Planning accessibility across countryside path networks

A Good Practice Guide to Disabled People’s Access to the Countryside
Contents of Good Practice Guide
Introduction

The objective of these guidelines is to assist you as a countryside access manager to make informed decisions about accessibility across countryside path networks. They will also enable you to more effectively manage these networks with reference, as appropriate, to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and other countryside and highways legislation.

Improving access to the countryside for disabled people is not just a matter of improving the physical condition of individual paths and trails. There are many similarities between the thought processes in identifying the least restrictive access for a single path and developing an action plan for a network of countryside paths. The important distinction is that at the individual path level you may reasonably decide it is impossible to provide full accessibility whereas at the network level it is very unlikely no good accessibility can be provided.

For disabled people to have equal opportunities they must be able to make the same sort of choices as the rest of the community in seeing varied landscapes, getting into different environments and gaining diverse experiences. Few people with a countryside interest would be satisfied with only one or two sites to which they could gain access, yet for many disabled people this is the reality.

These guidelines address this issue by looking at:

- the accessibility for disabled people of countryside path networks;
- the procedures that need to be followed in considering the needs of disabled people in planning countryside path networks.

The guidelines focus specifically on disability issues. However, disabled people are not a separate, discrete group of people. They are as diverse as the rest of the community. Their activities, capabilities and aspirations overlap with other peoples’. Therefore a lot of these guidelines are as relevant to meeting the needs of communities in general as it is to meeting the particular needs of disabled people.

Before examining the key activities that must be pursued in order to plan an accessible countryside network we need to consider what is meant by reasonably accessible and what is an accessible network.
Countryside Path Networks

What is a network?

Networks exist and are managed on a variety of scales. For example a network may be a series of paths within a wood, a valley, on a hill or mountainside or across a whole district, indeed multiples of districts. Different partners may have responsibility for different parts of a network, and potentially different sources of funding may contribute to the maintenance and development of its various components.

As an individual countryside service provider you may be considering the network as the specific area for which you have responsibility or over which you have influence. In the wider context you might consider the area which you manage to be within a broader network which is defined by a geographic boundary (natural, man-made or artificial).

The management and planning of the network may be undertaken in conjunction with some or all of the other recreation providers within an area. In that way you can look at the wider opportunities for the delivery of the full possible range of experiences on offer in partnership with other local agencies.

Whatever the scale or nature of the network you are considering, the approach in these guidelines is relevant at any level whether the network has been defined geographically, functionally (according to its use by various people) or with reference to the management regimes that operate it.

For many disabled people linear routes (paths and trails) have been the primary opportunities to gain accessible countryside experiences, and particularly so when it has come to experience in the wider countryside where public access is not the sole purpose of the land use. Paths and trails will remain the most important means of access to the countryside. These guidelines on network planning relate primarily to paths but you should also consider accessibility issues relating to open countryside, moorland and the wider ‘natural’ environment.

Reasonable Accessibility

In most countryside networks all the paths and trails cannot and should not be made fully accessible. The two questions that arises are:

- what level of accessibility can be reasonably expected by all users?
- what level of accessibility can be reasonably provided by access managers?

The task of the countryside service provider is to balance these two questions and come up with a practical answer.
You should aim to provide a network to a standard that allows the maximum variety of people to use it without unreasonable difficulty. This does not mean simply increasing the number of people using the network. Increasing accessibility means that the diversity of people able to use it and gain the experiences and enjoyments that a given environment has to offer is increased. This requires a physical network that allows disabled people as individuals to choose what, where, how and when that experience is gained in the same way as other users or visitors.

What is reasonable will vary in different situations and according to the needs and capabilities of users. It is exactly because of this circumstance that network planning is so essential. As it will not be possible or appropriate to make all paths fully accessible networking planning is the process which will ensure that disabled people have some choices available to them within the overall system. It may be reasonable, because of cost or conservation restrictions, that a particular countryside path can not be used by some disabled people. It is far less likely that an entire network offers no opportunities for disabled people.

