't see or hear them, we need designated areas, people are generally good when they see a guide dog but not always and they don't know if somebody is deaf.*

Being unable to either see or hear approaching cyclists, many of whom refused to slow down, made many of our informants wary of using paths that were shared with cyclists, particularly in areas where there were a lot of cyclists.

Some disabled people are denied access to sites because of the type of mobility aid they choose to use when in the country. Whilst for many, scooters fit their needs others like to use quad bikes, arguing that even the most robust and best designed scooters are unable to cross the sort of terrain that they wish to traverse:

*I did try a lot of the purpose built, well I won't say purpose built, the specific off-road wheelchairs and stuff that were available on the market – the electric wheelchairs, but they just, you know, they aren't*

*capable of really sort of getting you deep into the heart of the countryside, independently and reliably, because, you know, battery powered vehicles, the range is massively affected by, you know, going off road and they're just, basically, electric vehicles are hopeless when it comes to off road usage, and you know, I was looking for something more extreme.*

Quad bikes are banned from many FC and other woodland sites but disabled people can apply to the local offices for a permit which may or may not be given and appears to depend on the whim of the officer approached. This lack of consistency is a problem:

*I wanted to do it legally, but to actually use a quad bike, you know, on Forest Commission land, or anybody's land is, technically speaking, illegal, unless it's a byway... if I do have any sort of gripes with the Forestry Commission, it's about the issues of getting a coordinated response from them. Basically, if you go to a local office, they might say, I know, I went up to Scotland on holiday once, and I wanted to take the quad with me, and I just phoned up the local office and one chap was extremely helpful, and just issued me with a permit on the spot, and off I was able to go with my partner, you know, exploring the forest roads and stuff like that. But, on the other hand, there are numerous offices that I've phoned up, that have said, you know, "We can't possibly do that, that's against the rules" and then you have to sort of take it further and it's just an uncoordinated approach to exactly what response you get.*

Mobility devices are legally defined as follows:

*Class 3 - Mechanically propelled invalid carriages that are constructed or adapted to be capable of exceeding a speed of 4mph but incapable of exceeding a speed of 8mph on the level under its own power (generally powered wheelchairs and other outdoor vehicles including scooters intended for use on roads/highways). They must be fitted with a device capable of limiting the maximum speed to 4mph for use when travelling on footways. The unladen weight must not exceed 150kgs. (The Use of Invalid Carriages on the Highways Regulations 1988 (made under the provisions of the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970))*

Some organisations, such as the DRA are not keen on the use of quad bikes on paths, arguing that they are unsuitable for use on footpaths, which perhaps misses the point made in the above quote, where it is clear that people want to use them in areas where there are currently no footpaths.

Many disabled people feel the cold more than nondisabled people and they need access to hot water, which is not always readily available:

*We do have problems keeping warm, even when the weather is mild. I use a hot water bottle, getting somewhere to fill it up is very helpful. Cafés often won't do it for free.*

There are also a number of physical barriers that can exclude disabled people. Many of these have been identified by the Fieldfare Trust. They argue that, for good disabled access, an accessible visitor's centre should be located within 500m of good, off road parking, paths should have a maximum gradient of 1:10 with a hard surface and that loose stones should be at a minimum and less than 10mm in size. There should be no stiles, steps or fences blocking the path and gaps in the path should not exceed 12mm. There must be a passing place every 150m and a resting place with a seat every 300m (<http://www.fieldfare.org.uk/rural.htm>). These are very laudable aims and have been welcomed by some disabled people:

*It works quite well, people are pleased to have some sort of guidelines that they can work to, to get it right and you come, particularly in open space, or green space as we call it now. You know there's projects going ahead and people are very, very pleased to have a document or something that will guide them as to what they should be doing.*

Other organizations of disabled people have expressed concern arguing that they are unachievable and that they put people off attempting to make paths accessible:

*The Fieldfare Trust, its standards and guidance, hasn't been all that very successful, its standards are too high, and they've excluded hills for example, they talked about the need for ramps and they talked about the requirements that they shouldn't have stones of more than 10mm in diameter on a path. And it's virtually impossible to achieve those standards except with huge cost, or using tarmac, and people on the whole, I think, have found that because of that, they've lost some of their value. They're part of the scene now rather than the total scene. The people who find it this way wanted to see that as the standard, you see? Now, our experience of that is frankly they were counterproductive, because landowners would grasp this, say "oh, this is what they've said in this book, there's absolutely no way I could provide that, therefore there's no point in my providing any access at all.*

