

Forestry Commission Disability Equality Scheme 2009 - 2012
Summary of first consultation.

ENGAGEMENT WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The FC recognises the importance of involving people with disabilities in the work of the organisation. In this way the views we receive on how the FC provides its services are based on knowledge and experience and we are able to use that to make our provision more accessible to people with disabilities.

In order to develop the new DES and associated action plan, as outlined in the next section, the FC engaged with the following organisations through interviews and focus groups to canvas views on the potential contents of the new Scheme:

Organisation	Description of Organisation
Rough Riderz	Club for wheelchair users, along with able-bodied Mountain Bike riders, enabling opportunities for off-road downhill 4 wheel mountain bike riding.
The Fieldfare Trust	Promoting countryside access for disabled people.
Cardiff and Vale Coalition of Disabled People	Supporting the full rights for, and inclusion of, all disabled people in the community. Working to empower disabled people to be in control of their own lives.
Disability Wales	The national association of disabled people's organisations, striving to achieve the rights, equality and independence of disabled people in Wales.
Celf o Gwmpas	Provides high quality arts experiences primarily for adults with learning disabilities.
Wales Council for Deaf People	The major voluntary body in Wales concerned with deafness. An umbrella organisation of associations, both voluntary and statutory, working in the field of hearing loss and representing people who are deaf, deafened, hard of hearing or deaf/blind.
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	Provides guide dogs and other mobility services that increase the independence and dignity of blind and partially-sighted people. Campaigns for improved rehabilitation services and unhindered access for all blind and partially-sighted people.
Royal National Institute for the Blind	Challenging blindness by empowering people who are blind or partially sighted, removing the barriers they face and helping to prevent blindness.
Mencap	The voice of learning disability. Everything they do is about valuing and supporting people with a learning disability and their families and carers.
Individual	Keen cyclist who broke his back some years ago.
Royal London Society for the Blind	RLSB offers independently acclaimed "best in class" education, training and employment services to people who are blind or partially sighted
Disabilities Trust	National charity providing personal care and specialist housing for people with special needs
Speaking Up	Speaking Up supports and empowers people with learning difficulties, disabilities and mental health

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	problems to speak up for themselves
Camsight	Cam Sight is a charity, working with blind and partially sighted people within Cambridgeshire.

The organisations were sent an initial consultation document, giving an overview of the Forestry Commission, suggesting some potential priorities for our DES and asking some specific questions. Respondees were also invited to make their own comments or suggest their own priorities. Our aim was to focus understanding the needs of disabled people and consulting on specific services designed for disabled users.

We asked for views on our initial proposals for the FC's DES which were;

1. Consultation with disability groups with regard to new and existing services and facilities.
2. Increase the sharing and publication of best practice in making services accessible. Ensure the organisation learns.
3. Increase the advertising of accessible services, e.g. accessible trails. (diversity database, Local Newsletters).
4. Examine data on proportion of FC budget spent on educational work with special schools compared to mainstream schools, in order to benchmark and monitor the budget across the FC.
5. Engage with local teams to carry out an assessment of expenditure on diversity initiatives to inform future policy-making and direction.
6. Continue development and expansion of forests closer to centres of population to more readily provide leisure, health and education opportunities.
7. Use Staff Survey insights to help us evaluate that the FC public services are being engaged with and valued by diverse groups.

Views were sought via a mixture of interviews and focus groups. Participants were asked to identify the three actions, from the above list, that they felt most important to achieve progress and also if they had any ideas that we might have missed.

The results of the interviews, and the subsequent action taken is summarised below:

Priorities for the proposed actions								
		FC Proposal						
Group	Disability represented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Cardiff and Vale Coalition of Disabled People	All	1st	=2nd	=2nd				
The Fieldfare Trust	All	2nd		1st			3rd	
Disability Wales	All	1st	2nd	3rd				
Celf o Gwmpas	Learning	1st	2nd			4th	3rd	
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	Sight	1st						

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Wales Council for Deaf People	Hearing	=1st						
Mencap	Learning		1st		2nd			
Royal London Society for the Blind – Individual 1	Sight	1st		2nd				3rd
Royal London Society for the Blind – Individual 2	Sight	3rd		2nd			1st	
Royal London Society for the Blind – Individual 3	Sight	1st		2nd		3rd		
Royal London Society for the Blind – Individual 4	Sight	1st		2nd		3rd		
Disabilities Trust	Physical & Sight	1st		2nd			3rd	
Speaking Up – Focus Group	Learning							
Camsight – Focus Group	All							