**What is an accessible network?**

It is a network which..........

- gives all disabled people choices in the experiences they can enjoy in the wider countryside, the countryside immediately around settlements and urban green spaces;
- gives disabled people the same range and quality of choices as everyone else;
- includes fully accessible paths (i.e. to BT Countryside for All Standards);
- includes paths where the least restrictive access has been achieved;
- has all development and maintenance work leading to increased accessibility.

It is not a network which:

- has to have all its paths fully accessible;
- has just those routes which were easy to make accessible as the only ones available to disabled people;
- has generally good accessibility but not at the most popular or special sites.

This is based on the idea that

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<tr>
<th>Total Access</th>
<th>Programme Access</th>
<th>Physical access</th>
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<tr>
<td>having the same choices as everyone else</td>
<td>experiencing the enjoyment, excitement, relaxation or adventure of the countryside</td>
<td>reaching quality countryside experiences</td>
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</table>
A policy states the aims of an organisation.

A strategy lays out how policies are to be achieved.

An action plan details what is to be done.
Policy

What are policies for?

Policies exist to inform and lubricate both the internal workings and the external relationships of an organisation. Accordingly they should meet the needs of:

- those responsible for implementation
  (e.g. access managers, land owners, planners, contractors)
- those who are to be its ultimate beneficiaries.
  (e.g. disabled people, young people, elderly people, the public)

The Need for Specific Policies

Policies specifically addressing issues relevant to countryside access for disabled people are needed for five reasons:

- **Raising Expectations and Demand**: Many disabled people do not expect countryside services to be accessible to them. Clear and positive policies can and will stimulate interest among local communities, disabled visitors and tourists in general. A trading advantage in the tourist market can be built up over areas that do not embrace accessibility.

- **Managing Change**: Change will be needed if the needs of disabled people are to be met through core path network planning. Explicit statements on disability issues demonstrate the political will to make those changes and provide a clear framework for staff and other stakeholders who will be expected to implement and respond to those changes.

- **Accountability**: Published policies and strategies explain intentions, provide a measure against which success can be measured and a framework against which short comings can be identified and rectified. Clear policies also provide a means of assessing cost effectiveness.

- **Duty**: Under the Disability Discrimination Act service providers might be required to justify their policy with respect to its effect on a particular disabled person. A clear policy, thoughtfully developed, consulted upon and implemented, is likely to indicate that reasonable steps have been taken to avoid discrimination.

- **Reversing Exclusion**: In the past disabled people were less visible in society, more dependent on support services and less involved in community life. It has taken a long time to alter perceptions based on the medical model which saw and treated disabled people as unwell, less able and dependent. The social model of disability recognises that it is the environment that handicaps people. Policies and strategies which reflect this will more effectively and transparently tackle social exclusion.
Developing Countryside Access Policies

Most countryside service agencies will have policies in place governing various aspects of their work such as access, conservation and equal opportunities. Fewer are likely to have specific policies that detail their aims with regard to the accessibility of their services for disabled people.

General policy statements such as “.......will have regard to the needs of disabled people” are not a great deal of help. They do not tell providers of a service what they have to aim for, and they do not tell disabled people what they should expect from the service.

In order to develop policies that can inform and guide the planning and management of countryside access networks you need to consider a number of factors. These may vary according to whether you are part of a public, voluntary or private sector organisation but collectively they simply involve a review of existing policies with a view to their integration with a specific accessibility policy.

- **Countryside Legislation**: The requirement to have regard to the needs of disabled people is now a greater part of countryside access legislation in England, Wales and Scotland than previously. The duties placed on individuals and organisations require that they consider what they intend to do, i.e. what their policies are. The duties of highway authorities in England and Wales to prepare rights of way improvement plans which cover accessibility have an implicit requirement that disabled people should expect some improvements in service over a period of time. In Scotland the requirement to prepare core path network proposals also carries with it a responsibility to cover the needs of disabled people.

