



How to make your retail space wheelchair accessible.

Shopping is often something we do without thinking about it. However, for some, it means planning and researching before they go. Many businesses on the British high street are still inaccessible to customers who use wheelchairs.

In a gov.uk survey on disability, 78% of respondents said they had been unable to access or had extreme difficulty accessing shops or shopping centres. The same survey highlighted that the spending power of disabled people and their families is at £274 billion - that is a big loss of potential profit for retailers.

If you are a shop manager or owner and you are thinking about making your business accessible to shoppers who use wheelchairs, then we can help.

Here is our resource for making a retail space accessible for shoppers who use wheelchairs.

The Equality Act 2010

The act legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. There are nine protected characteristics under this act including disability, gender, sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity and age.

The act defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal

daily activities.' Someone who uses a wheelchair may find elements of shopping more difficult than others. Reasonable adjustments need to be made to make a shop accessible and to improve the shopping experience. Understandably, larger brands will be able to make more adjustments than smaller ones. Don't panic if you can't make all the changes that you would like.

Venue audits and planning

Doing a venue audit before you open a new retail space is a great idea. You should examine your shop in terms of accessibility when you upgrade or change interior layouts or refurbish an existing space.

You may not have a say in where your shop is located particularly if you are part of a larger chain or brand as your head office may decide for you. However, if you can make that decision, look at the shop in terms of access: are there steps? Raised kerbs? Could you install ramps or change the outside of the building with permanent-accessible features? Is the shop positioned on a slope or steep hill that might make someone's journey difficult? Is there public transport access or accessible parking?

This may be the deciding factor for where you locate your shop.

Front door and ramps

It is recommended that entrances would be step-free with a level threshold of less than 15mm. Where this isn't possible, you need to invest in a good-quality ramp which can be used when needed. Although some stores may not be able to add portable ramps, each shop will have individual requirements, but you need to be able to think about alternative solutions if you cannot have a ramp.

It is worth doing a walk around the shop with this in mind to see where you need step-free access to be added. Check with your head office,

builders or the building owner (if you are renting) about what can be added or removed or what alternatives they could provide.

It's worth checking if there is an alternative access route that is one that you wouldn't mind taking. This means ensuring that it's not through dark alleyways or refuse collection areas or anywhere nasty!

Push button / automatic doors

Can someone physically get into the shop? Often shop doors are heavy and it's not always the best weather conditions to have them open all the time. Ideally, someone should be able to open them with one hand and they should not be too heavy.

You could install a doorbell/ button that someone can hit to activate an automatic door or alert a staff member that a customer is waiting to get into the building. These also need to be fitted at a height where people can reach them if they are using a wheelchair at a height of 900mm.

Door width also needs to be taken into consideration. It may not be possible to change the width but if it is, then a doorway must be at least 32 inches wide.

Also, if you are using turnstiles at the entrance, you will need to check that someone who is using a wheelchair can enter and exit easily. Ensure that any gates or doors that need to swing open, this is not at face height, and they open automatically.

Ensure any plants or advertising boards are kept away from the entrance of the shop.

Lifts and the second floor

If the shop has more than just the ground floor, then you will need a lift where possible. You will need to liaise with the landlords or your head office to make sure they are in working order and have sturdy handrails inside that people can grab. Check people can use the lifts easily and independently.

Keep the lifts free of clutter such as rails or boxes and available for customers when needed. They should also be clean, signposted and in working order.

If you cannot install a lift, then you need to think about if this is the right shop for your business or if there are alternatives. This could be using technology to showcase products that are upstairs such as virtual tours, online catalogues or developing a personal shopping experience where you bring items to someone.

Changing rooms

Fitting rooms need to have enough space for people who are using wheelchairs to enter, get changed and possibly have a companion with them who may need to help them.

Are there grab rails in the fitting room to help someone up or steady themselves? Are chairs ready for someone who may need them or a cord that someone can pull or a button they can push for assistance if they need it?

Often, clothing shops, for safety or security reasons may have one person per fitting room or cubicle policy. Be aware that sometimes, people using wheelchairs may have a personal assistant (PA) or family member or partner who needs to assist them.

Here are some further recommendations for fitting rooms:

- Clothing hooks set at 1400 mm and 1050 mm above the floor level.
- A vertical grab rail on side walls set at 800mm from the floor level to the bottom of the rail.
- A horizontal grab rail on the back wall set 680mm above the floor level.
- A 600mm deep supported changing bench set at 480mm above the floor.
- A horizontal door pull to enable the door to be closed when someone enters
- The door with a minimum clearance requirement of 875mm

Cosmetic or skincare counters with chairs

Some shops have tables and counters where they apply products such as make-up or skincare. Often, these are set at a height which may be inaccessible to shoppers using wheelchairs.

