

Disabled Access

The countryside is not always easy to get around on foot, let alone with a wheelchair or buggy. Overcoming natural features, such as slopes, can be part of the experience of being in the countryside but man-made barriers such as fences, steps and stiles or uneven surfaces can restrict the choice of places available for people who find it difficult to get around. Many people, whether in a wheelchair, with hearing loss, visual impairment, learning difficulties or with mental health problems, want and are able to enjoy the countryside but may need services provided in a slightly different way to help them do so. The right to enjoy Access Land, for example, applies to people in wheelchairs in the same way as people visiting on foot.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 strengthens the disabled person's right to equal access. The Act requires all providers of goods, facilities and services to improve access by making 'reasonable adjustments' help disabled people. It came into effect in October 2004.

The role of local authorities

It is not clear whether the DDA applies to countryside access, and is only likely to be clarified through the courts. It is likely that the Act does not apply to the 'right' of access, but that it may apply as soon as a service is provided to help people enjoy that right. This might mean, for example, provision of information, or provision of a gate or bridge, if considered 'reasonable'. Highway authorities are encouraged to consult with local disabled people to help them decide what might be considered reasonable adjustments in their local area.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 states that local authorities, when authorising the erection of stiles, gates or other works on footpaths or bridleways must have regard to the needs of people with mobility problems. It provides for the Secretary of State and the National Assembly of Wales to issue guidance on how the powers to authorise works are to be exercised.

The objective is to remove impassable barriers, while leaving the natural features that give the countryside its character. This approach, together with providing the right information, will help to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to experience the natural environment and everything it has to offer.

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More information

The Disability Rights Commission www.drc-gb.org/
Freepost, MID07164, Stratford on Avon, CU37 9BR Tel. 08457 622 633

The Fieldfare Trust provides advice and information on disabled access www.fieldfare.org.uk

The National Trust, English Heritage, English Nature and the RSPB have all published guides on the facilities they provide for disabled visitors.

The Ramblers have a very useful section on their website www.ramblers.org.uk/

Tourist Information Centres offer guidance on access to local recreation opportunities and some local authorities have also produced useful guidance.