

SECTION 10 ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA) was introduced to end the discrimination that many people face. Since 1995 the Act has been amended to introduce new rights and many of these rights have implications for the built environment. The impacts of these are constantly being monitored and are likely to be updated from time to time.

It is important to understand that the DDA is different from the Building Regulations in that it does not directly require accessible environments to be provided for disabled people. The rights are for access to employment and for access to goods, facilities and services, rather than to the building in which these are made available. There are a variety of ways in which employers and service providers can ensure they are not discriminating against disabled people and not all of these will entail a change to the physical environment. A 'physical feature' includes anything arising from a building's design or construction of from an approach to, exit from or access to a building.

Building designers, whilst not legally required to respond to the DDA should anticipate its requirements and design buildings accordingly. Those commissioning new buildings or adaptations to existing buildings are well advised to consider the implications of the DDA in terms of their ability to employ or offer goods and services to disabled people on an equal basis.

Since 2004 it has been expected that service providers make 'reasonable adjustments' to the physical features of their premises to overcome physical barriers to access. Experience shows that the majority of adjustments which employers are likely to have to make would not relate to physical features.

Access Audits

An access audit is a useful starting point in assessing the current state of accessibility and usability of an existing building by disabled people. Such an audit should include a full inspection of the building and the results set out in a report which details recommended actions.

Building Regulations

Part M of the Building Regulations has specific requirements for access for disabled people, not only to buildings used by the public, but also some requirements as far as both new and extensions of existing domestic properties are concerned. It is likely that these requirements will be updated from time to time and current advice should be obtained from the Building Inspectors of your local authority when considering new build, material alterations, or extensions to property. Only in exceptional circumstances will a Building Regulations Application be approved if the requirements of Part M are not met.

However, the need to conserve the special characteristics of historic buildings needs to be recognised. In such work the aim should be to improve accessibility where and to the extent that is practically possible, always provided that the work does not prejudice the character of the historic building, or increase the long-term deterioration to the building fabric or fittings. In arriving at an

appropriate balance between historic building conservation and accessibility, it would be appropriate to take into account the advice of the local authority's conservation and access officers, and English Heritage in order to make the building as accessible as possible.

Physical characteristics of a building or extension which still complies with Part M of the Building Regulations in force at the time the building works were carried out are not required to carry out further alterations to comply with newer regulations.

An approved Document has been approved and issued by the Secretary of State for the purpose of providing practical guidance with respect to the requirements of Part M. This provides guidance for some of the more common building situations, but there may be alternative ways of achieving compliance with the requirements. There is no obligation to adopt any particular solution contained in the Approved Document if you prefer to meet the relevant requirement in some other way.

English Heritage Access Policy

English Heritage is the lead advisory body on providing access to historic buildings in England. They believe that access should be celebrated with high quality design that is also sensitive to the special interest of historic buildings. They encourage those who own or manage historic buildings, or other heritage properties, to adopt access plans that are consistent with the special architectural, historic, or archaeological interest of the property concerned.

English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund are committed to achieving and improving physical and sensory access to historic landscapes, by balancing the demands of access and conservation. Some suggestions:

- Replacing existing gravel surfaces with self-binding gravel or by adding binding agents such as bitumen and resin
- Relaying stone setts with tighter joints, or pointing them to form a less recessed joint, or incorporating a level surface within them
- Introducing alternative routes and signing them accordingly
- Introducing alternative routes which give access to certain key features, and views within the landscape, while acknowledging that full access may not be possible
- Using interpretation and alternative media to provide intellectual access to those areas that will remain physically inaccessible

Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)

CABE believes that good design is fundamental to higher quality buildings and open spaces. Function is one of the cornerstones of good design and accessibility is vital for a project to function well. Creating places and facilities that are accessible to everyone should not be seen merely as an afterthought, or as compromising other aspects of the overall design. Integrated solutions should become the automatic standard for all services and new developments.

The most obvious element of an existing building which determines its accessibility is its fabric or shell. No building functions as an empty shell. Internal layouts fitting out, fixtures and fittings can be critical. This at first may not seem to be important for a Design Guide which focuses on issues

relevant to Planning Application Guidance but for alterations, new buildings and extensions internal arrangements which assist in making a building accessible can affect the external appearance.

Existing buildings used in any way by the public should have an access audit done. Some of the issues highlighted by that audit as requiring action may affect the appearance of a building. Any new building and any substantial alteration (will) require an Access Statement to be prepared as part of a Planning and/or Building Regulation Application. Advice on the need for and preparation of an Access Statement can be given by your local authority and the Disability Rights Commission will give further information and examples. Public buildings need to be accessible to a wide range of users including people with mobility or sensory impairments, and people with learning difficulties.

