



Opening up the
built environment
to all



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Foreword

Jane Gratton, Head of People Policy at the British Chambers of Commerce explores why diversity and inclusion is important in making the built environment more accessible to everyone

In today's environment, people want to work with businesses that are truly committed to accessibility and inclusivity. That's why diversity across your business and workforce isn't just desirable, it's essential.

This commitment is something we at the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) recognise with our annual Chamber Business Awards, not just because it's the right thing to do but also because it makes good business sense.

Diversity and inclusion are the key to tackling major business challenges

Diversity and inclusion are key to tackling some of the major challenges faced by businesses. This is exemplified by the winners of the BCC's Equality Trailblazer award. Launched in 2021, the first award went to Manchester-based law firm Freeth's for embedding diversity and inclusion into almost every facet of their business. This included the creation of a Black Lawyers Network, a mentoring programme to support

women to progress to senior roles, a focus on the ethnicity pay gap and removing barriers facing those from lower socio-economic backgrounds looking to enter the legal field.

This year, our prestigious award went to Herts Inclusive Theatre. This company works hard to improve the wellbeing of disadvantaged and disabled people, using the arts to build confidence and develop skills in an inclusive space.

Unless you can welcome and cater to the needs of all customers, you risk losing out to your competitors who can. Figures from the Purple Tuesday movement show that the Purple Pound – the combined spending power of disabled people and their households – is estimated to be worth £274bn every year.

The organisation also reports that 54% of disabled people will not revisit a venue that has inaccessible toilets, while 48% will avoid places with inaccessible entrances and store navigation.



Jane Gratton, Head of People Policy at the British Chambers of Commerce

Businesses need to invest more training for existing employees

When it comes to staffing, British businesses are currently facing a very tight labour market. More than three-quarters of firms attempting to hire staff are reporting recruitment difficulties. The BCC is calling for businesses and government to work together to tackle this challenge by investing in more training for existing employees and supporting young people to get the skills and experience they need to join the workforce.

At the same time, there is a huge pool of talent in our communities who are struggling to access work. By creating more flexible working practices and workplaces, you can boost recruitment and retention and become an employer of choice. Harnessing the skills of older workers, people with health conditions and disabilities, parents and carers, ex-offenders and many other talent pools will bring people with the enthusiasm and commitment to boost your business productivity.

Adding more accessible features to your business are simple steps to take

Removing obstacles to working in your business makes good sense. And there are some simple steps you can take. Accessible parking spaces, ramps and automatic doors are obvious adjustments that support staff and visitors. Changes to the style of décor and the location of furniture and fittings can also make a massive difference to people who are neurodivergent or visually impaired.

Figures released by the government show that the number of disabled people in employment between 2017 and 2022 increased by 1.3m. Yet we still have over 1.2m job vacancies in the UK economy that employers are struggling to fill. There are many more people who want to work and achieve their full potential, but who need employers to provide a more flexible and accessible workplace.

Many businesses are already leading the way for others to follow in embedding diversity, inclusion and accessibility into the very core of their organisations. While businesses are leading this charge, government must wholly support them in their endeavours, so we see equal, diverse and successful businesses and workplaces right across the UK.



*Ian Streets, Managing Director at
About Access*

Introduction

I am immensely grateful to Jane Gratton and the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) for providing the foreword to our latest e-book.

An essential part of our work is to raise awareness within the business community of the issues around poor accessibility, and the opportunities for all which arise from getting it right.

The BCC represents thousands of companies and organisations across the UK and overseas

It is reassuring, therefore, to have that message reinforced by such a respected organisation as the BCC, which represents thousands of companies and other organisations in the UK and overseas, and is recognised as one of the most significant voices for British business.

But sadly, there are still some working in property and related sectors who cling to such outdated terminology as

the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), which, except in Northern Ireland was replaced by the provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

You're unlikely to be able to meet the requirements of a piece of legislation if you don't even know it exists, so every time we hear someone talk about the DDA we redouble our efforts to enlighten people and the organisations they work for.