Could you use adjustable chairs where possible so that you can lower the height or raise someone up to the lights and/or mirrors that you need? If you have a lower counter or adjustable counters/chairs then check you allow space for knee clearance for someone sitting underneath or in a wheelchair.

Mirrors

People need to be able to see the outfit before they buy it or try a new make-up shade on their skin. Mirrors are often placed around shops so that people can see what they look like, but these can be placed at the wrong height for someone who is using a wheelchair.

Check that mirrors are placed at different heights in the store. Note if there are areas that have steps or might be difficult to reach if you are a wheelchair user and don't place the mirror in that area. Could you have adjustable mirrors, handheld or portable options that could be brought out to the customer?

If you are converting a changing room into an accessible changing room - you'll need to note the position of the mirrors there, too.

Counter height

People need to be able to pay! Often counter height can be set far too high for someone who is using a wheelchair. You could use different options such as different height counters throughout the shop.

Alternatively, allow customers the option to pay where they are instead of having to go to the counter.

Wire-free card machines

Card machines are becoming increasingly wire-free so that they can be transported to the person rather than stationary on the countertop. If your card machine has a wire, you must check that it is long enough for a wheelchair user to access.

Where possible, can you switch to using wireless card machines? Consider allowing someone to use apps such as PayPal or other payment systems as an alternative.

Clothing or product rail height

It may not be easy for someone using a wheelchair to access clothing or product rails. If your store is big, there may not be a member of staff

around to help. Having lower clothing rails, and product counters can help but also, train staff to be vigilant. If staff spot someone who needs help, they should offer. Ideally, there would be a lowered counter for wheelchair users at a height of between 70 and 76cm. Staff should come out from behind the counter so that a wheelchair user can see them and be served.

Also, in food shops, being conscious that products may be out of reach for customers. Treat customers with kindness, acknowledge them as they enter and offer to help when needed.

Layout

People need space to manoeuvre so this means measuring space around tables, units or displays.

The width of a standard manual wheelchair varies but is usually less than 76cm. Electric wheelchairs and scooters might be wider so there needs to be room to move. A minimum width for this to work should be 120cm (180cm is ideal) and there needs to be enough space for wheelchair users to be able to turn around when needed.

It is not always just step-free access that you need to think about as internal door frames may need to be a certain width or hallways.

Implement a uniform flooring surface (all one height or with gentle slopes) throughout the store to assist individuals using wheelchairs.

Accessible shopping hours

Some shops host quiet hours which are great for disabled customers especially those who may be wheelchair users and neurodivergent. Quiet hours usually involve no music, fewer shoppers, and less crowding.

If you do decide to host quieter hours for disabled customers, make sure this is advertised so that shoppers know what time to visit.

Queues

Queues can be really difficult to manage especially at busy periods such as sales or Christmas. Keeping this in mind, encourage other customers to be mindful and make sure that there is enough space for someone to turn or move around.

Having a clear queue system of where to enter, stand and exit can also help to keep the flow of the store moving. Alternatively, could you ask someone using a wheelchair to wait somewhere quiet and call them when ready? Or bring a portable pay machine to them.

Heavy bags

Don't assume that someone will be able to lift a heavy bag - ask. If you can, pop around the counter to hand it to someone or ask what they would like you to do with the bag.

Things on the floor

Move any objects or clutter on the floor that shouldn't be in the way, taking care to tuck in leads or plugs that may cause problems. This includes moving clothes off the floor - especially during busy sale periods!

This also goes for A-signs which are often popped on a floor when there is a wet floor or other hazards. It may be difficult to manoeuvre around them, especially in smaller shops where there are narrow aisles. They must be removed again when the floor is dry to avoid accidents or make access easier.

Signage

Provide clear signage with large fonts and high-contrast colours for better readability. The signs need to be placed at a height that they can be read.

If you are considering making signs accessible, then you can [download our free resources](#) on how to make your Word documents more accessible and Accessible Internal Communications for more information.

Car parks

Not all shops will have access to car parks, but larger supermarkets or shopping centres may have their own. The minimum recommended number of accessible parking bays, if the shop has a car park, is one space per disabled motorist who requires an accessible bay plus 6% total car park – (minimum 1 space)

The size of the bays matters too - Accessible bays need to be big enough to allow doors to be fully opened and to allow disabled drivers and/or passengers to transfer to a wheelchair parked alongside the car. The minimum suggested size is 2.4m wide by length 3.6m.

Accessible bays should be clearly marked with each bay indicated with ground-painted signage and bollards or pole-mounted signs.

If you can't offer parking, then could you consider where the nearest car parks are? Add a section to your website or socials where people can access that information. You could include:

- How many spaces there are
- Public transport alternatives

- How far the spaces are from the store
- The route you need to take to the shop from the parking spaces
- If the spaces are free or do you need to pay for them and display a ticket
- If there are kerbs, textured pavements or traffic lights

Emergencies

Every shop will have emergency plans in place should a fire alarm sound or any other type of incident. Does your evacuation plan include disabled people especially those in wheelchairs? Do you have step-free access for emergencies?