The access guides found in the BT Countryside for All Accessibility Standards and the Countryside Agency Management Zones were seen by this group as being more realistic. These are however only linked to physical impairment and little mention is made of improving access for people with other impairments. All these needs can only be ascertained by working with various groups of and for disabled people and they include access to information in suitable formats, transport issues and training of staff on attitudes to disabled people. Whilst these guides were welcomed by many woodland and rural organisations, there was a feeling that the challenge lay not in preparing the standards or in circulating them, but in implementing them and keeping access at the top of the agenda:

*I think it, yeah, it's gonna be quite challenging, keeping that momentum.*

### *Finance and resource needs*

Finances, or rather the lack of them, present a major barrier to disabled people's participation and access to the countryside. All our informants mentioned expense as a problem. This is as true for those who want to access the woodlands as it is for those who manage them. In this respect disabled people merely mirror their nondisabled peers in that it is well documented that those with higher levels of income (and higher occupational status) are consistently the principal consumers of countryside recreation (Gratton and Taylor, 1985; Curry, 1994). Disabled people are disproportionately represented in the poorest sections of society. Not only are employment rates among disabled people low, over 40% live in poverty.

Resources effect disabled people's ability to access and enjoy the countryside in a number of ways. Not only is it is expensive to access the country and to get transport to and from woodlands it is also expensive to buy the goods and equipment normally required when accessing the outdoors, such as waterproof clothing and appropriate footwear, as one of our study participants told us:

*I've turned up here with all the kit, most disabled people don't have the money for this and therefore won't come.*

In addition to these costs, many disabled people incur additional expenditure as a result of their impairment. Specific benefits, such as the disability living allowance will not help meet these costs. These additional costs can include specialist wheelchairs, with off-road 'mountain bike' type wheelchairs costing upwards of £6000. Normal, everyday wheelchairs cannot be taken off road. This includes both manual and powered chairs.

Many people with a mobility impairment used scooters to ease their access in the country. Scooters are more than just mobility aids, they promote confidence, a feeling of independence and increase the enjoyment of the country and activity:

*I really like the use of power as opposed to manual chair, which many use on their own, as I feel completely in control and independent, I fell sure that with a powered mobility aid I can get through on my own and also that the walk is not a long slog but a pleasure. I'm able to enjoy myself and the view.*

Everyday scooters which are primarily designed for shopping, are not stable enough for off-road use and the ride is very uncomfortable over rough terrain. There are a number of models designed specifically for off road use but these are not only expensive (the model recommended by the Disabled Rambler's

Association costs over £6000), they require upkeep, are large, very difficult to transfer to and from the site and difficult to store when not in use.

Maintenance and storage is a problem for these scooters. They also require regular use, as a community project in the North of England recently discovered when it purchased three such models which, because they were used rarely, failed and had to be discarded after a year. Some sites also mentioned problems with regard to training both of staff and users of the mobility aids and insurance and they were unsure if they were covered, as one Ranger told us:

*They're very big, too big to store on site and we don't have a budget to maintain them. There's also issues of liability if let out to people unsupervised.*

Almost all our informants who had a mobility impairment felt that there should be more powered scooters available for hire and that this was the only way that their own storage and transport problem could be overcome. Some sites have now bought scooters for lending out to disabled users, with the National Trust leading the way:

*There are 60 sites, or is it more?... between 60 and 100 sites the National Trust has where you can borrow a scooter, and there are somewhere like 50 or 60 sites which are not National Trust which also you can borrow scooters as well, in the countryside, and I think myself, a growth of that sort of scheme would be immensely valuable, hugely valuable. It is growing.*

The National Trust have worked closely with the DRA in developing this scheme and they have provided training on the management and maintenance of scooter fleets. They have also worked with the National Trust to develop training courses for users of these scooters. These last for about 20 minutes and include advice on where is safe for people to go on the site and finish with a short practical test. This course has been based on the DRA's own experience of lending out scooters. The DRA have also encouraged local National Trust sites to work closely with disabled people in developing these courses, arguing that disabled people would be the best placed to be able to offer advice on where is safe to go and what the potential pitfalls are on any given site.

