



**ACCESS IT**

**ACCESS-IT**

Innovation for Accessible Tourism  
in Natural and Rural Areas

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# How to develop a truly accessible tourism offer and meet demand



Co-funded by the  
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## Table of contents

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1.	The WHAT	4
2.	The Who	7
3.	The How	8
4.	Monitoring Service Quality	12
5.	References and Further Reading	14

## Table of Figures

---

Figure 1.	Six steps in developing accessible tourism services	8
Figure 2.	Examples of accessible service provision	11
Figure 3.	The three parts of a monitoring questionnaire	13

## 1. The WHAT

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This guideline is a business support toolkit for undertaking a strategic approach to the development of accessible tourism services and products as well as information on accessibility. Both public and private tourism managers and owners of SMEs can use this toolkit to develop or improve their awareness of the access requirements of their customers and gain new skills for developing and implementing accessible and sustainable solutions, which could help them to increase their share of the growing market of accessible tourism. This is also especially important for businesses in natural and rural areas (NRAs), where accessible offers are often limited.

The aim of **Tourism for All** is to allow everyone to enjoy tourism experiences on an equal basis. This means that people with disabilities or with other specific access requirements and their families should have the possibility to choose where and how to travel, independently and in comfort and safety, based on reliable information and services throughout the tourism value chain. Tourists with specific access requirements can experience difficulties at any point in their journey, from the earliest planning (gathering and sifting through information), to booking, travelling (in various modes of transport), in accommodation, when visiting attractions, cultural venues, urban areas or natural landscapes, in restaurants and cafes, when shopping or attending a business meeting or conference and returning home again.

The “Visitor Journey”, as described in Topic 1, can be used to identify the critical points of the service chain where access barriers may typically occur (figure 1, below). In each phase of the visitor journey, business owners and managers are guided to assess the accessibility of their offer. Based on these assessments, they can understand and decide whether improvements and adaptations are needed in their existing facilities and/or services, in order to improve the accessibility of their offer and meet customers’ needs and expectations.



**Figure 1. The Visitor Journey**

The phases of the Visitor Journey are:

- Planning and booking
- Travel to/from the destination/venue
- Overnight accommodation
- Food and beverage
- Mobility / Local Transport
- Activities
- Sharing and recollecting the experiences.

At each phase it is important to identify the specific accessibility requirements of customers, based on their needs and preferences, so as to minimise access barriers and provide high quality tourism services. It is, therefore, evident that all managers and staff who are employed in a service role at any part of the “visitor journey” must have appropriate knowledge, skills and competences to offer such services to all visitors.

### Universal Design: the key for designing accessible tourism services

Essentially, tourism services should be designed to be inclusive, as far as possible without the need for adaptations for visitors who may have certain impairments or access requirements. Service design must follow the so-called “Universal Design” approach, which was developed in the USA in the 1990s.

*“Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. The intent of the universal design concept is to simplify life for everyone. The universal design concept targets all people of all ages, sizes and abilities”.*

*(Center for Universal Design, Raleigh, NC, USA)*

The concept of Universal Design is based on 7 principles:

1. *Equitable Use.* The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. For example, a website that is designed so that it is accessible to everyone, including people who are blind, employs this principle.
2. *Flexibility in Use.* The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. An example is the provision of height-adjustable tables for coffee breaks at events, allowing visitors to be seated or standing.
3. *Simple and Intuitive Use.* Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Lever-taps for one-handed use are an example of an application of this principle.
4. *Perceptible Information.* The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. An example is when information in noisy public areas include captions.
5. *Tolerance for Error.* The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. An example of a product applying this principle is an educational software program that provides guidance when the user makes an inappropriate selection.
6. *Low Physical Effort.* The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue. Doors that are easy to open by people with a wide variety of physical characteristics demonstrate the application of this principle.
7. *Size and Space for Approach and Use.* Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility. An example is a lower counter at a reception desk, suitable for wheelchair users.

Applying the principles of Universal Design may require some specialist guidance when planning new or improving existing tourism infrastructure and services.

