

Disabled people: an opportunity for your business

There are almost 12000 disabled people in Bracknell Forest¹ and did you know that disabled people contribute over £80 billion a year to the UK economy? Or that those people may account for up to 20 per cent of the customer base for an average UK business?²

Despite these compelling figures, the needs of this section of the public are poorly addressed by most UK businesses. By ensuring they have the same opportunities to use your business or service as everybody else you will gain new customers, increase customer loyalty and enhance your company's reputation.

How will improving accessibility help my business?

There are sound business reasons to take account of the needs of those people with impairments:

- ☞ Your company will gain the opportunity to do business with a significant proportion of the UK's population, all potential customers who your competitors may well be neglecting
- ☞ Disabled people, older individuals, their families and friends have increasingly high expectations. They will go elsewhere if they are not satisfied with the service they receive
- ☞ Once these people have found a business that suits their needs, they will become loyal customers returning time after time
- ☞ The consumer experiences of disabled people affect the choices of their family, friends and carers. The new business they bring to your company will increase your cash flow and create additional business revenue
- ☞ Improved physical access will make your business more appealing to many others, including the 3.3 million families with children under five who use prams or pushchairs
- ☞ Studies show that corporate reputation increases for businesses that welcome disabled customers.

Who are disabled people?

You might not know that someone has a disability just by looking at or speaking to them. Some people, such as those with long-term health conditions or older individuals see their impairment as part of aging and don't consider themselves to be disabled at all. Disabled people are all different and may have a wide range of impairments covering such things as:

- Visually, hearing and/or mobility impairments.

and people who have:

- a physical disability, a long term illness, mental health or psychological difficulties, an acquired brain injury and/or learning or intellectual difficulties.

¹ Office for National Statistics

² Office for Disability Initiative

Top Tip

All of these people and their families, friends and carers could be your potential customers. The advice in this guide will help you get ready to welcome them to your business.

Reasonable adjustments

There are always ways to provide a service so that customers are not turned away or forced to go elsewhere. Practical and often low-cost solutions will overcome most barriers. Many adjustments are common sense and can be put in place by making simple and cost-effective changes to the way something is done. Other adjustments might need more consideration but could, for example, be put in place as part of a general refurbishment or redecoration programme.

Top Tip

Always choose reasonable adjustments that enable disabled people to access the same or as nearly the same service as non disabled people.

Doing business with disabled people

Attracting and keeping these customers is not just about catering for wheelchair users, who in fact make up less than 8% of the UK's disabled population. By taking a holistic approach and looking at every aspect of your business, you should find that you can meet the needs of most people by being positive and flexible.

Top Tip

Don't miss a marketing opportunity! Once you've decided to take action, tell everyone what you are doing. Include information in your advertising and promotional literature, on your website, in employee newsletters and on any appropriate signage. Your commitment to accessibility and a public statement that your company welcomes disabled customers will help to:

- ☞ increase the loyalty and satisfaction of existing customers
- ☞ attract new customers, especially if you publicise your new policies
- ☞ gain advantage over your competitors
- ☞ enhance corporate reputation.

Language

Using the right language will help to build positive relationships with people with impairments and their families, friends and carers. Where possible try not to highlight someone's impairment but, if you have to, people would prefer you to:

- ☞ say 'disabled people' rather than 'the disabled' or 'handicapped',
- ☞ avoid words that imply frailty or dependence (e.g. XXXX 'suffers' from MS),
- ☞ say 'XXXX has epilepsy' rather than 'XXXX is an epileptic' or a 'victim of epilepsy' if you need to refer to a person's impairment,
- ☞ say XXXX 'is a wheelchair user' rather than XXXX 'is wheelchair bound' or 'XXXX is confined to a wheelchair'.

Finally, remember to be natural. Don't worry about using everyday phrases that may seem to refer to an impairment, such as 'see you later' to a blind person.

Serving disabled customers

Ask disabled people about their requirements in advance if possible; for example, use 'Please let me know if you require any particular assistance' as a standard line in letters or at the entrance to your shop and as part of your customer care procedures. Build responses to requests for adjustments into standard procedures and practices and make sure everyone knows what you can offer. For example, consider including a standard statement on printed matter and in your marketing materials.