There are of course some disabled people who have the financial capital to buy and maintain their own off-road scooters. It was clear that these people were far more able to access the country but they all had to own large cars and have a large house with a garage for storing the equipment. Many of these people came from a single organisation; the Disabled Ramblers Association. Not only were this group able to afford their own scooters, they also knew how to apply for funds from bodies and had, in the past, managed to raise funds to buy spare scooters for hiring out, at a nominal cost, to those wishing to trial the scooters and to buy their own portable accessible toilet and trailer for towing both the toilet and a spare scooter in case of breakdown.

Photographs on the Disabled Ramblers' website shows just the sort of terrain these specialist vehicles can cover (<http://www.disabledramblers.co.uk/gallery.shtml>). They allow access to a range of areas that would not be thought possible for disabled people. Our research interviews with people who had used these scooters clearly showed just how far people were able to go on them.

*[Scooters] allow us to really go off the beaten trail, it's exciting and what makes for a good walk, is this excitement, this thought that we've pushed ourselves.*

One group talked about a trip to Cornwall with these scooters where they went down a path not knowing if they would be able to make it to the end and how it got narrower and narrower along a cliff top, they realised they couldn't turn back but had to go on. This was, they told us 'thrilling'. Trampers, the type of scooter most use and recommend, let them do this.

We also met people who had used or were using 'shopping' type scooters in rural areas and whilst they could do this they were aware of the risks they took and many had broken down. Not only are these scooters potentially dangerous they are also uncomfortable.

There are other forms of mobility aids, including adapted bikes, which allow a wheelchair to be attached at the front and some sites are also hiring these out. In these the wheelchair user is a passenger and they are available for hire at some FC sites and other places. Downhill, mountain bike type wheelchairs are also now becoming increasingly popular, although their use, as we discussed above, is not without controversy.

Resources are not just a problem for individual disabled people or for their organisations with regard to the provision of scooters and other mobility aids. Providing and maintaining access is expensive and requires a budget. On one visit we commented to a ranger about the lack of signage for people with a visual impairment and received the following reply:

*Well yes, it is a problem, that we don't have signs, but they've got no money to make signs and we've raised it with the Forestry Commission.*

Resources for maintenance is also a major problem:

*On a practical level as well I think one of the realities of my experience is that you can get the capital and the excitement if you like to build something from fresh, but then all too often, the maintenance just isn't there.*

We heard examples of this both on the upkeep of both paths and equipment, especially scooters and other mobility aids. We were told that often

equipment is bought out of 'end of year' allowances, without thought being given to the long term financial implications.

A summary of the barriers faced by different impairment groups is contained in Table 2.

**Table 2: Barriers experienced by disabled people by impairment grouping**

<b>Barriers/ impairment group</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>Transport</b>	<b>Attitudes</b>	<b>Physical environment</b>	<b>Resources and facilities</b>	<b>Prior experiences</b>
<b>Mental health problems</b>		Lack of public transport	lack of understanding of needs of this group by other countryside users and staff at certain perceived inappropriate behaviours, inability to go with an organised group at set times	Environments can be oppressive for some e.g. enclosed woodlands, may be disorienting; for others wide spaces problematic	Financial lack of finances to enable excursions or purchase of appropriate equipment	Lack of understanding from others may make people reluctant to venture outdoors
<b>Physical Impairment</b>	Lack of appropriate information at the planning stage of excursion of accessibility. On site: height and location of information boards present difficulty for wheelchair users.	Lack of public transport	Perceptions of risk by staff/managers.	Poor paths, gates, stiles, lack of resting places/shelter maintenance of paths	Financial lack of finances to enable excursions or purchase of appropriate equipment  Cost of specialist equipment  Lack of accessible toilets, suitable trails which are challenging, accessible picnic benches for those who use mobility aids	Lack of opportunity to get outdoors means confidence in the outdoors may be low