This e-book is part of that process. It will give you an idea of the sectors and territories in which we operate, the sources we research as we endeavour to identify and share best practice, and the approach we take towards removing barriers and making the built environment more accessible.

Making premises accessible is the right thing to do. If that's not a priority for you then consider the potentially heavy penalties for breaching the Equality Act 2010. If you're still not convinced, think about the boost for your business from being able to welcome more customers and better staff. And if you don't want to take my word for it, take Jane Gratton's.

Case study:



Look to the future

From our daily dealings with minimum widths for doorways, maximum gradients for ramps and many other benchmarks, one of the main pieces of advice we offer is when working to design an inclusive environment don't be afraid to go beyond the guidance.

Whether you draw it from Approved Document M of the Building Regulations, from BS 8300 or other official sources, try to remember it only sets a minimum requirement and it gives you the freedom to be better than the lowest level if you can – and if you want to.

We come across examples far too often of designers adhering to the guidance but not taking basic additional steps which could make a big difference.

Real-life examples include people encountering obstacles when trying to move to a different part of their workplace to get to food and drink facilities. We have also seen instances where the loos are on a different floor as well. However accessible the actual facilities are, obstacles can make the route inaccessible.

One case we looked at involved a company moving into a new

building which was much more accessible. But its location was not on a public transport route and didn't have any parking. These aspects hadn't been taken into consideration and that created a significant problem.

In every example, the designers and architects had stuck to guidance but failed to anticipate what the future might look like.

Similarly, some employers overlook the fact that however many disabled colleagues you have in or around your organisation, that number could increase because people might acquire impairments through accidents, medical conditions and age.

If that happens, should they be forced to leave the job they need and love, or can adjustments be made to keep them and their valuable experience on your team?

What would you do as a boss if you acquired an impairment? Maybe your circumstances and savings would be such that you'd relish the chance to wheel off into the sunset and enjoy retirement? But surely, you'd at least want the option to stay rather than be pushed to leave because of accessibility issues?



A partnership approach to accessibility

An effective approach to accessibility is all about partnership. We work closely with disabled people and their representative organisations to find out what they need to create an inclusive environment. We then liaise with other professionals such as designers, developers and the owners and operators of buildings to meet those needs.

Our services include conducting audits of buildings or services to identify any barriers to access, and consulting on new build or renovation projects to ensure they are accessible for all.

We also encourage organisations to engage with an access consultant at the earliest opportunity, because it costs much more to remedy faults than to get things right in the first place. Our strategic planning service will help clients look at the big picture and develop a plan for the future, and the best results come when project leaders have the foresight to make an

access consultant part of their design team from the outset.

If a design has been completed and it's not too late to make changes, we can provide an appraisal service, assessing the plans and highlighting any issues before the builders move in.

We also provide access statements, which will set out any issues your premises might present. Such a document may be required in support of a planning application or a submission to Building Control. It can also be displayed on your website to help visitors make an informed decision on whether they can get in and use your building.

We provide these services, and combinations of them, for clients across the UK and, increasingly, worldwide for clients who recognise the benefits of hitting the highest standards wherever they operate.



Case studies:

A problem shared

The advantages of a design appraisal can extend beyond identifying potential issues and obstacles to accessibility. Where you have shared premises, the question can arise about liability.

In assisting a client prior to them taking five floors in a 20-storey city centre office building, we made them aware of the different responsibilities held by them and their landlord in the various areas of the building. Until that point, the tenant had made the assumption that the landlord's building control people would have everything in hand.

The key point is that in just the same way as a landlord and their tenant will liaise over such essentials as fire, gas and electrics, they should take a joint approach to access. Between them, and with the right advice from the right people, they should be able to ensure an accessible journey around the building.

Design role enables early resolution

Proof of the importance of making an access consultant part of your design team from the start of a project was provided by one of our assignments involving the renovation of an historic building. The property has various sections protected to Grade I, II and II* and that, arguably, makes it even more important to ensure people can move around it safely.