## 2. The Who

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This guideline addresses several target groups, including tourism operators and their suppliers, VET trainers, professional organisations and destination managers. All these groups can benefit from understanding the needs of customers with specific access requirements to ensure that their guests receive appropriate and quality service, while at the same time demonstrating why it makes good business sense to do so. The guideline can be used by managers and owners of SMEs for planning and developing their accessible services, and by trainers for the design of vocational training courses.

More specifically, the guidance is addressed to:

- **Owners of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) e.g. accommodation services, food and beverage**, providing tourist services to visitors, including those with specific access requirements as part of their target market
- **Managers of private SMEs or public tourism enterprises, including managers of tourist attractions (e.g. museums, galleries)**, providing them with a good understanding of visitors' requirements, advice on staff training, the importance of breaking down access barriers and how to develop accessibility policies
- **Front-line staff**, enabling them to cater for customers with specific access requirements
- **Facilitators and Trainers** involved in training on accessible tourism
- **Policy Makers and decision makers** responsible for the development of tourism policies and strategies in local or regional authorities and in destination management organisations.

### 3. The How

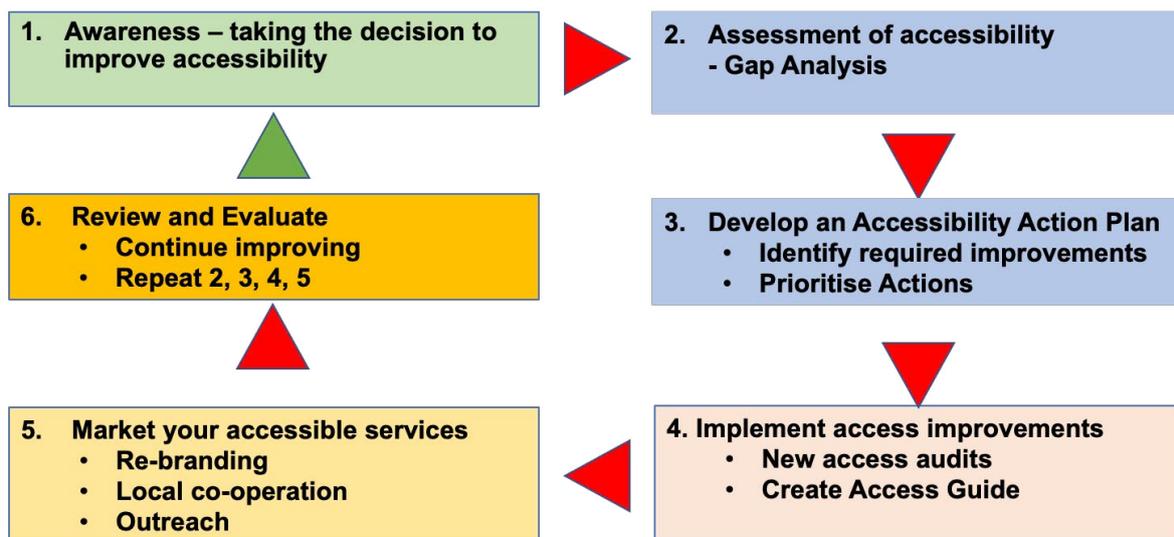
Making the tourism offer accessible doesn't always require big changes. Often some small changes and a raised awareness of potential access barriers can make a big difference. Accessible tourism is about more than just providing physical access. For example, having a paper and pen handy at the reception desk can be useful for communicating with visitors who are hard of hearing or have a speech impairment. Providing information and restaurant menus in large-print format is useful for those with visual impairments.

Trained staff, who have acquired an understanding of customers' access requirements, are able to offer a high-quality service by anticipating and overcoming potential difficulties faced by customers.

Ensuring good physical access is of great importance when creating a destination or facility suitable for all visitors. This applies when upgrading existing facilities and services or when starting "from scratch". Physical access includes, for example, creating level access routes (possibly by means of ramps or portable ramps in existing venues), adding good signage, making part of a reception desk lower to allow easy communication with persons using a wheelchair, installing accessible toilets and adding contrast markings to large glass doors and windows.