Staff need to be informed on what to do in the case of an emergency and how to assist disabled people when they are exiting.

This will also include staff members who may use a wheelchair - can they get out of the building in an emergency?

Toilets

There are lots of considerations when it comes to accessible toilets.

- Is the accessible toilet easy to find and well-signposted?
- Is the door easy to open? Is there a power-operated door and are controls at a height easily reached by a wheelchair user? If the door is not power operated how easy is it to open? Could you easily do this with one hand?
- Are grab rails provided?

- Is there room for someone to be able to position a wheelchair and transfer to the toilet from both the side and in front of the toilet?
- Is the room clear of items and not being used as a storage area?

It's worth checking the toilets before the shop opens and throughout the day to ensure they are in good working condition and that they are fully stocked with soap and toilet rolls.

You will need to check that the red cords are in good working condition. Red cords help to ensure the safety of people who may lose their balance or need assistance. This needs to be in a position where if someone does fall, they can reach the cord and it needs to be left untangled and untied. If staff are checking the bathrooms, do they also check on the red cords as part of their duties? If not, who is responsible for this?

Toilets also need to be brightly lit with easy-to-read signage.

The accessible toilets need to be left unlocked or a spare radar key left at the till in a place where shop assistants know to find it. Not everyone may have access to a radar key so there should be one available. Radar keys are a national scheme which provides a standard key that can be used across the UK. The key should be easily accessed and available to staff who should know what and where it is.

Wheelchair users are not the only people who need to use accessible facilities. People with different impairments need to access them for varying reasons, so avoid making assumptions. It's also important to note that some people may have disabilities they choose not to disclose.

It isn't just about the space!

Making sure that staff are aware, trained, welcoming and understanding can help reduce any potential issues.

Ask don't assume

It's best to ask someone what their access needs in-store may be. Not every disabled person will have the same access needs.

Carer vs personal assistant

Don't assume that someone who is with a person is their carer. This could be a partner or a family member. A person may prefer the term personal assistant (PA) instead. If you are unsure, use a companion or ask their names if you want to be friendly.

Don't just speak to the person using a wheelchair's companion but speak to both. It can be frustrating and upsetting to be cut out of a conversation if you are the one asking the question.

Trained Staff

Staff should be trained to know where things like ramps are kept and who is responsible for putting them in place. If there is no lift or upper-floor access, what is in place to help someone access the products?

A survey by Scope revealed that 67% of people avoid disabled people - part of this is a fear of saying or doing something wrong.

Consent

Sometimes people may ask for extra help where a member of staff may need to touch their body, face or hair. Asking for consent and announcing what you are going to do in advance is respectful.

Staff rooms

Is there enough physical space and seating for people? If someone is using a mobility aid, is there clutter-free access to rooms and can they get to the seating? Tables and chairs will also need careful positioning.

Microaggressions and casual ableism

While you may be careful of language when speaking to a disabled person, there are still ways we can communicate subconsciously. A microaggression or casual ableism is when someone portrays their negative thoughts with or without meaning through verbal, behavioural or environmental slights directed at a marginalised group. This could be towards a disabled person, people of colour or LGBT+ people.

This could be through body language for example arms crossed and verbal through sighs or tone. Being aware of things like asking open questions, body language, behaviour and facial expressions can help to eliminate the possibility of making someone feel unwelcome or discriminated against.

Advertising, marketing, and social media

While many retail chains will have teams in the head office that are responsible for all three, some have a more organic approach to their marketing. If you can organise your own marketing, why not feature and use disabled models where possible?

This could be including someone who uses a wheelchair in advertising campaigns or remembering to include disabled people in your social media images. Visibility and representation go a long way in showing that your business is aware, educated, and welcoming.

Feedback

Allow all members of the team and customers to feedback on accessibility. Don't just ask about the business itself but ask how people found the shop. This can be done through surveys, mailouts or simply asking people for their opinion on how their shopping experience was. Understand that

while it might be difficult to hear about problems, there may also be positives to how their experience went which recognise your hard work.

Feedback to head office

Ensuring feedback reaches head office. For many independent shops, the person receiving the feedback may be the person who can implement it but for others, there may be a head office to go through. Creating a log of feedback that you can use when attending meetings, raising the issue with appropriate managers and chasing up previous reports can show that you are actively trying to make your shop more accessible. Not only that but it could make a huge difference.

Our website has [free resources you can download](#) on a number of topics.

Thinking about disability Awareness Training?

We have different options available depending on your requirements. This includes face-to-face training or virtual sessions as well as lunch and learn mini sessions. For more information, [visit our website](#).