

Enhancing the forest sector's contribution to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish forests

There are over 8.6 million disabled people in Britain and more than 800 million disabled people in Europe. Disability is a diverse category that includes people with hearing, sight, speech and learning impairments as well as those with physical impairments. Contrary to popular opinion, wheelchair users make up only a small proportion of disabled people. In recent years, legislation across the UK has sought to bring about equality for a number of different groups in society. The Disability Discrimination Act 2005 broadened the requirement to promote equality to include the provision of goods, facilities and services. It also places a general duty on public authorities to eliminate unlawful discrimination against disabled people, promote positive attitudes towards them, encourage their participation in public life and to promote equality of opportunity. This presents new challenges to the Forestry Commission and other bodies providing access to the countryside.



"Good signs and information about what to expect are crucial. It's not only about paths and facilities, it's also about ways to enjoy their time in the woods."

Access Panel member

Background

This research project was designed to develop an understanding of the issues arising from the application of new legislation, and to provide material guidance to better enable forest recreation managers to meet their new duties. There were several phased research tasks, focused on slightly different activities. Research with recreation managers and forest rangers was conducted at Penninghame Pond in Dumfries and Galloway, the Greenlink Project in Hamilton Park and around Loch Garten in the Highlands. Action research, in the form of disability audits of specific forest sites, was undertaken in Mabie Forest, Dalbeattie Forest (Town Wood), Threave Estate, David Marshall Lodge in Aberfoyle, Abriachan Woods, Anagach woods in Grantown-on-Spey, and Lionthorne Woods. The information collected from the different research tasks was used to produce a series of practical guidance notes and examples of best practice aimed at forest managers.

This work is part of a suite of three research projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Objectives

The research aimed to:

- assess the duties placed on the forest sector by the 1995 and 2005 Disability Discrimination Acts and relevant government policies to provide equal access for disabled people
- identify knowledge needs of and develop training for forest recreation managers to enable them to promote equal accessibility to recreation
- review existing management guidance, tools and case studies of good practice for disabled access provision in the outdoor recreation sector
- develop a database of organisations representing disabled people and other informal disability groups

Methods

A mix of different research techniques was employed, including:

- a desk-based review of disability legislation in relation to the forestry sector
- a series of regional forums with landowners, land managers and recreation managers – group discussions using checklists of questions to explore issues, perceptions, experience and organisational attitudes to disabled accessibility
- a questionnaire survey of landowners, land managers and recreation managers involved in recreation provision in Scottish forests
- site-specific disability access audits

Findings

There is much confusion amongst countryside and woodland managers about the different terminology applied to access provision. There is an understanding that disabled users desire the same nature and quality of

forest experience as do other users, and that this may be compromised if there were to be extensive modifications of particular sites. Therefore, it was recognised that access provisions need to be appropriate and enhance the experience of all users, both able-bodied and disabled.

Nevertheless, many recreation managers thought only in terms of physical impairments, and interventions focused on easy access trails. How to accommodate the needs and interests of all the different disability groups that might visit a site was harder to appreciate. Availability of information was found to be important in aiding people's decisions about whether to visit a site and how well they would be able to use it once there. Managers working in more urban areas were more knowledgeable about the recreational requirements and possible options for improving disability access than those from more remote areas. The main obstacles to providing disabled accessibility are seen to overwhelmingly relate to finances and staff resources, liability and the physical limitations of the forest site.

Recommendations

- There should be close consultation with local disability groups about the best ways of addressing access design issues. This will improve equality of access and visit experience for a variety of woodland and forest users.
- Woodland and countryside recreation managers need to consider disability access beyond the current focus on physical access (e.g. gates and paths) to include other issues such as the provision of appropriate information and the facility to take part in specific activities.
- Training focused on local site conditions and area characteristics may be the best way of improving countryside and woodland managers' knowledge and application of the Disability Discrimination Acts.
- Access auditing might be best used to define whether a site has met an acknowledged physical access standard.

Partners

Suzanne Martin, formerly of Forest Research; Simon Bell, Penny Travlou, Edith Bowman and Jenny Roe, The OPENspace research centre

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For further information contact: bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk or visit www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INF4-7LTFBG for details of projects exploring disabled access and woodland recreation.

Reports and publications

Bell, S. (2007). *Accessibility and Disability: Making Woods More Accessible*. Edinburgh, OPENspace report for the Forestry Commission

Bell, S., Travlou, P. and Roe, J. (2007). *Task 2. Qualitative and Quantitative Research with Forest Recreation Managers to Collate Knowledge and Skills Related to Disability Accessibility*. OPENspace report for the Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.

Bowman, E. and Bell, S. (2007). *Task 1. Accessibility and Disability: a Guide to the Application of Disabled Access Legislation to Scotland's Woodlands*. OPENspace report for the Forestry Commission, Edinburgh.

OPENspace (2007a). *Good Practice Examples of Access to Forests or Countryside*. Report for Forestry Commission Scotland, Edinburgh.

OPENspace (2007b). *Collation and Review of Guidance, Tools and Case Studies of Good Practice*. OPENspace report for the Forestry Commission, Edinburgh, 40 pp.