<b>Learning difficulties</b>	Easy read formats not readily available	Lack of public transport	Assumption that go as group or accompanied, lack of understanding around people's needs and capabilities		Financial lack of finances to enable excursions or purchase of appropriate equipment	
<b>Sensory Impairment</b>						
<b>Visual Impairment</b>	Pre-site visit information lacking which could assist understanding the layout of paths/trails, lack of range of formats for information, audio description poor or non existent, tactile maps, way finding markers not tactile. Individuals may not be aware of services such as ranger service as a result. On site information boards difficult to read due to formatting. Signage for directions located poorly. Braille lacking, font types	Lack of public transport On site transport may be necessary to reach the visitor centre	Assumption of dependency by staff/ fellow outdoors enthusiasts	Even paths, low lying branches general maintenance of paths. Lack of tapping barriers to enable people to negotiate site. Electric fences	Lack of finances to enable excursions or purchase of appropriate equipment  Lack of access for assist dogs, lack of facilities for assist dogs place to spend, water needs	Poor experience of a site may make people reluctant to visit again

	and sizes, formats inappropriate. Colour contrast					
<b>D/deaf</b>	Lack of range of formats for information, lack of subtitling of video information, lack of interpreters	Lack of public transport			<p>Lack of finances to enable excursions or purchase of appropriate equipment</p> <p>Lack of training for access dogs</p> <p>Lack of interpreters on guided walks; poor lighting impedes ability to lip read/ signing. Lack of facilities for assist dogs lack of facilities for assist dogs place to spend, water needs</p>	<p>Cyclists coming up from behind can be disorienting, little or no understanding of D/deaf people's needs</p>

## Forestry Commission: policy and legislation

This final section looks in particular at recent policy developments and how they have impacted on access for disabled people.

The DDA is recognised as a significant piece of legislation which has raised awareness of the rights of disabled people throughout the UK. Similar to the Diversity Review findings, our respondents agreed that outdoor providers recognised and acted upon the DDA, but that change has been slow. A number of limitations with the legislation were identified and this had a knock on effect on the way providers engaged with the legislation. The lack of guidance produced by government on outdoor access has resulted in providers being unsure of issues such as what is a reasonable adjustment and whether they provide a service. The actions of larger providers such as the FC in the production of guidance have helped to clarify these issues through improving the sector's knowledge of what access means. A number of organisations pointed to the lack of case law around access to the outdoors as a significant issue in the development of practice in this area. However, there is an over emphasis on physical aspects of access to the detriment of other aspects such as information. Tied to this overemphasis on physical aspects of access is an automatic assumption - often unrealistic - that the law would be too costly to comply with:

*My first meeting with a group of tourism providers ... was four years ago, and in that room they were all grimacing ... they were going at me "we'll all go bust, I'm going out of business, I'm giving up, I've been here for 20 years, I'm not doing it any more, I can't do this DDA stuff." I went to the same group only three weeks ago ... [I] said "You're all smiling, you're all still here, none of you have gone bust, isn't it wonderful?"*

In some informants' opinion, only a tokenistic engagement with the DDA on the part of many providers is apparent. An example of such tokenism is the development of one accessible trail within a larger site rather than adopting a more holistic approach and endeavouring to improve access throughout the site. In part, this is related to an over emphasis on physical access, often tied to dominant constructions of disabled people as being synonymous with wheelchair users. A number of representatives did feel that this was changing within the sector, albeit slowly, with more organisations recognising the diverse nature of access to include the needs of people with a range of impairments. The most important area for many groups is access to information in appropriate formats.

In contrast, participants view the DED as a potentially powerful piece of legislation, the effects of which have yet to be fully realised. It was generally agreed that the DED was already having an impact on the provision of goods and services throughout the sector. The DED with its emphasis on engagement with disabled people has compelled public bodies to actively seek out the views of this group

Anecdotally, differences in legislation between the devolved governments has arguably had an impact on disabled people's use of the outdoors. In particular, differences in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act and the Crow Act in their recognition of disabled people's use of motorised vehicles to assist in access to the outdoors has resulted in some individuals travelling to Scotland to enjoy specific leisure pursuits.