However, we found issues which included "accessible" loos not being the correct size and a main meeting area, which is of historic significance, being inaccessible to start with yet not being remedied because it was considered to be outside the scope of the project. With an access consultant on board, a lot of these issues could have been resolved while the project was still on the drawing board.



Connecting clients with customers and staff

Whatever your sector, there's a simple equation when it comes to making your premises accessible.

Think about the negative impact of falling foul of the law. A court case, a big financial hit from fines and costs, and the reputational damage as the matter attracts coverage in the press, with the added risk of it going viral on social media.

Then think about the positives of opening up your business to disabled customers, estimated by the Purple Pound to have a spending power in the UK alone of £275bn a year. And at a time when staff recruitment and retention is so difficult, and the war for talent intensifying, making your shops and offices accessible to an army of workers who would bring skills, experience and commitment – if only they could get through the door.

There's a list below of the sort of professionals we work with and the wide range of sectors and premises which are becoming more accessible as a result of our input.

The people draw on our guidance as they strive to give their clients an edge in an increasingly competitive property market.

- Architects/designers/surveyors.
- Facilities/estates managers.
- Human resources for training of staff.
- Health and safety companies who are asked for access audits and don't provide the service.

The premises are located across the UK and worldwide, and we provide services to a variety of buildings and their property managers including:

- Retail and shopping centres.
- Education sites.
- Ecclesiastical buildings.
- Local and national government.
- Healthcare establishments.
- Elderly care facilities.
- Hotels and resorts.
- Car park buildings.
- Airports.
- Railway stations.
- Sports stadiums.
- Housing associations.
- Travel facilities.
- Industrial sites.
- Tourism.
- Heritage.

Case studies:

Consultation drives communication

Heritage and cultural properties require special care and consideration when it comes to accessibility, partly because of the unique features of some of the sites and also because they generally attract an older clientele.

There are signs that the operators of such sites are becoming more innovative. If you close early in winter because of fading light, can you remedy the situation by installing temporary lighting? Can you do more with your outdoor exhibits by making walkways more weather-resistant and creating viewing platforms where accessibility is an issue? In short, can you enable people to continue to enjoy attractions which the elements might render out of bounds?

These are some of the issues we address in our communications with the heritage sector. We contribute articles to specialist magazines and websites, and we host consultations that enable disabled people and their representative groups to share their experiences and concerns.

We apply our expertise to such attractions as churches, museums and galleries and to outdoor sites including country houses and stately homes. It's all about helping people to prepare for their visit and giving them reassurance that you see their safety as paramount.