- **DDA**: There are duties on all service providers to actively avoid discrimination against disabled people (see the Guidelines on the DDA for Countryside Service Providers). Although many countryside services are provided free of charge this does not remove the provider from these duties under the DDA. The need to show disabled people, service users and the general public that you agency aims to meet these needs and duties is common to all countryside services.
Public Consultation: The involvement of local communities in the development of policies is generally considered worthwhile in terms of ensuring more practical and more acceptable policies. It is also important in informing all stakeholders of your organisation’s intentions.

Policy Context: Policies for the provision of countryside access opportunities for disabled people cannot be dealt with in isolation from existing countryside or equality policies. Nor can they be isolated from other quite distinct policy areas with which they occasionally conflict.

For instance, in an area with stone walls as field boundaries, traditional stiles may be important features in the landscape. You might have to consider gates as replacements or adjuncts to improve access for disabled people. Over a wide area there may be several hundred stiles. On the one hand it is unlikely to be reasonable to say that all stiles can be replaced irrespective of the loss to the local heritage. Equally it is unlikely to be reasonable to say none of them can be replaced even though many disabled people will remain severely restricted. By developing a policy that takes into account both the historic value of the stiles and the legitimate needs and rights of disabled visitors you will be better able to deal with each situation as it arises. Perhaps you will be able to prioritise the type or location of the stiles that can be replaced or must be retained. A clear policy context will enable you to explain to visitors who cannot gain access why the position is as it is.

The Content of Specific Countryside Access Policies

Suggested policies that a countryside service provider might adopt with respect of countryside access for disabled people are illustrated in the Appendix. The main themes of those policies include

- **Equality**: Outlining the sorts of opportunities and outputs disabled people can expect from the service, its approach to integration, the standards it will pursue and how the needs of disabled people will fit in alongside other policies.

- **Resources**: Stating the principles by which resources will be applied, recorded and made available to public scrutiny.

- **Consultation**: Outlining the intention and processes for consultation with and representation for disabled people.

- **Staff**: Detailing the commitment to training, developing, and appraising staff with respect to their responsibilities to deliver equitable services.

- **Evaluation**: Statement of the principles, and processes by which the evaluation will take place, and how complaints from disabled people will be dealt with.
Strategy

To develop a strategy designed to meet the policy goals you have established you need a lot of information about your network and the people who it is to serve.

- **Facility Catalogue:** Paths are just a means to an end. People with and without disabilities use paths to reach some part of the countryside where they can enjoy the view, have a picnic or any other activity of their choice. In many instances just enjoying the general environment along a path is sufficient for many people. This may lead you to see which paths provide access through a particularly pleasing environment and can be seen as facilities in their own right.

Your network will probably comprise a series of features of interest linked by paths, and served by amenities such as car parks, toilets and visitor centres. Your strategy will need to take account of all these facilities, amenities and the paths that link them.

- **User Demand:** An effectively managed network should meet the demands of its users. A strategy that is to change and develop a network must therefore begin with an understanding of the facilities and paths people are currently using, would like to use or could use if made more accessible. Assessing current demand will provide you with very helpful information but it may not give you the whole picture as many disabled people may not be able to express their current interests where access is poor or they may have little knowledge of areas they have not been able to get to. You will need to consider latent and potential demand as well.

- **Path Network Survey:** Unless you know where there is already good accessibility, where good accessibility might be provided and where good accessibility might be very difficult to provide you will not be equipped to make decisions about access to your network for disabled people. This means you must undertake a survey of the network and specifically collect information on factors relevant to access for disabled people. The Accessibility Survey and Access Audit Guidelines will help you complete this task without, necessarily, covering every inch of the network in extensive detail. Where you have clear policies you should be able to formulate your strategy on the basis of good background information so long you are willing to adapt and respond to the more detailed picture that will emerge as you progress to the action plan stage.