Other priority actions suggested

Group	Disability represented	Suggestion
Rough Riderz	Any wheel chair users	Provide Uplift facilities for Disabled Mountain Bikers to all trails suitable for their requirements and at comparable cost to able-bodied Mountain Bike riders.
Rough Riderz	Any wheel chair users	Building and location of trails for disabled mountain bikers.
Rough Riderz	Any wheel chair users	Provide facilities to enable disabled mountain bike users to get to the top of all suitable trails at comparable financial cost to other trail users.
Individual respondent		Permission for disabled people to use own Quad bike to access the FC land.
Disability Wales	All	Train FC staff using the Social Model of Disability.
Celf o Gwmpas	Learning	Collect HR data on employees with disabilities & have a strategy for increasing numbers.
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	Sight	The provision of information for the general public is also in accessible format.
Guide Dogs for the Blind Association	Sight	Involve - don't just consult.
Speaking Up	Learning	Offer concessions to events for people with disabilities and their carers
Speaking Up	Learning	Ensure parking is free for people with disabilities and is suitable for their needs
Speaking Up/Camsight	Learning/	Arrange trips to the Forest from urban

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	Sight	centres on a regular basis. Arrange guides to show people around forests.
Speaking Up	Learning	Make use of technology such as CCTV to bring wildlife closer to people
Camsight	Sight	Ensure trails are suitable for disabled users and then provide accurate information about them
Camsight	Sight	Ensure toilet facilities are accessible

Comment

We received 14 responses. The tables show a consistency of choice between the groups, regardless of which disability they represent. The order of preferred priority is easy to identify and is as follows:

1. **Consultation with disability groups with regard to new and existing services and facilities.** Chosen by nine groups as their first or equal first priority and one group as its second.
2. **Increase the advertising of accessible services, e.g. accessible trails. (diversity database, Local Newsletters).** Three organisations thought it the first priority, or equal first, six organisations considered it the second, or second equal priority.
3. **Increase the sharing and publication of best practice in making services accessible. Ensure the organisation learns.** Two organisations thought it the first priority, or equal first priority, three of organisations considered it the second, or equal second priority.
4. **Continue development and expansion of forests closer to centres of population to more readily provide leisure, health and education opportunities.** This was considered by five groups to be in their top three.
5. **Engage with local teams to carry out an assessment of expenditure on diversity initiatives to inform future policy-making and direction.** This was in the top three for three organisations.
6. **Examine data on proportion of FC budget spent on educational work with special schools compared to mainstream schools, in order to benchmark and monitor the budget across the FC.** One group said this was their second priority, another had it equal first with all other priorities.
7. **Use Staff Survey insights to help us evaluate that the FC public services are being engaged with and valued by diverse groups.** This was the least favoured option only being endorsed by one organisation

The only common theme emerging from the independently suggested priorities was facilitating access to our land for wheel chair users, enabling them to more easily enjoy cross country routes and downhill mountain biking.

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We asked the following questions for each of their identified priorities:

- Why do you feel this is a priority for the Forestry Commission?
- How do you think it will help the Forestry Commission/Disabled users?
- Have you seen this approach work well in other organisations/places?
- Do you have any specific ideas how this approach could be used most effectively?
- What other actions do you think the Forestry Commission needs to take to ensure people with disabilities can engage with services?
- Do you have any other comments that would help us?

Do you have any questions?

The comments we received from the respondents were very useful, common themes for each being as follows;

1. Consultation with disability groups with regard to new and existing services and facilities.

- Disability Discrimination Act requires involvement from the start.
- Disabled people are the experts and know how to overcome the barriers that face them. They are also aware of best practice elsewhere.
- Disabled groups can help to identify, prioritise and monitor implementation.
- Ensure that especially practical facilities are suitable and take a range of needs into account – e.g. not just ramps and loos but (e.g.) recorded information, videos with sign language, colour code walks etc.
- Have the right people representing the appropriate groups. Use local groups where most appropriate. Ensure that all the different disability groups are taken into consideration, not just one particular group.
- Avoid tokenism - don't set up groups to discuss issues and then not include the groups' recommendations in action planning.
- Engage with groups of people with disabilities right from the beginning of a project.
- Mixed consultation groups can work, but make sure each group is specifically targeted in your marketing & make sure each knows that their needs will be catered for.
- Remember children & families with children with disabilities.
- Make an engagement event that is attractive for people to come to.
- A lot of people with disabilities live on benefits, so think of a way of reimbursing costs.
- Make information readily available and in accessible formats on request.
- Routes for those who are blind or partially sighted need to be segregated from Cycle routes and horse routes.
- Use more Symbols than text on signage. Good for partially sighted, but also good for those with learning disabilities and people whose first language is not English, or who do not speak English.

