

Disability Access & Awareness

Why is it important to you?

Particularly with older village halls, where accessibility is sometimes harder to improve, it can be difficult for some of the most vulnerable members of the community to attend and participate in events. When a person is unable to take part in community activities then there is an increased risk that they may become socially excluded. It is typically stated in Village Hall governing documents that the building is “for use by all inhabitants of the area”.

Additionally, the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) makes it unlawful for anyone to discriminate against a person on the grounds of their disability. It applies principally to service providers (including village hall committees) and employers, who have a legal duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to ensure that a disabled person is not treated less favourably than anyone else. It is essential to treat somebody with a disability as a person and not to see a disability as the problem. The problem, which the Act aims to address, is that as a society we have developed services with the majority in mind rather than trying to include everyone.

“ There are many barriers which can be improved for little cost. ”

Key Points

According to the DDA, the legal definition of disability is:

“A disabled person must have or have had, a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

The DDA was implemented in 3 stages:

As of December 1996: It is unlawful to treat a disabled person less favourably for a reason related to that person’s disability (unless it can be justified). Less favourable treatment means; refusing service, providing a worse standard of service, providing service on worse terms.

As of October 1999: Service providers have to take reasonable steps to change any policies, procedures or practices which make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to make use of a service. Service providers will have to take reasonable steps to provide auxiliary aids or services (for example, the provision of information on audio tape or of a sign language interpreter) which will enable disabled people to make use of a service. Where physical barriers make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people

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to use a service, service providers must take reasonable steps to provide the service by a reasonable alternative method.

As of 2004: Where a physical barrier makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for a disabled person to use a service, service providers may have to take reasonable steps to either:

- remove the feature
- alter the feature
- provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature.

Identifying improvements

This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to carrying out an “access audit”, but aims to prompt consideration generally of access issues. An initial method to identify access improvements is to assess potential barriers when using the hall (inside and outside). You should consider as many issues as possible no matter how small; something small to one person could, for somebody with a disability, be the difference between using the hall or not.

From the car-park (if you are fortunate enough to have one!) to the door, how easy would it be for somebody with mobility issues or a visual impairment to access the hall - particularly on a dark night? Is the car-park bumpy and would a smooth path make access easier? An outdoor light may help people to see where they are going. Are any steps clearly highlighted and an alternative route such as a permanent or removable

ramp provided? Does the hirer know that a removable ramp is available for use? Are handrails provided where required?

How difficult is it to get from room to room inside the hall and are toilet facilities easily accessible for everyone? If you have a large hall, would somebody with a hearing impairment be able to hear a speaker at the front; would they be able to tell if the fire alarm was activated and how to exit? Is there a step either side of the fire exit and could it hinder people’s escape? Is relevant signage appropriate and clear?

Some solutions may be expensive, such as building a new permanent ramp, or a fully accessible toilet block extension, but should still be considered. However, there are many barriers which can be improved for little cost. For example, painting the edges of steps to improve visibility; painting door frames in a contrasting colour to the walls; putting a strip of warning tape in the middle of glass doors to avoid collision. Hearing loop systems are more affordable and there is a range of portable options.

Organisations such as Disability Cornwall and some private companies offer a professional Access Audit service which is recommended. Once an audit has been carried out it can be easier to keep up to date with the accessibility issues of the building by applying the same principles to any future hall improvements.

Many access issues should be considered and can be improved when replacing items; such as seating. Are the seats going to be comfortable for extended periods of time? When purchasing new chairs has it been considered to order a percentage of the chairs with arms?

- Part M of the 1992 Building Regulations requires buildings to be “reasonably safe and convenient for disabled people to gain access to and within .. and to use them”. These Regulations cover internal and external features of all new or substantially rebuilt non-domestic buildings and most extensions to them. It does not, as yet, cover existing buildings apart from requiring that any alterations should at least maintain existing access facilities if any exist.
- VAT is not payable on goods and services supplied to a charity for the purposes of improving the access of people with disabilities into a building and within it. The Provision of toilet facilities for disabled people in a charitable building such as a village hall is also zero-rated.

FAQs

What if we can't afford to make any major improvements due to financial or physical restrictions, are we breaking the law?

The law states that “reasonable adjustments” must be made which may seem slightly vague. However, in practise if an improvement such as a new concrete ramp is going to cost £20,000 and the annual turnover for the hall is only £5,000 and supposing the committee have been unsuccessful in attracting funds for the work, then it is unlikely that this is seen as a reasonable adjustment to make.

It may be possible to attract funding for improvements and many access improvements don't have to cost very much.

We are considering an extension to the hall; when should we be thinking about accessibility?

Part M of the 1992 Building Regulations dictates that any new building work must be compliant to specific accessibility requirements.

We don't have many disabled people in our village and they don't use the hall anyway. Do we really need to think about making some changes?

Yes. Perhaps some people are put off from using the hall due to the barriers they have to overcome. It may be useful to carry out a community survey to see if the hall is providing the service required by local residents.

We want to build an extension for accessible toilets but the cost is prohibitive what can we do?

Sometimes it is possible to convert one of the existing toilets to make it fully accessible. It would be worth approaching a community minded surveyor or architect for advice before dismissing the idea altogether.

Further information

Disability Cornwall

01736 756655

www.disabilitycornwall.org.uk

ACRE Village Hall information sheets (available from CRCC):

- 23 Making Halls Accessible (£4)
- 32 An Introductory Guide to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (£4)

DirectGov

website, www.direct.gov.uk, and search 'DDA'

Office of Public Sector Information

www.opsi.gov.uk and search 'DDA'

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