The development of an accessible tourism offer follows 6 key steps, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Six steps in developing accessible tourism services**



## 1. Awareness – taking the decision to improve accessibility

Developing awareness depends on business leaders gaining knowledge and understanding that leads them to change their existing business model, by prioritising accessibility and inclusion for all guests. This includes:

- Understanding the requirements of visitors with disabilities and/or other specific access requirements
- Knowing the value of Universal Design approaches to create offers that are suitable for all customers, largely without the need for specialised services
- Understanding the accessible tourism market and the need to revise company policies and practices to make services accessible for all customers.

## 2. Assessment of accessibility (Gap Analysis) related to the entire visitor experience at the venue:

Knowing the access barriers that visitors may encounter in the current offering is a pre-condition for understanding how to overcome them. It is required to conduct a series of Access Audits:

- Assess physical accessibility - environment and facilities
- Assess accessibility of services offered
- Assess customer services by staff
- Assess provision of information about accessibility of the offer
- Assess accessibility of information channels (Website, print, voice, etc.) for different users.

(NOTE: Topic 1 of the ACCESS-IT Training Course covers accessibility assessment methods in detail).

## 3. Develop an Accessibility Action Plan to start taking remedial measures

### 3.1 Identify the required improvements based on the assessments

- Physical infrastructure
- Services
- Staff training
- Information and communication

### 3.2 Prioritise Actions

- Draw up a schedule with short, medium and long-term plans for improvements in staff training, infrastructure, facilities, services, and information/marketing.
- Analyse the resources required to carry out:
  - Low-cost and easy improvements
  - Improvements that can be made during ongoing maintenance and by changing work routines
  - Larger-scale improvements that require long-term planning and capital investment
- Identify sources of funding and other resources that may be required (e.g. staff training, consultants).

### 4. Implement access improvements

- Train company managers and staff in disability awareness, user requirements, customer service – interacting with customers, Universal Design, accessibility and specific topics related to their role in the organisation
- Establish routines for continuous monitoring and improvement of accessibility
- Carry out infrastructure works
- Launch new services and evaluate them with users
- Make new Access Audits of premises, facilities and services
- Use the access audits to create an “Access Guide” which explains the accessibility features of your facilities and services to guests with specific access requirements.

### 5. Market your accessible services

Highlight **accessibility for all** as a key part of your business policy and marketing strategy and engage with the accessible tourism market:

- (Re-) brand the company/destination as “inclusive and accessible for all”
- Cooperate with local and regional suppliers for joint marketing of accessible tourism offers
- Outreach to new target groups.

### 6. Review and Evaluate

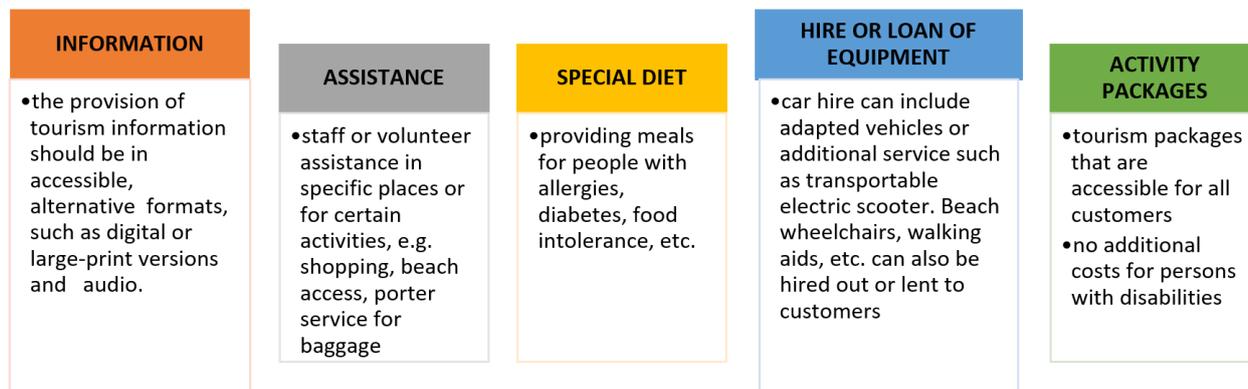
- Check all aspects of the offer after 4 (Implementation) and 5 (Marketing)
- Gather customer feedback and plan further improvements as required.



When planning access improvements, besides physical access measures, businesses should consider improving the quality of each individual service.