*'Getting on and doing'*

One respondent felt that by producing guidance documents the sector had gained confidence in tackling issues, but observed that:

*I think there is a danger of having too many [policy guidance] and spending your time preparing lots of guidance publication rather than getting on and doing*

Resource commitments of time, training and money, as we argue above, are felt to be the biggest barriers to the implementation of policies. While a number of rangers spoken to had received some basic 'disability training', all welcomed the opportunity for further training. As noted by one organisation, there is a need to target training towards the needs of staff through all levels of the sector. Furthermore, there was recognition amongst ground staff that while they may be aware of the issues in their locality, their views and experiences may not be heeded at the strategic level and vice versa.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

### Conclusion

Disabled people are a diverse group with a range of experiences, views and needs. As such, their reasons for accessing woodlands and the countryside more generally are similar to those of non-disabled people. It is also clear that for some, access to the countryside is an important part of their lives. However, there are a range of barriers that act to mitigate against disabled people's ability to experience the countryside. These barriers include attitudes, lack of facilities and equipment, poor provision of information in suitable formats, transport issues, resources. It is clear that many disabled people feel that they are not 'expected' to be either found in, or want to go into the countryside.

There has been a considerable amount of work by those involved in outdoor leisure industry to try and improve access for disabled people. Much of the effort that has been targeted at improving access has concentrated on physical access and meeting the needs of those who have a physical impairment. The needs of those with a learning disability, with a mental health problem and those with sensory impairments have often gone unmet. This is perhaps unsurprising as much of the legislation and the development of standards have been targeted at physical access issues. There are few, if any guidelines available for how to meet the needs of other groups, which are more diverse and harder to tie down and define.

The two most basic issues that face these groups are attitudes and information provision. Attitudes to disabled people include a belief that they are not capable or competent. Consequently, service providers are often 'over-protective' in their attitudes to the activities they promote for disabled people. If sites are to ensure that they are fulfilling the needs of their disabled clients in the services they offer them they must consult with disabled people and their organisations and ask them what it is that they want to do and what they feel safe doing. Where partnerships have been established, this has worked very well.

The type of advice and information wanted by disabled people varies by impairment group. Those with a mobility impairment, for example wanted to know about physical access issues, such as the presence of steps, styles, gates etc and also, for those with a mobility impairment but who didn't use a wheelchair, information about seating along the paths. Seating is important both to those with a mobility impairment and those who may be with people who use a wheelchair. People with a visual impairment wanted information on what was available to them at the site and the types of walks they could go on. For people who were deaf needed information on the type of support they might receive in a centre. For people with a learning disability information about walks and other activities has to be provided in a style and format that is accessible to them. The one thing that disabled people do share is a desire for information that they can trust. Again this is an area that will only be improved if service providers work with disabled people and their

organisations and consult with them and ask them what it is that they want and in what format.

There is a danger in any report that we focus too much on the negatives and ignore the positives. It is clear that there are many people who work in the outdoor leisure industry who not only welcome the presence of disabled people in the countryside, but also are actively promoting it. These people are very strong allies for disabled people and their work should be recognised and encouraged. We met many such people in our work and the Forestry Commission should work with these individuals and enable them to take further action so as to ensure that disabled people are given the greatest possible opportunities.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are drawn from the findings of this research report:

### *Training*

- Staff training on disability issues is already fairly well established, however, despite a number of forest staff receiving at least some disability awareness training, all welcomed the opportunity for additional training. Many had received training some years ago and felt that they would benefit from 'refresher' courses. Ideally, such courses should be provided by organisations of disabled people within the locality. By doing so, outdoor providers will foster links with local groups, thus assisting in the requirements of the DED. The nature of the training should be tailored to the needs of staff throughout the organisation and should include all staff.
- Disability equality training should be devised, developed and delivered by disabled people with appropriate training skills, experience or qualifications. It should take account of local issues and courses should be developed in collaboration with local disabled people.
- The Forestry Commission and similar bodies should be approached to provide resources and support to disabled trainers and disability-led training providers in the development and marketing of responsive and flexible training solutions targeted specifically at countryside issues.
- Training should model and promote anti-discriminatory practice. It should promote the Social Model of Disability by emphasising disability as a social construct and raise consciousness of the impact of (negative and positive) language used in everyday settings.