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- Change the word `consultation' to `involvement' which mean different things. Involvement is working together where consulting is normally on a decision already made.
- Always engage with people with hearing impediments and have plenty of signs and printed information.
- Consultation will have a positive impact in terms of informing disabled people about the services of the Forestry Commission.
- Consultation should not be about sitting in an office. You need to take disabled people to the forest so they can experience the environment and give informed feedback.
- Ensure that people with a wide range of disabilities are consulted.
- Consultation will save the Forestry Commission money in the long run, as they will get their services right first time.
- Don't do anything without consultation.

2. Increase the sharing and publication of best practice in making services accessible. Ensure the organisation learns.

- Raised awareness of accessible trails.
- By sharing we break down the barriers and encourage disabled people to use the forests more.
- The organisation learns and disabled people learn that the organisation is trying.
- It is the only way to keep up to date.
- Should share with and learn from other organisations.
- FC has a good reputation and should continue to share experience with other organisations.
- Document best practice systematically, using photos and evidence of how it benefits different groups.
- Celebrate the good work both internally and externally.
- Highlight the benefits to disabled people.
- Good PR.
- Engage groups to look at best practice and include disabled people in those groups.
- Need to benchmark where we are in order to measure progress.
- Use local and national magazines, newsletters and websites for disabled people to advertise facilities and ask for involvement.
- Target advertising to different disabled groups, clarifying what is available specifically for each of them.

3. Increase the advertising of accessible services, e.g. accessible trails. (diversity database, Local Newsletters).

- Many of the same points raised under (2).
- Be honest about where we are and what we're trying to achieve.
- Build confidence and understanding to help people make an informed choice.
- Build long-term relationships with disability organisations.
- This isn't about capital investment, but about relationships.
- It is usually the small actions that make a difference.

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- Increase audio guides, easy read and pictorial signs, information in different formats (Braille, large print, etc.).
 - Disabled people will be more likely to use FC services.
 - People have heard of the Forestry Commission but are not aware of the range of accessible services they provide. There is a real need to advertise these services more clearly.
 - The Forestry Commission needs to have a locally based advertising scheme. To do this they need to accurately describe the accessible services for a forest and publicise this through local disability organisations who are based within a reasonable travelling distance to that particular forest.
 - Accessibility to the Forestry Commission website is not an issue for visually impaired people. The biggest issue is knowing there is a website at all and prompting people to find out about it.
 - It is more than advertising. Disabled people need to be fully aware of what to expect when they get to a forest. Accurate information is the key, e.g. knowing that cyclists will use a path is very important for someone with a visual impairment.
 - People with disabilities get their information from a variety of different sources, often depending on their disability. The Forestry Commission should focus on building up relationships with local disability organisations to help advertise services easily.
 - Centre Parcs is a favoured holiday destination for people with disabilities. Forestry Commission should advertise their accessible services at Center Parcs sites such as Thetford.
 - Radar publishes an accessibility holiday guide, could use this publication.
4. **Continue development and expansion of forests closer to centres of population to more readily provide leisure, health and education opportunities.**
- Important due to the economic agenda.
 - Easier access and help with transport will allow more people with disabilities to get to use our services.
 - Provide assistance with transport costs or transport availability.
 - Have one champion for access to forests (example in England is successful).
 - Participate in initiatives shared with other countryside organisations (like the Countryside for All initiative in England).
 - Link in with local 'green' initiatives (e.g. transition towns and 'eco' schools) so that your initiatives are relevant to local communities.
 - People with disabilities tend to live closer to cities and transport out of them can be difficult, so this is very important.
 - This will make the Forestry Commission better known. Visiting a local forest would then give a disabled person the confidence to travel to a rural forest.
 - Forestry Commission should work in partnership with other organisations to create new green spaces, e.g. Wetlands Trust, Local Councils.

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5. Examine data on proportion of FC budget spent on educational work with special schools compared to mainstream schools, in order to benchmark and monitor the budget across the FC.
 - Essential. The priority indicates that the FC is spending more time with mainstream schools, but the balance must be right.
 - Pilot the approach on a three-year plan, monitor and learn from it.
 - Will create a more inclusive service for all abilities.
 - Better to work in partnerships.
 - Involve the special schools.
6. Engage with local teams to carry out an assessment of expenditure on diversity initiatives to inform future policy-making and direction.
 - Can make accounting more complicated for local teams, though use of coding can reflect expenditure on different groups.
 - Would be helpful.
 - Would ensure that disability is not forgotten.
7. Use Staff Survey insights to help us evaluate that the FC public services are being engaged with and valued by diverse groups.
 - Should use the insights of your staff, whether they have disabilities or not. If services are not accessible for people with disabilities it is likely that local staff will have received complaints. Need to use this information.