Face-to-face contact and customer support

All your customer facing staff should:

- ☞ feel comfortable with all customers
- ☞ never patronise, make assumptions or think they know best
- ☞ be ready to offer assistance, but never impose it
- ☞ confidently ask whether the person has specific requirements and be able to respond sensibly
- ☞ know what reasonable adjustments your company offers.

They must be prepared to:

- ☞ move to a place that is quiet or where they can talk with a customer face-to-face
- ☞ sit or bend down to talk to a customer at his/her eye-level
- ☞ offer a customer a seat or help them with doors
- ☞ let a customer take their arm for guidance or support
- ☞ offer a customer the use of equipment, for example a clip board, as an alternative writing surface
- ☞ use appropriate ways to overcome barriers to communication, for example by writing notes if necessary

- ☞ always talk to a customer directly, never to his or her companion/interpreter
- ☞ never shout at or call attention to a customer
- ☞ never compromise a customer's right to privacy or confidentiality
- ☞ check to make sure a customer has been understood correctly
- ☞ always be courteous and patient.

Top Tip

Don't make assumptions about what people can and can't do, it's always best to ask them.

Your premises

There are many things you can do to improve physical access to your business:

- ☞ Make sure your company premises are well lit and corners, steps and counter edges are marked with high visibility tape so they can be easily seen
- ☞ Lighting inside and outside your business should be non glare and evenly positioned so visitors can identify any obstacles in the dark, for example car parking, routes to the entrance, corridors etc..
- ☞ Paint the edge of entrance steps white to highlight contrast, fit a handrail or install a bell or buzzer and, if necessary, be prepared to go outside to serve someone with an impairment
- ☞ Fit easy-grip handles or move existing handles to a more accessible height for wheelchair users
- ☞ Consider a temporary ramp that you can fit if a wheelchair user visits. This will also help people making deliveries to your company
- ☞ Keep corridors and aisles clear of clutter so wheelchair users and people with poor mobility can get through
- ☞ Doors can often be heavy so make sure their opening and closing mechanisms work properly and fit simple to use handles
- ☞ Provide a sturdy chair for customers who have to queue or wait. Consider fast-tracking people who are unable to stand in a queue. If required, you could also reserve particular seating or spaces for disabled visitors
- ☞ Rugs or loose carpet fittings can be a trip hazard so if you use them make sure they are recessed or fixed securely onto the floor
- ☞ Consider providing personal shopping, home delivery or home visit service for people who can't get to your business.

Parking

If you can't provide parking for disabled visitors on your premises, make sure staff know where the nearest parking is located.

If you have staff parking, make a staff space available for disabled visitors by prior arrangement.

Will a member of staff help a customer pack at the checkout and then be able to take the shopping to the car?

Is there a facility for a customer to order a taxi in the store when they are ready to leave?

Top Tip

If you have a designated disabled parking bay, make sure it is well lit, clearly signposted and that it is not used by staff or delivery drivers.

Toilets

- ☞ Consider fitting a handrail to help with sitting down or standing up
- ☞ Make sure the toilet paper holder and spare rolls are within easy reach
- ☞ Consider having an easy to use lever tap fitted to the sink
- ☞ Consider fitting an emergency cord.
- ☞ Do staff know where nearest toilets are if not in store (not just disabled toilets)
- ☞ Are staff aware of the RADAR keys for disabled toilets and does your store have one?
- ☞ Some people may have a medical condition which means they may need to use a toilet quickly and they may have a 'Just Can't Wait' toilet card.

Getting it right

Don't forget to let customers know about the changes you are making and that you welcome their views on improving services. Their views will help you to make further improvements and increase customer loyalty.

Top Tip

Customer feedback is the best opportunity to learn more about your customers and their thoughts on how accessible your business really is. They may pass on some useful tips picked up elsewhere.