### *Information*

- There is a need to examine the information produced for disabled people and radically rethink how that information is developed and targeted. The amount of planning required by disabled people to organise their leisure time given the barriers faced by them means that they are dependent on good, reliable information to enable them to safely enjoy the countryside. There are numerous projects and

schemes available to assist woodland managers to provide accessible information and they should be made aware of these. The content of information should include information on physically accessible trails; sensory trails; accessible toilets; accessible shops café; details of ranger led walk.

- The type of advice and information required varies by impairment group. The Forestry Commission should work with organisations of and for disabled people to establish what it is that each group requires and the appropriate forms of communication. For example, information sheets prepared for people with a learning disability should be prepared in collaboration with the target audience.
- Working with organisations of and for disabled people, the Forestry Commission should seek to establish a universal system for access guides, developing standards. This should involve not just disabled people but other managers of rural land managers such as the National Trust.
- A central database on access guides should be established.

#### *Barrier removal*

- The Forestry Commission should carry out access audits at all its sites. It must include audits of barriers faced by all disabled people.
- Action on the barriers identified in the above audits should be prioritised with local organisations of and for disabled people.
- A budget should be established not just to remove barriers but also to maintain current provision.
- The Forestry Commission should look at transport issues not just within their sites but also to and from the site and see if they can develop links and partnerships with other local providers to improve this. Access to and from the site should also be audited in terms of safe road crossings etc.
- Health and safety should not be over emphasised. It is of course essential that disabled people should be safe when on Forestry Commission sites, but it should not be used as an excuse for denying access to the site or to activities in the site.
- However, the provision of information and the removal of barriers will not encourage disabled people to use the outdoors. As we have shown throughout the report, many disabled people do not have any experience of the countryside and therefore confidence in the outdoors and think it is not for them. Poor information provision, coupled with the barriers identified throughout the report, the problems may seem insurmountable for someone who is keen to get outdoors but is unsure how to go about this. The Forestry Commission should look at the possibility of establishing outreach work/ collaborative work between woodland staff and local disability organisations as one way of opening up the possibility of outdoor environments for disabled people.
- Disabled people want to enjoy the countryside in a variety of ways, and should be seen as a heterogeneous group with a diversity of interests. This involves allowing inclusion in as wide a range of events as

possible rather than simply 'bolting on' one accessible walk/event for a group. Disability issues should be mainstreamed and all policies, events and programmed should be disability proofed.

- Disability issues should be mainstreamed and all policies, events and programmed should be disability proofed. There must also be 'programme accessibility', which relates to the ways in which programmes and activities are designed to enable people with a variety of impairments to fully participate and have fulfilling experiences of outdoor recreation.

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## **Appendix: topic guides for research**

- A. Key informant topic guide
- B. Site visit focus group topic guide
- C. Forest ranger topic guide
- D. Parent and family topic guide

## A. Key informant topic guide

### *Preamble*

Do you think the terms woodland, forest and countryside mean different things? Can you tell me a bit about what you think the differences are?

What is your understanding of the term disability?

Alternative wording – what does the term disability mean to you?

### **Background**

- What the organisation does e.g. specific interest in access, more generic interest in disabled people rights etc.
- Your role in the organisation and how long worked there

### **1) The extent to which the organisations feel that disabled people use the woodland/forest in general and forestry commission land in particular.**

What is your perception of disabled people use and access to woodland/forest recreation goods, facilities and services?

How did you come to this view?

Note: possibly add in here a question about perception of disabled people's access to the countryside, rather than asking a similar question further down?

Does your organisation monitor and evaluate visitor numbers/profiles?

Does your organisation run any specific projects to include disabled people?

How do these projects operate? (mainstream or disability specific)

Are you aware of any specific initiatives for disabled people in your area? If so, were disabled people involved in the planning, consultation and actions of this? [Prompt discussion over whether physical access]

What is your perception of disabled people use and access to forests and woodland?

How did you come to this view?

Does your organisation monitor and evaluate visitor numbers/profiles? (What prompted this?)

Has your organisation been involved in any initiatives around access to woodland/countryside? Prompt for background, funding, outcomes

Have you been involved in any initiatives around access to woodland/countryside?

If so, were disabled people involved in the planning, consultation and actions of this?