Of those independently suggested;

8. Provide Uplift facilities for Disabled Mountain Bikers to all trails suitable for their requirements and at comparable cost to able-bodied Mountain Bike riders.
 - Agree system(s) suitable for uplift and introduce throughout FC on suitable trails.
 - Excellent facility for disabled mountain bike users, a new sport.
 - Ensure uplift provider companies provide uplift suitable for disabled riders and their bikes and are insured to do so.
 - Ensure costs of uplift are affordable and comparable to costs of uplift services for other mountain bike users.
 - Do not build suitable trails without providing for uplift.
9. Building and location of trails for disabled mountain bikers.
 - FC are only providers and have worked well with relevant groups.
 - Continue to work with the groups to match new trails to group growth
 - Involve local disabled groups and disabled mountain bikers before starting a trail, to assess potential use v investment.
 - Consider training FC staff to give disabled people a taster of the sport.
 - Provide one or two special bikes for disabled people at key venues, enabling disabled people to test the sport without significant initial spend.
 - Create a national FC strategy, involving relevant groups, for future build and enhancement.
 - Many improvements to accommodate disabled users are small and inexpensive.

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- Enhancements for disabled users can also assist other riders and make courses more popular for all.

10. Permission for disabled people to use own Quad bike to access the FC land.

- Some disabled people want to go off 'accessible built' paths and have a more free experience.
- Wish to ride cross-country with able-bodied cycling friends, also solo.
- Wheelchairs are unsuitable for this option.
- Allows much greater independence.
- Create a consistent permit system across the FC.

11. Train FC staff using the Social Model of Disability.

- Better understanding of barriers and engaging with disabled people to remove them.
- Front line staff give improved first time message.
- Focus on environmental, institutional and attitudinal barriers.
- Improved awareness and anticipation of what might be a barrier to people.

12. Collect HR data on employees with disabilities & have a strategy for increasing numbers.

- No further comments.

13. The provision of information for the general public is also in accessible format.

- Use of symbols and large size text.
- Helps many people (impaired sight, learning difficulties, language barriers).

14. Involve - don't just consult.

- No further comment and also covered by comments at (1). Involve - don't just consult.

15. Organise trips to the forest

- Getting to the forest can be difficult. There should be organised trips to forests on a regular basis, picking up people from local population centres
- The music events in the forest should attract a reduction for people with disabilities and those accompanying them. It would be good if tickets to music events included travel.
- Sound is very important to visually impaired people. Would like a trip to the Forest to listen to the dawn chorus.

16. Enable all people to get close to nature

- Make use of CCTV to show live feeds of nesting birds and other wildlife at Visitor Centres.
- Use sensory displays in visitor centres for those with visual impairments.

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17. Safety & Security in the Forests

- Supply personal alarms to people who want to walk in the forests so that if they get lost or feel unsafe they can raise an alarm. Could make use of GPS devices so that people can be found if they feel unsafe.
- Supply tactile maps for people with visual impairments. These can be studied before going to the Forest to make people feel comfortable and aware of their surroundings.

18. Parking

- Ensure disabled parking is free in forests
- Ensure that disabled parking spaces have sufficient space for wheelchair access.

19. Easy Access Paths

- Ensure easy access paths are suitable. One person had been on one in Thetford Forest which was not suitable for their wheelchair.
- Easy Access paths should 'still feel like nature'. We do not want concrete paths in the forests.
- Wooden boardwalks with handrails are the most suitable.
- Easy access paths should also have information that is available in different formats, e.g. Braille and tactile signs.

20. Guided Walks

- Would like the Forestry Commission to have a network of volunteers who can lead guided walks for a range of disabilities.

SUMMARY

Although there are many different sorts of disability, the main messages are clear.

- Involve and consult with disabled groups, local or national as appropriate and do this at an early stage of any initiative.
- Use the opinions that are given and tell the groups what you have done.
- Create and maintain good relationships with disabled groups.
- Disabled groups will help us get it right.
- Share best practice internally and externally.
- Advertise what we offer in national and local newsletters, magazines and websites – tailor the information to the targeted group.
- Tailor our advertising to help different groups understand what is available for them.
- Involve as many different types of disability groups as possible – one answer does not suit all.
- Think of signage, symbols and large text are more accessible for a wide range of people.
- Increase audio and Braille communication means.
- Avoid tokenism.
- Create benchmarks from which to chart progress.
- Consider transport subsidies or provision to allow more disabled people to access forests.