- **Resources:** A strategy that proposes action must include the means to achieve its goals. Before developing an action plan you must be clear as to the money, time and expertise it can draw on. It is often the case in countryside access work that the desired output far exceeds the resources available to achieve it. If this is the case and fund raising is to be part of the programme, the targets and approach should be detailed.
Public Consultation: As with policy development the quality and robustness of a strategy will be enhanced if all relevant stakeholders have been involved in its production. This is especially important where you are going to make judgements on such issues as which facilities visitors think are most important, or which currently inaccessible paths disabled people would most like improved.

Key Strategic Issues

Having collected all relevant information you will now need to consider a range of issues in drawing together your strategy. All aspects of the network must be considered such as conservation, transport, education and interpretation, and information provision. The strategy should also be relevant to all actual and potential users including disabled people, children, cyclists, horse riders and walkers. With respect to the specific issue of accessibility for disabled people across the network the key issues to consider are:

Targets

Under new legislation in Scotland, England and Wales the public will have access rights to many areas and paths that they previously did not use. This will increase the extent of many networks but realistically it is not expected that all local authorities will manage all paths. In many areas it is the priority paths or core path networks that will be the focus for resources and management. With the likelihood that little improvement of the accessibility of the wider countryside beyond this core will be undertaken it will be even more important that core path networks meet the needs of people who need good access standards to enjoy the countryside. If a core path network represents only 10% of the paths available in an area, and full accessibility is provided on only 10% of the core paths then only 1% of the countryside access the public at large can use will be available to all disabled people. For this reason the inclusion of targets for the level and extent of access for disabled people should be an important part of your strategy.

Targets are a only a tool but as a part of a strategy they can be very useful. They give you something to aim for and a measure by which success and failure can be assessed. In terms of accessibility, targets are useful in presenting to disabled people how and how quickly you are going to make progress in meeting their needs.

Qualitative targets are notoriously difficult to define and monitor but they can have merit in guiding your decisions. For instance, a target to provide full accessibility to three distinct environmental experiences within a network could significantly influence which paths across a network are improved first.

Quantitative targets can be a valuable means of demonstrating accessibility has been improved. Such targets could be set as a proportion of a network, say 15% fully accessible, or as an absolute measure, say 10 kilometres. This will usually only provide an indication of the level of service provided to disabled people. If the accessible routes that meet these numeric targets are the least interesting or least popular ones disabled people will not have been given the same countryside opportunities as the rest of the community.
The following table provides some suggested criteria for setting targets for the accessibility of core path networks for disabled people. Targets may need to be used in combination to provide a comprehensive picture of the service that is to be delivered to disabled people.

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<tr>
<th>User based targets</th>
<th>Qualitative targets</th>
<th>Quantitative targets</th>
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<tr>
<td>more disabled people using provision</td>
<td>greater variety of accessible experiences</td>
<td>more kilometres of fully accessible paths</td>
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<tr>
<td>wider range of disabled people able to use provision</td>
<td>wider diversity of accessible experiences</td>
<td>more kilometres of barrier free routes</td>
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<tr>
<td>greater frequency of use by disabled people</td>
<td>better quality of accessible experiences</td>
<td>more kilometres of paths achieving least restrictive access</td>
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**Path Quality**

The countryside access industry does not appear have to reached a consensus on what constitutes a good path. Whilst recognising the enormous diversity of countryside environments there are not even consistent descriptions of what constitutes a good upland path as opposed to a good urban fringe path. There are guides on good practice in the construction of paths both in lowland and upland environments. Standards exist for cycleways and for paths that are fully accessible to disabled people. The difficulty is in identifying on other paths not for those two purposes where, and by what degree, variation from these standards is acceptable. If full accessibility is not considered appropriate for a path, what is? The question this leads to is should money be spent on improving a path when, say because of stiles along its route, the number or range of people able to use it will not change.

The **Least Restrictive Access Guidelines** focus on accessibility on individual countryside paths. These processes consider the needs of disabled people and the potential impact upon them of factors including poor surface, excessive gradient and barriers such as stiles. This approach effectively gives a measure of the ‘fitness for purpose’ of a path where that purpose will include use by disabled people. The significance of determining ‘fitness for purpose’ for all paths is in achieving cost effective provision. Any path work which falls short of making a route fit for its purpose is a waste of limited resources.