Disability Checklist for small businesses

- ☞ Does everyone understand the business case for welcoming these customers?
- ☞ Do you and your employees understand your legal responsibilities?
- ☞ Do you keep track of how requests for adjustments from customers are managed?
- ☞ Do you routinely consider disability when you update or make changes to the ways you work or to your built environment?
- ☞ Do you ask your customers what you can do to make your service easier for them to use – and then take steps to do it?
- ☞ Do you highlight the good service you offer to your disabled customers in your marketing materials?
- ☞ Do your suppliers know you are serious about disability and that you expect the same from them?
- ☞ Are your staff trained in disability awareness and what they should do in various situations, including how to help if someone has lost their mobile phone or need to make contact with a carer
- ☞ Are your advisers – legal and otherwise – competent on the requirements of the Equality Act 2010?
- ☞ Are your staff aware of the Autism Alert card or Safe Places card

As part of Bracknell Forest's commitment to making the area as inclusive as possible by creating the opportunity for people with disabilities to participate more fully, as well as supporting businesses and services to be more inclusive, Bracknell Forest utilises an access guide facilitated by DisabledGo. By encouraging improved access for all people, businesses and services can share in the significant consumer market that they represent.

Key Points for Businesses

- ☞ Appropriate service, not special service
- ☞ Be patient, be understanding
- ☞ Treat the customer with respect
- ☞ Customers with a disability are the same as every other customer. Their purchases will help keep your shop in business
- ☞ Where appropriate consider how your shop layout impacts upon all customers
- ☞ Good service is satisfying for the customer and the sales assistant, just enjoy it.
- ☞ People may rate good customer service more than cost of goods
- ☞ Think about "employing" disability champions. Rather than a salary, "pay" could be in the form of staff discounts

Mobility Impairments

Customers who use a wheelchair or walking aids do not necessarily need assistance to move around your shop, but they may need help in selecting goods. If you ask if they want help they will let you know what is the most appropriate for them. All you have to do is ask. Be particularly attentive if your shop is re-stocking and you have goods and boxes on the sales floor.

Advice Notices

- ☞ Do not attempt to physically aid the customer unless it is requested
- ☞ Talk to the customer, not the carer, if they are being accompanied
- ☞ If requested help the customer select goods and merchandise, particularly from higher level displays
- ☞ Ensure the customer can access payment machines at the cash desk
- ☞ If the customer is in a wheelchair try to kneel and have eye level contact when you talk to them
- ☞ Talk at normal voice levels and pace and avoid raising your voice
- ☞ Is there space for a mobility scooter inside the shop? if not a polite notice in a prominent place with what assistance can be provided by you business for people with mobility problems may be appropriate.

Sight Impairments

Customers with sight impairments are very independent and capable - they managed to get to your shop afterall! However, they may still need some extra support with their shopping. They may not be able to read instructions on packaging or signs and may have difficulty with colours. When buying clothes they will need honest advice.

Advice Notices

- ☞ Red bands on a cane or dog harness indicate a hearing impairment as well
- ☞ Greet them on arrival so they know an assistant is available. Ask if they want assistance
- ☞ Do not take hold of the customer. Ask if they would like to take your arm for them to hold when leading them through the shop
- ☞ Do not walk too quickly and avoid sudden changes of pace or direction
- ☞ Watch out for hazards at head height, especially if the person you are guiding is taller than you
- ☞ Give clear advice of any obstructions (stock re-fills, packaging, displays) or changes in direction
- ☞ Be available to read instructions on packaging or signs
- ☞ If the blind or partially sighted person has an assistance dog you should approach from the side opposite the dog. Do not take hold of the harness or lead
- ☞ If the customer has an assistance dog, do not distract it. Remember it is a working dog not a pet (However, a bowl of water available for assistance dogs would be appreciated.)
- ☞ Ensure you confirm the price of and sizes of goods before they get to the cash till
- ☞ Remember to say goodbye or let them know you are walking away when you leave a blind person so that they are not left talking to themselves
- ☞ Blind pedestrians may need to keep in close contact with the building frontages in order to avoid getting disorientated or lost. Following along building frontages can prove impossible for a blind person if the footway is obstructed with shop displays, cafe furniture, parked vehicles or other obstacles.