Some examples of accessible services are given in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Examples of accessible service provision**



For the development of the company's **Accessibility Action Plan**, businesses should refer to the main priorities addressed in the ACCESS IT guidelines under Topics 1, 2, 4 and 5, which – together provide detailed information on how to provide accessible tourism services.

- ✓ **Topic 1.** How to assess the accessibility of a tourism product/service
- ✓ **Topic 2.** How to address the requirements of the target customer segments
- ✓ **Topic 4.** How to bring to market and promote an accessible product
- ✓ **Topic 5.** How to involve stakeholders in the development of accessible products.

## 4. Monitoring Service Quality

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In relation to Step 6 of the actions outlined in this guideline, Review and Evaluate, the aim of monitoring service quality through visitor feedback is to identify both good and bad points which can indicate how the services may be further improved or developed.

In particular, monitoring the performance of services aims at examining the degree of satisfaction of tourists, with respect to the available infrastructure and the services offered during their stay, and thus to identify their perception about the product and services offered by SMEs in a rural area.

Businesses may use several means to gather information from customers, the main methods being customer surveys and “screening” of social media sites and review websites where tourism businesses are featured, such as TripAdvisor.

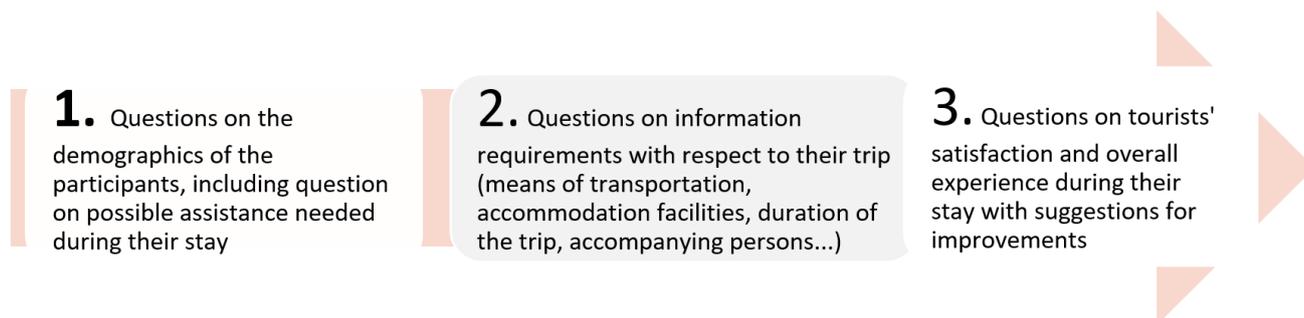
Customer surveys should normally be short and simple to answer. They may cover the following questions:

- Which is the target group and what are their specific access requirements, if any?
- What assistance, if any, was required (and used) during their stay?
- What is the level of satisfaction of the target group with the available infrastructure and the services offered during their stay?
- Suggestions for improvements in the services, infrastructure and transportation.

A survey questionnaire may consist of closed questions and an open-ended question, where participants will be asked to provide any opinion or information, they believe would be useful to the monitoring.

It might consist of questions with answer options such as check boxes or radio buttons, with optional ‘free text’ comments. It can be structured in three parts as shown in the following example:



**Figure 3. The three parts of a monitoring questionnaire**

Monitoring of the tourism services should identify the types of access requirements that are presented among individuals or groups of visitors to the business or rural area. The questionnaire can be distributed at each activity/ attraction/ service/ accommodation venue. Assistance in filling the form may be offered to tourists with disabilities, if necessary.

Alternatively, visitors may receive a survey questionnaire by email, so they may fill it in after returning home. The visitor survey should clarify that the aim is to identify whether the rural business can meet the expectations of visitors regarding their overall experience and the accessibility of the infrastructure and services, with a view to making improvements.

Customer feedback should be treated as confidential information, following the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Commission.

Tourism businesses should use and review social media channels such as FaceBook, Instagram, YouTube and review websites, such as TripAdvisor to gather information posted by visitors and, where necessary, give answers to questions or critical reviews.

Customer reviews which give positive feedback on the accessibility of services can be useful information for future guests and may be considered for inclusion on the company website or in the Access Guide.

## 5. References and Further Reading

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