The **BT Countryside for All Standards** are part of a continuum of specifications. Disabled people are not a separate user group, their abilities overlap with other people’s. For instance, athletes who use wheelchairs may be able to use countryside paths that some ambulant people would find very difficult. The standards were developed from the point of view of user needs and provide performance, not construction, specifications. Your strategy may need to cover similar sets of path specifications for other uses, such as cyclists and horse riders while still achieving the least restrictive access.
Alternative Routes

Access for disabled people is sometimes not achieved because, say, the gradients, of a particular path are too severe. Where a path is restricted to a particular line there may be little opportunity to improve accessibility. Your strategy should consider its approach to finding and utilising alternative routes where these will make a significant difference to the network and how it provides for the needs of disabled people. Indeed at the strategic level, your focus should be more on routes than on paths as part of your target is to link opportunities and experiences, not just manage the physical paths.

In the strategy you should be able look at the use of alternative routes in improving access for disabled people. In some cases the alternative need may only be a short diversion from an existing path. In others you may have to find a completely different route into an area to avoid a steep hill or other physical feature. A reluctance to confront the alternative route issue means that you will be trying to achieve a good level of accessibility from a set of paths that probably never considered the needs of disabled people as it evolved.

Potentially Accessible

The phrase ‘potentially accessible’ is a relative term. With unlimited resources nearly all paths could be made accessible. Nonetheless in developing your strategy you will find it useful to be able to look at routes which with a reasonable application of effort and resources could become fully accessible. The relevant factors are:

- **linear gradients**: This is the single most important factor that is likely to affect the cost of creating accessible routes. Where a path to a particular feature climbs a slope that is a lot steeper than the required standard you can either create an accessible route by zig-zagging the path or finding a separate alternative. The steeper the slope the greater the likely cost of achieving full accessibility.

- **physical features**: Where paths are not accessible because of major physical features (e.g. rivers, bridges, gulleys, etc) the cost of improvement to a good standard may be too great. Achieving accessibility will usually be by means of alternative routing.

Where routes are not affected by either severe slopes or significant physical features they have a greater potential to be accessible. They can be considered alongside existing accessible paths within a network plan that can build new paths on potentially accessible routes.

The identification of potentially accessible routes should aim to include as much of the network as possible rather than be an excuse to limit the range and extent of routes that disabled people might enjoy. By considering the potential of all routes you will deselect some from your accessibility planning. This will save some time and effort in developing your strategy. You should bear in mind that even routes which do not seem to have the potential to become accessible may need to be included in access improvement plans because they are particularly popular or lead to special points of interest.
New versus Old

Just as re-routing paths may be a cost effective way of securing improved accessibility so the construction of new paths may be a better option that modifying existing ones. Even when working on an existing route a small diversion involving new construction may be an easier way of improving accessibility that trying to modify the gradient or surface of the existing path. Over whole lengths of paths new construction may be quicker, easier and less disruptive than trying to meet all necessary criteria over the constraints of the old path. A network strategy which envisages no new path construction would indicate a very low priority had been given to meeting the needs of disabled people.

Some access managers have considered working towards improved access for disabled people by modifying their networks bit by bit. For instance, where a stile needs replacing to install a gate, or where a surface deteriorates repairing it to the required standard. This strategy means that access for disabled people is driven by factors which have nothing to do with what people want or need. It also means that it might be some considerable time before any fully accessible routes are available to disabled people. If the first stile to be replaced is in the middle of a path with stiles all along, it could be many years before that route can be used by disabled people.

Least Restrictive Access

The Least Restrictive Access Guidelines examine the process you can follow to identify what level of access for disabled people is the best that can be achieved on paths. Across a network as a whole the least restrictive access will still be identified by reference to three key factors:

- how many people will be restricted?
  (See the Least Restrictive Access: Appendix 1- The Access needs of Disabled People in the Countryside)

- how severely will those people be restricted?
  (See the Least Restrictive Access Guidelines: Appendix 2 - Access restrictions; and Appendix 3 - Gaps, gates & stiles and their use by disabled people; and Appendix 4 - Observations on the Accessibility for Disabled People of a Selection of Gates, Stiles, Barriers, Bridges and Boardwalks)

- how much will its cost (financially and environmentally) to remove or reduce the restriction?

