**How to make your outdoor business accessible:**

**A story from a disabled business researcher**

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Diversity is a fundamental aspect of our planet, evident in the wide range of geographical terrains, plants, and animals. We relish this natural diversity through travel and holidays. Similarly, human society is diverse, encompassing variations in skin colour, beliefs, gender, and physical characteristics. According to the Welsh Government adopted Social Model of Disability, impairment is one of such personal characteristics, which may or may not be lifelong and may or may not arise from illness or injury. An impairment may affect a person's appearance and/or the way they function or communicate and/or they may cause a range of difficulties including pain and fatigue. Disability by contrast is the inequality, disadvantage, disempowerment or discrimination which may affect people with impairments because of barriers to access and inclusion.

As a business researcher with extensive experience in studying and experiencing disability, I have much to share. However, instead of a lengthy literature review, I will narrate my personal experiences as a visually impaired individual navigating the mountains.

My passion for climbing and hiking stems from my father's journey, who hailed from a rural village in China and attained university education through sheer hard work during the 1980s. Despite living in an urban city, we paid our annual visit to my grandparents who still resided in those mountain villages, sparking my interest in hiking and climbing, a passion I brought with me to Wales.

People often ask how I manage to achieve feats that even many non-disabled individuals find challenging. My answer is simple: passion. A strong passion helps you find like-oriented friends and embrace challenges together.

**Why would outdoor businesses focus on accessibility for disabled people?**

Firstly, the World Health Organisation estimates that 15% of the global population is disabled, with the percentage in Wales even higher at around 21%, and represents a significant potential customer base for businesses. This is illustrated by the Purple Pound in the figure below:

Secondly, barriers, whether physical or attitudinal, can disable individuals. For instance, if an impairment necessitates a wheelchair and you are denied access to a restroom or a sightseeing location due to inaccessibility, you are disabled by the facility’s design. For people with non-visible impairments, it is more often the negative attitudes (prejudice) from others that may exclude them from participating. For those with long-term impairments, many are passionate about nature and keen to hike but feel unsafe or unwelcome due to existing attitudes and literal barriers. Hiking inherently involves overcoming natural obstacles, which makes the activity rewarding. However, insurmountable barriers, especially those manufactured by society, will deter participation.

Many tourist attractions have over recent years improved accessibility for wheelchair users by making sure services, such as cafés and other facilities, are, on the level, have accessible entrances and exits, as well as accessible toilets or preferably Changing Places Toilets as well as modifying key trails to enable all participants to enjoy the natural beauty of the site. However, more effort is needed to enhance accessibility for all, including the removal of physical and attitudinal barriers.

**Practical steps for enhancing accessibility by planning your route with accessibility in mind.**

Here are some practical steps to consider in your route planning and risk assessment as you consider the needs of the group, and how you will enable them to meet the objectives of the day:

1. Consider the physical route: ensure trails have firm, stable surfaces, minimal elevation changes, whilst avoiding excessive inclines or obstacles.
2. Length and duration of your route: Ensure information on the length and duration of the trail is clear and practical, with the specific needs of your group in mind. Factor in enough stops, where appropriate, and ensure the severity of the activity is clearly outlined.
3. Services, timing and other applicable information: verify the availability of accessible restrooms, parking spaces, rest areas, and services like shuttle buses or adaptive equipment rentals. For people living with conditions such as autism, not knowing what to expect on arrival can be a barrier to taking part or a cause of anxiety. You can help alleviate this by giving as much information as possible.
4. The weather and other environmental factors: As well as its impact on the terrain, and when choosing the best time for scheduling your activities, the weather will impact how the specific needs of your group may function on the walk and plans may need to be very adaptable.
5. Additional equipment: Where appropriate, participants could be encouraged to bring walking poles, or an organisation could provide them to those in need. Adaptive equipment like all-terrain wheelchairs or motorised scooters may also be available in some locations which can facilitate access to rough terrain. Organisations such as Disabled Ramblers and Snowdonia National Park provide accessible vehicle hiring services, which can help with making the tour accessible.

**Do you have an accessibility statement for your business?**

An accessibility statement can provide reassurances to your clients, and also set expectation as to whether your activities are suitable for those looking to participate.

An accessibility statement is typically associated with the specific measures taken to make the facilities and tour accessible, for infrastructure examples include installing ramps, providing audio guides, and ensuring wheelchair-friendly pathways. This can be a bit more challenging for outdoor instructors, as a level of ability is required to complete certain activities such as mountaineering, hill and moorland walking and climbing. For these kinds of activities, an accessibility statement is still valuable as it shows that you have considered accessibility and are open to conversations to make your activities as accessible as possible. One example of this can be operating a group-led approach to activities which includes regular breaks as required by the group, communicating this can add a sense of reassurance for those unsure about whether they will be supported in the activity.

**Encouraging more participation**

For some activities, it can support the instructor and client to have their caregiver or support worker present, as they are known to the client and understand their needs. A place can be offered at a discounted rate or for free to encourage this approach.

If you have activities which are suitable for disabled people, you can encourage participation by implementing an easy to understand ‘accessibility rating system’. For example, you can conduct a self-evaluation in terms of the difficulty and accessibility level of the route. Engaging with disabled users for feedback and collaborating with disability access groups, such as the Disabled People’s Organisation (DPO) Arfon Access based in North-West Wales, can make attractions more inclusive for everyone. There are also accessibility review organisations, such as See Around Britain, which collect photos from members in various places in Britain to assess their accessibility for disabled users. Everything from transport access to washroom facilities can be viewed in a series of photographs of the venue and are invaluable when assessing the suitability and accessibility of your route before you plan to visit or arrive at the venue.

**Support for your business**

Often, there is funding available from the public sector to support inclusive activities across the UK. Typically, this is offered to third sector organisation (such as registered charities). If you are not registered as a charity or third sector organisation, you could partner to apply for funding. This could be for an outdoor activity or to develop a skill such as navigation.

An example:

Berwyn Nordic Walking partnered with the Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society to deliver Nordic Walking sessions to a number of MS groups in England. Sport England, through the local government, funded 6 months’ worth of Nordic Walking sessions. The funding was awarded based on there being a benefit to a community group, which was that the members of MS Society were able to learn to Nordic Walk which helped with their mobility. Notably, some of the clients were keen climbers and mountaineers prior to MS and they regained confidence to visit the outdoors again, which contributed to their wellbeing.

Finally, as per the social model of disability, disability is about the barriers faced by people with impairments or living with the impact of chronic illness such as cancer, multiple sclerosis, stroke, Parkinson’s disease, Crohn’s disease and many more. Remember, not every impairment is visible, but barriers can be removed when people work together.

Useful contacts:

Arfon Access Group: jannieu@tiscali.co.uk

See Around Britain: <https://seearoundbritain.com/>

Mountain training website: <https://www.mountain-training.org/?gad_source=1&gclid=CjwKCAjw1K-zBhBIEiwAWeCOF-xftAf7haShRFpm3guojFL8je-jr8wULGAjogz_0sk8Vcp0jyZtbhoChQMQAvD_BwE>

The disabled ramblers: <https://disabledramblers.co.uk/>

Snowdonia national park tramper hire: <https://snowdonia.gov.wales/visit/access-for-all/tramper-hire/>

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