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- Create FC wide policies for disabled mountain bikers and quad bike users.
- Train FC staff.

A copy of the Initial Consultation document is at Appendix 1.

We are grateful to those individuals and organisations that took the time to respond.

Forestry Commission: Disability Equality Scheme

Involving members of the public with disabilities

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Overview

This document provides an outline of how the Forestry Commission (FC) will involve those with disabilities in the work of the organisation. The purpose of the involvement is to get people's views on the way the FC provides its services to make these more accessible to people with disabilities. Once this involvement process is complete, the ideas from across the involvement interviews will be combined and the initial Disability Equality Scheme (DES) will be drafted.

Background

As a public sector body, the Forestry Commission is legally required to have a disability equality scheme in place. These last for three years. Currently the FC is preparing for its second disability equality scheme. At the heart of the disability equality scheme is the need to involve people with disabilities into the decision making.

Therefore, we are asking for your ideas to understand how you think the FC should change and adapt to become more accessible as an organisation.

There are two parts to the involvement process; one with employees (being conducted separately), and one with users and potential users of the FC's services.

What does the FC do?

- The Forestry Commission is the biggest provider of outdoor recreation in the UK
- Cares for 827,000 hectares of sustainable managed woods and forests – that's more than 1.4 billion trees
- Plants more than 17 million trees every year
- Welcomes more than 50 million visitors every year
- Provides 2,600 km of cycle trails
- Has 55 visitor centres, almost 500 car parks and 155 easy access trails
- Provides 109 forest classrooms or educational facilities
- Maintains 24,000 km of forest roads – seven times the amount of motorway in Britain
- Welcomes more than 100,000 per year to our concerts in the forest
- Maintains more than 2,300 bridges
- Helped expand Britain's woodland by an area more than 3 times the size of greater London in the last 20 years.

As you can see the Forestry Commission provides a great deal in terms of leisure for the UK population. The purpose of this paper is to involve you in understanding how we can make this more accessible and inclusive to all people in the UK.

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This recent article in Able magazine highlights some of the FC's current facilities for those with a disability. More details on this can be found [here](#), on pages 22-26.

Proposals for the DES

It is proposed that the focus of the DES will be on a qualitative understanding of disabled groups' needs in relation to the public services supplied by FC.

Potential Objectives:

- Understand the needs of disabled people
- Consult on the specific services designed for disabled users.

Potential Actions to facilitate Objectives:

- Consultation with disability groups with regard to new and existing services and facilities.
- Increase the sharing and publication of best practice in making services accessible. Ensure the organisation learns.
- Increase the advertising of accessible services, e.g. accessible trails. (diversity database, Local Newsletters).
- Examine data on proportion of FC budget spent on educational work with special schools compared to mainstream schools, in order to benchmark and monitor the budget across the FC.
- Engage with local teams to carry out an assessment of expenditure on diversity initiatives to inform future policy-making and direction.
- Continue development and expansion of forests closer to centres of population to more readily provide leisure, health and education opportunities.
- Use Staff Survey insights to help us evaluate that the FC public services are being engaged with and valued by diverse groups.

Interviews

Interviews will take approximately 30 minutes. We want to discuss your ideas in relation to the potential actions.

We will ask you to pick the three actions that you think are most important to make progress. We will also ask if you have any ideas that are not on the list that you feel should be included.

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For each potential action we will ask the following questions:

1. Why do you feel this is a priority for the Forestry Commission?
2. How do you think it will help the Forestry Commission/Disabled users?
3. Have you seen this approach work well in other organisations/places?
4. Do you have any specific ideas how this approach could be used most effectively?
5. What other actions do you think the Forestry Commission needs to take to ensure people with disabilities can engage with services?
6. Do you have any other comments that would help us?
7. Do you have any questions?

Next Stages

We are planning to talk to a number of organisations at this stage including Roughriderz, RNIB, Capability Scotland, The Disabilities Trust, MIND, Action for Blind People, Whizz Kidz, Fieldfare, Mencap, RADAR, Sensory Trust, Disability Equality Forum and Wales Council for Deaf People.

Once this process is complete, we will combine and collate the ideas from across the interviews in order to draft a full Disability Equality Scheme. We are aiming to complete this by late August/early September. We will then begin a formal twelve-week consultation exercise with the aim of publishing our revised DES by the end of November 2009.

We will also prepare a short report summarising the results of this initial consultation exercise and the actions we have taken as a result for your information.

It would be useful if you would confirm if you want to be involved in the next stage of consultation or indeed involved with any further work with the FC.

Thank you for your time and attention.