Strategy Production

Armed with all the information you have now collected (network survey, demand assessment, facility catalogue, available resources, and public opinion) you should be able to review the key issues (targets, path quality, alternative routes, potentially accessible routes, new construction and the least restrictive access) to decide how you are going to create a network which meets the needs of disabled people.
Your strategy should tell everyone with an interest in access for disabled people:

- which features, facilities and environments are currently accessible;
- which features, facilities and environments you are seeking to make more accessible;
- what levels of accessibility will be achieved across the network;
- what targets you have set for disabled people’s access in the short, medium and long term;
- what resources are needed for all this, and how you will get them;
- how the public’s views have been considered and are reflected in your strategy;
- how your strategy on access for disabled people integrates with other plans for countryside access.
Action Plan

The action plan is the most detailed stage. This is where you make decisions about individual paths and facilities in the context that you have established for the network with your policies and strategies.

Whereas you will have undertaken an accessibility survey to collect information for your strategy, you will now need to audit some paths to be sure about their condition and to estimate the costs of improvements. See the Accessibility Survey and Access Audit Guidelines for guidance on the application and methodology of access audits.

- **Paths to Standard**
  These paths are important as they represent the immediate opportunities you can promote to disabled people. Hopefully they will have been created to serve some of the most interesting and popular areas of the network. Where you already have fully accessible paths in your network these could well form the core around which you develop the rest of the system.

  The action plan is likely to need a maintenance component so that these important routes remain available to disabled people in the future.

- **Paths to be Improved to Standard**
  Where there are gaps in the range of opportunities available to disabled people paths that add to the choices available should be made fully accessible. According to the results of your strategic review you are likely to be making decisions as to where new routes and fully accessible paths are needed as well as up-grading existing paths. Some of your routes for improvement may link to and complement those that are already up to standard. However, paths in areas that are currently not accessible are likely to be important if the range of choices available to disabled people are actually going to increase.

  The number and total distance of paths that will be improved to standard should be identified and included in the plan with the specific object of meeting the targets set in the strategy.

- **Paths to be Improved to Least Restrictive Access**
  Given that resources are likely to be a limiting factor on the decisions there will be quite a number of paths where the cost of reaching the standard, at least in the short term, is excessive. The strategic review should have thrown up a series of routes which are important in terms of the opportunities they provide and can be made considerably more accessible than at present at relatively little cost. The removal of barriers, the improvement of short sections of poor surfaces and the clearance of encroaching vegetation can be cheap and easy options that can make a difference for many disabled people.
Other paths
You are likely to have to commit resources to paths which do not form an important part of your accessibility strategy. This may be to accommodate other users such as horse riders or cyclists. Wherever resources are applied across the network they should not result in access for disabled people getting worse. In many cases simple maintenance programmes across the whole network can contribute to a general improvement in accessibility. For instance, the gradual replacement of stiles with gates will greatly extend access for some people.

Priorities
Your plan of action is unlikely to solve all the access problems disabled people currently face in the short term. You will need to decide your priorities. These may be influenced by the public consultation you have undertaken. They should also be influenced by the results you expect from the application of the resources available to you. For instance, will your priorities mean that after the first phase of activity there are more and better opportunities available for all disabled people.

Budgets
Effective budgeting will help you and other stakeholders see the return your investment in access for disabled people achieves. Just selecting the cheapest options for access improvements may not deliver much new or improved accessibility. One or two larger, more expensive projects may have a greater impact more quickly as far as improving things for disabled people is concerned.