Speech Impairments

Customers with speech impairment will normally indicate this to sales staff. Remember that your customer is engaging with lots of different people so they are experts and will guide you. Be prepared to use your initiative in how to communicate.

Advice Notices

- ☞ Maintain eye contact so you can follow the customer's communications and gestures
- ☞ Be attentive so you understand the customer's actions
- ☞ Give the person plenty of time to express themselves
- ☞ The customer may use hand gestures to indicate their needs and to communicate with you. Please watch carefully
- ☞ Be patient and give the person time to finish
- ☞ Be prepared to offer a pen and paper so that customers can write more complicated requests
- ☞ Be patient and be prepared to go at the customer's pace
- ☞ Resist finishing off words or sentences.

Hearing Impairments

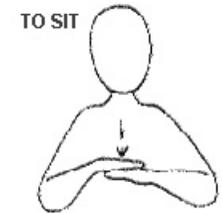
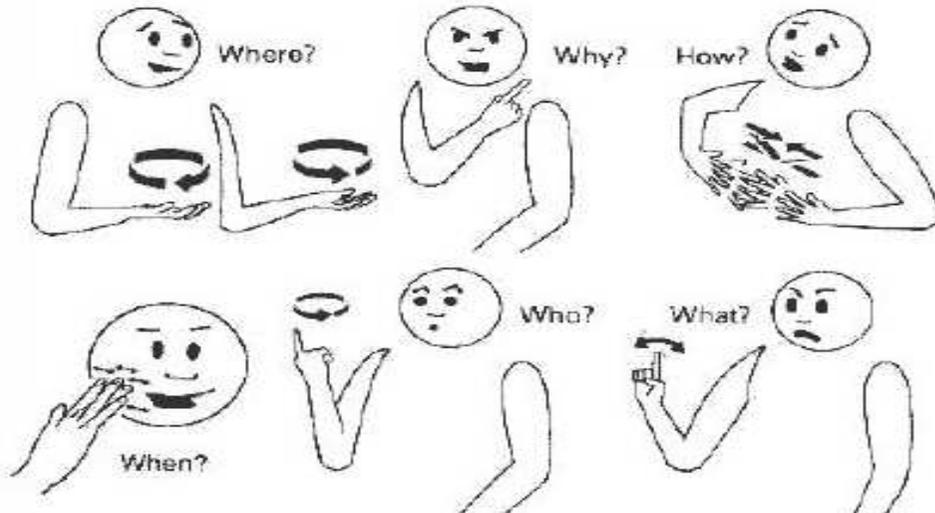
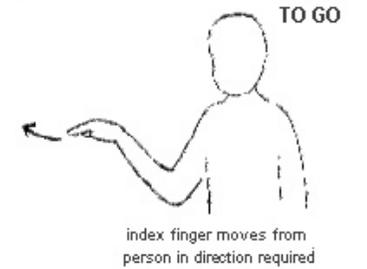
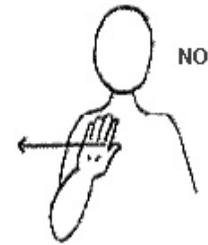
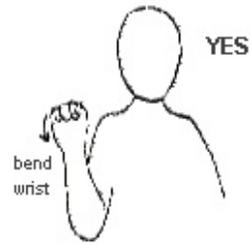
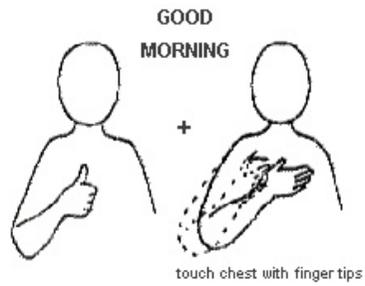
If a customer does not immediately respond to your greeting perhaps they are simply unable to hear you. Try again when you get eye contact. The customer will indicate if they have difficulty with their hearing. Now you will be able to communicate easily if you maintain eye contact and speak normally but clearly; the customer should then be able to “hear” you and understand what you are saying. The customer may like a pen & notepad to write down their requirements.