## **2) Perceived barriers to the inclusion of disabled people**

In your opinion, what are the barriers to disabled people accessing woodland areas and facilities? (Competing uses of forested areas)

What impact if any has the DDA and DED had on the way your organisations work./Way disabled people involved/ woodland agencies have engaged with disabled people/ access issues for disabled people?

Do you think there are specific issues for certain groups of disabled people? How has your organisation engaged with these issues?

## **3) Perceived practices that might facilitate the inclusion of disabled people**

What do you think might help in overcoming the barriers you mentioned?  
What barriers do you think are most easily overcome? most difficult?

## **4) Details of any practice examples relevant to the inclusion of disabled people**

Can you think of any examples of good practice?  
What in your opinion made this project work?

## **5) Policy and guidance: top-down or bottom-up communication?**

Are you aware of any of the recent policy/ practice documents available around this issue? (prompt with list go through each: main one the diversity review, DDA 2005, Disability Action Plan?)

For example, has your organisation produced any guidelines in relation to disabled people's access/inclusion?

In your experience, how have policy/guidance translated into practice on the ground?

What impact if any do you think these documents have had on forest managers/ access for disabled people/own organisation practices?

Is there a specific person whose role it is to focus on the needs of specific groups such as disabled people?

## **6) Training requirements for forest rangers**

Is there a specific person whose role it is to focus on the needs of specific groups such as disabled people?

Do people on the ground for example rangers, visitor centre staff and other front line staff have access to diversity and equality training/ disability equality or disability etiquette/confidence? What does this involve?

## **Rangers**

How long have you been a ranger?

Can you tell me a bit about your job, what does it involve?

What do you understand by the term 'disability'? When you talk about 'disabled people' what do you mean?

Have you been involved in any initiatives which have involved disabled people? Where, when, outcome, who was involved

Have you been involved in any initiatives to improve access for disabled people? Where, when, outcome, who was involved

How do you understand access? What does access mean to you?

How would you rate in terms of accessibility, where you work?

Have you heard of any/ received any information about projects/initiatives by agencies involved in the countryside? (e.g. BT Countryside for All standards) follow up with how they heard about it, when and if they are aware of the outcome?

Have you heard of any/ received any information about projects/initiatives by the Forestry Commission?

Have you received any training on access for different groups? Disability awareness training, diversity and equality training

Do you think there are specific issues for certain groups of disabled people? How do you see access for disabled people developing?

## **B: Site visit focus group topic guide**

### Pre-visit focus group

#### Ice-breaker

Introduce yourself: name and any stories/books you read as a child or more recently that featured woodlands/forests or countryside.

1. Do you think there are differences between woodlands, forests and countryside? What do you think these differences might be?

2. Did anyone visit woodland areas as a child?

If yes, where and what do you remember about being in woodlands.

If no, do you think there were reasons why you didn't visit woods –i.e. distance, no car, parental perception of impairment?

3. Would you usually choose to visit woodland areas?

If no, why not, are there considerations that prevent or deter you from visiting woodlands?

If yes, where do you usually go and why? What do you enjoy about woodlands?

4. Do you think there are barriers that prevent disabled people participating in woodland recreation? Can you identify some of these barriers?

5. If you wanted to get information about a woodland and its facilities or trails – where would you go for that information?

(Internet, NTS, FC, Visit Scotland, Nature England)

6. In an ideal world, what facilities and services would you want a woodland area to have in place? i.e. accessible visitor centre, toilets, ranger service, tapping trails, satnav for blind visitors use, public transport links, road-crossings.

7. Have you ever used this site?

If yes, what attracts you to here?

Have you ever used the ranger service?

If yes, can you tell us a bit about your experience/s of the service?

If not, can you tell us why you have not used this service?

If you have not used this site, why not?

8. Has anyone in this group been involved in access audits in relation to accessing woodlands/forests/countryside?

Can you tell us a bit more about that?

What happened to the access audit/s were they acted upon? Do you have any copies?

### Post-visit focus group

Ice breaker: introduce yourself and say something about how you've found the site visit.