Programme
Your action plan needs a timescale. This will guide your work and provide stakeholders with a picture of the progress they can expect. It may also help you avoid problems under the DDA. If you are challenged that a particular path is not accessible you may legitimately point to the fact that you are working on other areas of the network and will be looking at that particular path at some future point in the programme.

Evaluation
Your action plan should be subject to continual review. You need to consider more than just is it on schedule and within budget. The key evaluation criteria is whether access for disabled people has improved as a result of your work.
Consultation

Purpose of Consultation with Disabled People

Because public consultation features in policy and strategy development some general comments on inclusive planning are provided. More detailed considerations on networking with disabled people are provided in the Networking Guidelines. In planning countryside path networks it is especially important to consult with disabled people because:

- many disabled people do not see the countryside as accessible to them and there is likely to be a high latent demand among them;
- the particular problems various disabled people face in accessing the countryside may not be understood by other people;

Benefits of Consultation with Disabled People

Consultation with disabled people is not a matter of political correctness, it has practical benefits.

- disabled people are the best people to identify access opportunities that will mean something to them;
- they are best placed to suggest priorities for accessibility improvements;
- disabled people know how to find access solutions that meet their own needs;
- where some disabled people have been involved in access planning others will be more confident that provision will meet their needs;

Consulting with Disabled People

If you expect disabled people to turn up to general consultation meetings about the countryside you may well be disappointed. When they cannot currently get into the countryside they are not likely to see such meetings as relevant to them. Specific meetings with disabled individuals and representatives of disability organisations are essential if you are to get any significant response on issues of accessibility.

The methods you adopt in contacting and talking to disabled people may have to be varied from other consultation approaches. You may have to use different media, for instance audio tapes for visually impaired people, when sending out material. When talking directly to disabled people you may have to adjust the topics you cover, the amount of time you allow and the language you use to make your consultations accessible and meaningful. Advice can be obtained through local disability organisations that will usually be pleased to help you contact and involve disabled people.
As in all consultation exercises you have to assess how representative the people you consult are. Too often access for disabled people is seen in terms of wheelchair users only. The needs of sensorily impaired people and people with learning disabilities must be considered. Among people with mobility disabilities there is such a diversity of different circumstances that one person may find it difficult to give a complete overview of everyone else’s needs. Where the people you talk to are clearly representing a wide range of different disabled people you should be more confident you will receive a balanced response.

Some things may seem obvious but it is useful to remember during consultations with disabled people:

- some disabled people may talk to you through an advocate
- hold meetings in accessible venues;
- disabled people will know what they need but may not be familiar with countryside paths so as to be able to identify solutions;
- many disabled people will not be able to comment on areas that are not currently accessible, you may need to explain or bring photographs, etc;
- not all disabled people will want to use the countryside;

The questions you want answered by disabled people are likely to be the same as other sections of the community:

- what experiences should the path network lead to?
- which existing paths give access to where you want to go?
- are there any new routes that would add to the value of the network?

Additional questions you could ask disabled people include:

- are there any accessible paths that you value at present?
- which parts of the countryside do you think should be given priority for improvements to accessibility;
Access Fora

In the future Access Fora will provide a clear basis for community consultation on all aspects of countryside access. It is quite possible that these fora will be liable under the DDA should their decisions, actions or advice lead to discrimination against disabled people. If you ensure your Access Forum has effective representation of the disability community the chance of it a) discriminating and b) being liable under the DDA should be greatly reduced.

The roles and functions Access Fora may perform with respect to disability issues included:

- receiving the views of disabled people on countryside access;
- informing disabled people of proposals and activities in countryside access;
- ensuring ‘reasonable’ accessibility is maintained across networks;
- ensuring that landowner, recreational user and conservation interests are not always allowed to over-ride the needs of disabled people;

Conclusion

Planning a network that meets the needs of all potential users should not be seen as a daunting or threatening task. You are not expected to provide full accessibility for all of the people on all of the paths. You are expected to provided for all of the people on some of the paths. You should remember that where good accessibility is provided for disabled people many other users will benefit from more convenient, more enjoyable paths.