Advice Notices

- ☞ Advertise if you have loops in store/at kiosk/checkout points and ensure all staff understand how to use these systems and that they are tested regularly.
- ☞ Start by gaining eye contact and then greet the customer
- ☞ Try not to touch the customer to attract their attention; it is usually acceptable to gently and politely tap a deaf person on the shoulder to attract their attention, however be aware that sharp movements/ touch could cause unwanted surprise
- ☞ Do not presume that if a person is wearing a hearing aid that they can hear perfectly, speech is often one of the hardest frequencies to pick up
- ☞ When talking always keep eye contact – do not turn away to point things out as the customer will not be able to see what you are saying
- ☞ Do not cover your mouth with your hand, paper or a pen and do not speak with anything in your mouth
- ☞ Be aware that a beard or moustache may make lip-reading difficult
- ☞ Your customer may use hand gestures to indicate their needs and to communicate with you. Please watch carefully
- ☞ If person has an assistance dog you should approach from the side opposite the dog. Do not take hold of the harness or lead
- ☞ If the customer has an assistance dog, do not distract it. Remember it is a working dog not a pet (However, a bowl of water available for assistance dogs would be appreciated.)
- ☞ Talk at normal voice levels and pace - **Don't shout**. This distorts your mouth, making you harder to understand
- ☞ When communicating via an interpreter, speak normally allowing time for translation. The interpreter may request that you slow down if you are talking too quickly
- ☞ Talk to the person not the interpreter, interpreter guidance is that they expect people to talk as if talking to the person and not to the interpreter
- ☞ At the till be prepared to show the customer the price rather than just saying it
- ☞ Try to face the customer when speaking.

Some simple British Sign Language

Some Basic British Sign Language Gestures



Learning Difficulties

Customers with learning difficulties require you to be patient and understanding. Communication is not always easy and you may have to repeat yourself to ensure that you have recognised the customer's needs. Be prepared to move at your customer's pace and avoid causing any distress for the customer. Remember the customer wants to be independent and a shopping trip is important to them.

Advice Notices

- ☞ Be patient and understanding
- ☞ Avoid double negative statements and vague questions, for example, "You do not want that, do you?"
- ☞ If necessary repeat what the customer is saying to ensure that you have understood your customer's needs
- ☞ The customer may be with a carer who can assist if necessary
- ☞ Avoid causing distress and be prepared to be patient to allow your customer time to regain their composure
- ☞ If the customer is having difficulty with their money when paying, offer assistance if you feel it is appropriate
- ☞ Be prepared to break information into small chunks and give the person time to understand the information.

The Safe Place scheme

People may carry a 'safe place' card which gives their name and the contact details of someone to call when they need some help. When someone feels vulnerable, they may hand the card to members of your staff who should then be able to call the person nominated on the card to provide assistance/help.

Dementia Awareness

People with dementia may experience a range of problems that have the potential to impact on their ability to interact with those they encounter. Similarly those they encounter may be unsure how and whether to help people who appear to be experiencing difficulties. People with dementia all differ in the way they experience their dementia, but generally speaking in public situations people with dementia may have a range of difficulties, including:

- Have problems remembering what they are doing
- Have difficulties in communicating clearly
- Have problems handling money
- Have problems navigating in complex or confusing environments

How staff respond to people who may be experiencing these kinds of problem can make a real difference.

How can I spot a person with dementia?

You can't. Most people with dementia are over 65, but some are younger. Some people with dementia will tell you if they are having problems, and how you can help. You might also notice customers doing, or saying things which suggest that they are having problems that might be caused by dementia. These include:

- ☞ Looking, or saying that they are a bit lost or confused
- ☞ They might appear to be searching for something they can't find
- ☞ They might be looking like they don't know what to do next
- ☞ They might appear to have problems handling or understanding their money, or how to use their card
- ☞ They might be finding self-service facilities hard to understand
- ☞ Their speech might be hard to understand
- ☞ They might appear to have problems understanding what you are saying
- ☞ They might forget to pay for things they have picked up.