With over eight million adults in Britain with some degree of disability and an increasingly elderly population it becomes ever more important that buildings are designed for optimum ease of use by their occupants and visitors.

Car Parking: Larger parking bays are required to allow people with reduced mobility to get in and out of their cars with the minimum of difficulty. It is necessary to provide these facilities for public buildings and other sites where car parking is provided, as close as possible to the facility being served. It would also be sensible in new housing development to provide sufficient space for easy access to and from cars, both for residents and for visitors. Bays for use by the public should be clearly identified as for disabled people. Kerbs between parking areas and routes to the facility should be dropped. The car park surface should be smooth and even and free from loose stones.

Pathways: Routes should provide ample aural and tactile information as well as visual clues to help people with sight impairments. Pedestrian and traffic routes should be clearly distinguished using texture and colour. Surface materials should be firm, slip resistance in all weathers and well laid and maintained. (Cobbles and loose gravel are not recommended.) Path edges should be defined but by minimal changes in level. Width of pathways should be considered for ease of use of those in wheelchairs – there should be sufficient space for people to pass others who are travelling in the opposite direction – and splayed or rounded corners provided where possible. Cross falls should be no greater than 1 in 40 and handrails provided on slopes steeper than 1 in 20. Grids, gratings, and covers should be flush with paving materials. Planting should be trimmed to at least head height to avoid obstruction. It can provide scent and colour.

External signs: These should be carefully located so as not to cause obstruction, clear, well-lit, non reflective and logical. 70 to 75% of the information we received is given through eyesight. Anyone with a significant degree of sight loss, or no sight at all, will experience an information deficit. So it is crucial that signs maximize opportunities for visibility and legibility to make use of any remaining vision. Signs hanging perpendicular to a building façade are useful

A sign should contrast with its background and the lettering should contrast with the sign board. There are four basic principles in sign design: signs should be used only when necessary; sign location should be part of the process of planning a building and the environment; messages should be short, simple and easily understood; signs should be consistent, using prescribed typefaces, colours and contrast and graphic devices. Lower case (non-capitalised) lettering is easier to read. Light lettering on a dark background improves legibility for people with sight impairments.

Symbols should be used where appropriate. To minimise glare reflective glass should be avoided and that the sign has a matt surface should be ensured. Tactile signs, maps, and models: embossed, Braille and audible signs can improve access for those with limited vision. Sign Design

Guide: a guide to inclusive signage by JMU and the Sign design Society is a very useful starting point (available from RNIB Customer Services).

External Lighting: Pathways, steps and potential hazards should be adequately lit, but should not create pools of light and dark. Lighting associated with steps should not cause anyone to negotiate steps in their own shadow. Excessive lighting in the countryside should be avoided.

Street Furniture: Avoid placing street furniture where it cause problems for people with sight impairments or obstructs the passage of wheelchair users. Bollards should be a minimum of 1000mm in height and tonally contrasted with the background. Adjacent bollards should not be linked with chain or rope. The provision of appropriate seating is important. Seats should be stable and be provided in a variety of heights, with and without armrests. Cycle parking areas should be clear of the routes.

External ramps: These are essential to enable wheelchair users (and people with pushchairs) to overcome level changes in the public realm, and should be accompanied by steps for ambulant disabled people where steeper than 1 in 20. However, they are also an important consideration in assisting disabled and elderly people into dwellings.

In Part M of the Building Regulations, a gradient of 1 in 20 is considered level, 1 in 15 is adequate, and 1 in 12 is an absolute maximum. The preferred gradient is 1 in 15 or less. The steeper the ramp the shorter the length must be between level landings. The impact of overall lengths and widths of ramps required to negotiate height differences is often underestimated. Ramps can have a significant visual impact on a building or landscape environment and need to be carefully detailed and integrated. Surface materials used, handrail design and colours employed will all need careful consideration.

External steps: Ambulant disabled people often prefer steps to ramps and they should always be provided as an alternative to ramps greater in gradient than 1 in 20. Step widths and heights are critical to ease of use.

Handrails should always be provided, preferably on both sides of the steps, however short the flight. As with ramp surface materials used, handrail design and colours employed will all need careful consideration to comply with regulations.

Entrances: These should be easily distinguishable within the building façade and should relate well to access routes. The preferred aim in terms of access is to make a building's main entrance accessible to everyone on a permanent basis. People will need to be protected from outward opening doors if they are not recessed into the building façade.

Doors in frequent use should have vision panels. Clear opening widths, use of double doors and sliding doors, type of door handles and door closers, automatic opening mechanisms, and use of colour contrast are all design issues which will need to be addressed. Entry thresholds should have a maximum change in level of 13mm but be flush if at all possible. Exit doors, particularly those for emergency egress, are as important as entrances.

Lift Installations: The over ride requirement for maintenance of lifts above the lift car can have an impact on roof level in conservation work.