1. Can you tell us a bit about the activities you participated in today that you either do not always have the opportunity to pursue or wouldn't usually do?
2. Are there areas in the site you used more than others? Why?  
Are there any areas in the site or activities you avoided? Would you be prepared to tell us why?
3. What did you enjoy most about this site?
4. Was there anything you did not enjoy or found difficult?
5. Is there anything that you can think of that would have made your visit more accessible or enjoyable? Accessible, descriptive information, information about assistance available to visitors?
6. Would you consider coming here again or visiting another site?
7. If you could make recommendations about increasing disabled people's presence and participation in woodland recreation, goods, facilities and services – what recommendations would you make?

## **C. Forest rangers: follow-up interview from site visits**

First overall impressions about the walk

Overall impressions about the group

Was there anything about the walk you noticed as being particularly useful or problematic with this group?

Interactions with the support staff

Future plans for the park

### **Rangers**

How long have you been a ranger? Who employed by?

Can you tell me a bit about your job, what does it involve?

What do you understand by the term 'disability'? When you talk about 'disabled people' what do you mean?

Have you received any training on access for different groups? Disability awareness training, diversity and equality training (who provided this?)

Do volunteers receive any disability training?

Have you been involved in any initiatives which have involved disabled people? Where, when, outcome, who was involved

Have you been involved in any initiatives to improve access for disabled people? Where, when, outcome, who was involved

How do you understand access? What does access mean to you?

How would you rate in terms of accessibility, where you work?

Have you heard of any/ received any information about projects/initiatives by agencies involved in the countryside? (e.g. BT Countryside for All standards) follow up with how they heard about it, when and if they are aware of the outcome?

Have you heard of any/ received any information about projects/initiatives by the Forestry Commission?

Do you think there are specific issues for certain groups of disabled people?

How do you see access for disabled people developing?

## D. FC site visit: parent and family topic guide

### Pre-visit focus group

1. Do you think there are differences between woodlands, forests and countryside? What do you think these differences might be?

2. Did you visit woodland areas as a child?

If yes, where and what do you remember about being in woodlands.

If no, do you think there were reasons why you didn't visit woods –i.e. distance, no car, parental perception of impairment?

3. Would you usually choose to visit woodland areas with your child?

If no, why not, are there considerations that prevent or deter you from visiting woodlands?

If yes, where do you usually go and why? What do you enjoy about woodlands?

Where else would you go as a family?

4. Why do you access woodlands?

Do you think it is important for your child to access woodlands?

5. Does your child access woodlands with school, friends, clubs, organisations?

How do woodlands compare with urban/other environments in relation to access facilities for your children?

How do you feel about your child using woodland area? (prompt: perceptions of forest or accessibility issues?)

6. Do you think there are barriers that prevent disabled people/children participating in woodland recreation? Can you identify some of these barriers?

7. If you wanted to get information about a woodland and its facilities or trails – where would you go for that information?

(Internet, NTS, FC, Visit Scotland, Nature England)

6. In an ideal world, what facilities and services would you want a woodland area to have in place? i.e. accessible visitor centre, toilets, ranger service, tapping trails, satnav for blind visitors use, public transport links, road-crossings.

7. Have you ever used this site?

If yes, what attracts you to here?

Have you ever used the ranger service?

If yes, can you tell us a bit about your experience/s of the service?

If not, can you tell us why you have not used this service?

If you have not used this site, why not?

8. Have you been involved in access audits in relation to accessing woodlands/forests/countryside?

Can you tell us a bit more about that?

What happened to the access audit/s were they acted upon? Do you have any copies?

Post-visit focus group (where families attended site visit)

Ice breaker: introduce yourself and say something about how you've found the site visit.

1. Can you tell us a bit about the activities you participated in today that you either do not always have the opportunity to pursue or wouldn't usually do?

2. Are there areas in the site you used more than others? Why?

Are there any areas in the site or activities you avoided? Would you be prepared to tell us why?

3. What did you enjoy most about this site?

4. Was there anything you did not enjoy or found difficult?

5. Is there anything that you can think of that would have made your visit more accessible or enjoyable? Accessible, descriptive information, information about assistance available to visitors?

6. Would you consider coming here again or visiting another site?

7. If you could make recommendations about increasing disabled people's presence and participation in woodland recreation, goods, facilities and services – what recommendations would you make?