Of course, there are all sorts of reason why people might be having these problems that are not related with dementia or memory problems. *Generally-speaking* - the younger the person appears to be, the less likely it is to be dementia-related. But remember, younger people can have dementia too.

Good Customer Service

If you have good "people skills" and work for a business with a good culture of customer care, you already have much of what you need to provide great service to people with dementia. Kindness, common sense, avoiding stress, using good communication skills and a smile go a very long way. The top tips for the impairments above cover most aspects with assisting a customer who has dementia.

Additional Advice Notices:

- ☞ Simply asking if you can help can go a long way
- ☞ Offering to pick out the right money if someone appears to be struggling to work out the coins or notes in their hand
- ☞ Offer to run the items through self-service, or show them how to do it
- ☞ Ask if they would like to sign for their purchase if they can't remember their PIN
- ☞ Offer to keep their shopping to one side so that they can come back and collect it when they have remembered their PIN

What can you do if someone appears to have forgotten to pay for something?

This is difficult. While someone may have forgotten to pay, they might equally be engaged in theft, and your safety is the most important thing. **If you know** the person, and you **know** that they have dementia, then you can simply ask if you can help, and if they would like to pay. This will often be all you need to do.

Very rarely, people with dementia will not understand that they need to pay, or may feel that they shouldn't. In these cases, it is up to the discretion of the manager. Some businesses, if they know the person and their carer, have simply totted up the value of goods, and asked the carer to arrange for payment.

If you do not know the person, then your business' usual policy on theft should apply.

Autism Awareness

Autism is a spectrum condition, meaning that people with autism can experience varying difficulties and it is also often referred to as Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Autistic people often don't like unfamiliarity; this could be a place, object or person and this can cause them to feel anxious and frustrated. People with autism typically have difficulties, to varying degrees, with three main things; these are called the Triad of Impairments, this means that no two people with autism are necessarily the same.

The Triad of Impairment main areas are;

- Difficulty with Social Communication
- Difficulty with Social Interaction
- Difficulty with Social Imagination

Difficulty with social communication. Individuals with autism can find it difficult to use or understand:

- ☞ facial expressions or tone of voice
- ☞ jokes and sarcasm
- ☞ common phrases and sayings; an example might be the phrase 'It's cool', which people often say when they think that something is good, but strictly speaking, means that it's a bit cold.

Difficulty with social interaction. Individuals with autism may:

- ☞ not understand the unwritten social rules: they may stand too close to another person for example, or start an inappropriate subject of conversation
- ☞ appear to be insensitive because they have not recognised how someone else is feeling
- ☞ appear to behave 'strangely' or inappropriately, as it is not always easy for them to express feelings, emotions or needs.

Difficulty with social imagination. Difficulties with social imagination mean that people with autism find it hard to:

- ☞ understand and interpret other people's thoughts, feelings and actions
- ☞ predict what will happen next, or what could happen next
- ☞ understand the concept of danger, for example that running on to a busy road poses a threat to them
- ☞ cope in new or unfamiliar situations.

Many people with ASD also have difficulty processing everyday sensory information such as sounds, sights and smells. This is usually called having sensory integration difficulties, or sensory sensitivity and can have a profound effect on that person's life.

Good Customer Service

If you have good “people skills” and work for a business with a good culture of customer care, you already have much of what you need to provide great service. The top tips for the impairments covered earlier in this document deal with most aspects of assisting an autistic customer. In addition, being autism aware will give you the confidence to approach and help someone who could be in need. Kindness, common sense, avoiding stress, using good communication skills and a smile go a very long way. In certain cases there may be a need for flexibility to alter the lighting or music volume upon request if the person has sensory sensitivity.

Autism Alert Card

Some people may carry and present the Autism Alert Card and may show this to staff if the individual finds themselves in a situation where they cannot easily explain their behaviour. The card gives some simple advice, the person's name and emergency contact details. It will help those presented with a card, how to help the card holder and it will also assist you in identifying that you are dealing with someone with autism.