By approaching your network plan in a logical way that sets the policy climate within which strategies are developed and action plans implemented you will demystify the whole process and especially any concerns you may have about your services for disabled people. As the disabled people become more and more visible and integrated in our communities there is less reason why meeting their countryside access needs should be seen as exceptional or an extra duty.

Any network plan that you produce should now cover some measure of access provision for disabled people. In that this is liable to change over time you and your customers will be able to see that improvements are taking place and progress is being made. That is all disabled people, indeed, everyone should expect from countryside service providers.
Appendix

Model Policy for Accessible Countryside Path Networks

Equality

Opportunities
Our organisations will seek to ensure that disabled people have equality of opportunity in pursuing the countryside recreation activities of their choice. This means that disabled people can have the same range and quality of experiences as other members of the community.

Outputs
Services and facilities will be provided in ways that do not make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to access them and where necessary all reasonable efforts will be made to change inadequate services.

Integration
Wherever possible disabled people will receive the same services and have access to the same facilities as other members of the community, having due regard to the fact that some disabled people may require or prefer modified provision to meet their individual needs.

Standards
Where recognised standards of provision for disabled people exist our organisation will adopt them or provide justification for any divergence or variation in their content or the way in which they are applied. In all situations our organisation will try to follow current best practice.

Other Policies
Where other policies are going to affect the ability of our organisation to deliver countryside accessibility these will be reviewed to ensure a proper balance is achieved and the needs of disabled people do not always take second place.

Application of resources

Principles
All resources will be applied fairly and equitably. All resources will be allocated and utilised with due regard to the needs of disabled people. The provision of accessible services and facilities will not be seen as an additional cost but as an integral part of all expenditure programmes.

Recorded
To facilitate effective monitoring of performance and cost effectiveness our organisation will, wherever practical, identify the resources it has specifically allocated to provision for disabled people. The benefits for disabled people and the rest of the community arising from the application of resources to provision for countryside accessibility will be identified and recorded.

Transparency
Our organisation will report at least annually on the level and manner of resource allocation on provisions for countryside access for disabled people.
Consultation

Disabled People
Our organisation will consult with disabled people and other relevant individuals and organisations in the application of countryside accessibility policies and programmes. Procedures will be established to facilitate periodic public consultations on major issues or at the time of significant events such as the preparation and publication of strategies and plans.

Standing Committees
Wherever standing committees or other groups are established to consider countryside recreation matters in our organisation representation will be sought from disabled people. The basis of that representation will be as wide as possible and, where practical, disabled or other people who genuinely represent a significant section of the disabled community will be encouraged to participate. Support will be provided by our organisation to encourage and facilitate disabled people to make a positive contribution as community representatives.

Transparency
The outcomes of these consultation processes will be made available to interested parties so that they may see and evaluate the nature and extent to which our organisation has taken on board the views of respondents.

Staff Training

Equality
Our organisation’s equal opportunities policies with respect to recruitment and staff development will be applied to all staff and volunteers involved in the planning and delivery of countryside recreation functions.

Procedural
As its most significant resource all staff and volunteers will be made aware of our organisation’s countryside policies relating to services and facilities for disabled people.

Development
Our organisation’s staff will be required to pursue development and training opportunities in disability awareness, access auditing and related fields. The our organisation’s partners will be encouraged to put in place similar requirements.

Appraisal
Discussion of issues relating to the provision of services and facilities for disabled people will be included in the personnel appraisal procedures operated by our organisation.
**Evaluation**

**Principles**
Our organisation will evaluate its performance and the value for money achieved in the delivery of countryside recreation services and facilities for disabled people.

**Auditing**
Access audits will be utilised to evaluate the development, planning and management of accessibility and to guide the establishment of priorities for both new developments on-going management and maintenance.

**Feed-back**
The results of evaluations of countryside recreation services and facilities for disabled people will be made available to consultative groups and other interested individuals and organisations.

**Complaints Procedure**
Our organisation will establish fair and equitable procedures to respond to complaints from disabled people concerning any aspect of its countryside recreation functions.