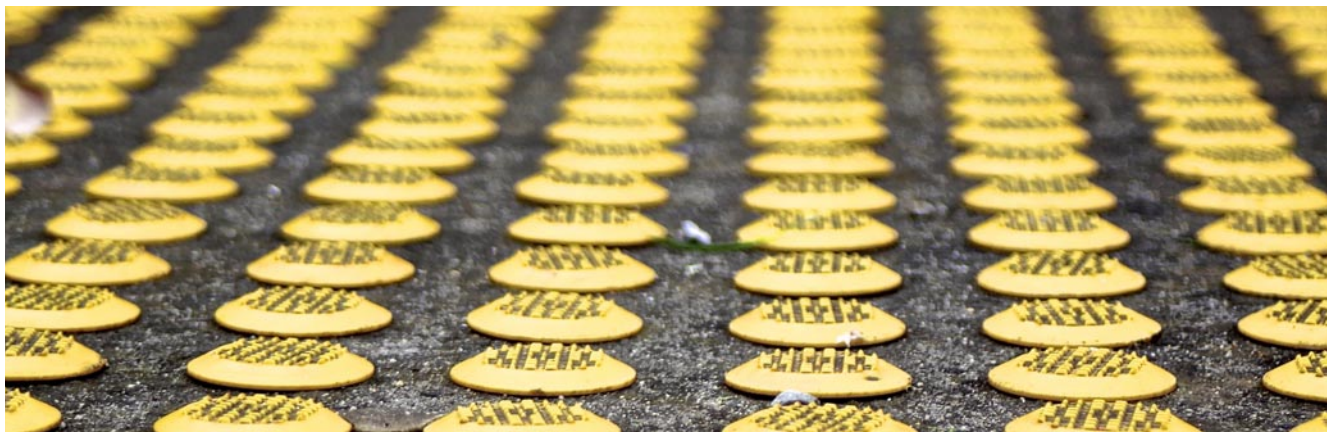


Access awareness is growing globally

Our portfolio of international assignments is growing all the time through word of mouth among clients and through repeat business. Following successful projects in Northern Ireland, we were introduced to a new client in Ireland and helped them to demonstrate their commitment to accessibility within a significant history and culture regeneration project.

Our work with high-end retailers in the Netherlands came from our involvement in projects in the UK for their parent company, a major multinational.

We've also continued our work in Gibraltar, which began with the Gibraltarian government wanting help to develop its sporting and cultural facilities. Most recently, we have delivered training to enable about 100 government staff to help them understand accessibility and undertake their own access audits and reviews of tourist attractions.



Anticipate the **customer journey**

To get a full understanding of the accessibility of a site, we recommend exploring the customer journey.

The starting point is to liaise with disabled people and grasp the impact of their impairments – what they can and can't do. A pan-disability approach is essential because something that improves accessibility for one person might create additional problems for another. Tactile paving is just one example.

Armed with that information, we can look at a property and identify the barriers that deter disabled people from spending their money with that business, or from applying to work there.

Some scenarios are obvious but others less so, especially as awareness increases of the concept of hidden impairments.

We look at the facilities available to visitors in getting to the property, such as public transport provision,

accessible parking and EV charging, ramps and steps and entrance doors. Then there's the welcome. Is the reception desk of variable height and does it have an audio loop?

From there, we consider the facilities people are likely to use within the building. Are the loos accessible, located conveniently and properly laid out? Are the lifts, doors and corridors wide enough? Are emergency exit routes accessible? Is the signage adequate?

How easy is it for a disabled member of staff to move around the building? Whether it's to use the accessible loo, make their way to food and drink facilities, relax in a breakout area or join colleagues in a meeting room on another floor.

And if the building undergoes refurbishment, will consideration be given to improving the level of accessibility it offered before, rather than just maintaining it?



Case studies:

Shedding light on a tourist attraction

Fanad Lighthouse in Donegal is rated in the top 15 lighthouses in Ireland and draws visitors for its museum, shop and picturesque location.

We started our assessment with the car park, which is 500m from the ticket office. It's then another 500m to the lighthouse entrance and there are 76 steps to the top of the tower. The site also has four dwellings. It sounds a bit of a challenge, but the shop is next to the car park, and it's possible for people who can't manage the walk to drive the distance to the lighthouse itself.

On arrival, they'll find step-free access to the museum, although admittedly the tower is 76 steps too far! There are steps to all of the houses, but one of them could be made step-free.

Having plotted the customer journey, we can then look at how to improve accessibility and in the meantime, we can draw up an access statement to show people how they can enjoy the experience even if parts of it are inaccessible.

Working together to reap the business benefits of accessibility

Retail presents an opportunity to literally put accessibility in the shop window. If you get it right, you gain an immediate advantage over your neighbours and competitors. And even if they copy you, that's not a bad thing. There are no downsides to sharing best practice and encouraging improvement across a sector or neighbourhood. If six stores in the same road promote accessibility, the whole street can welcome more customers.

We developed a customer journey for one client who operates a number of household name, international fashion brands. On the back of that, we visited two of their new stores in the Netherlands and took them through the customer journey to show how it fitted in with the overall customer experience. By doing that, you find out what works and what doesn't work and you can then explore putting in place measures, which will bring improvements, remove obstacles and boost business.

Engagement and **thought leadership**

Our motivation for doing what we do comes from a desire to make the world a more inclusive place, accessible to as many people as possible.

We believe prevention is better than cure, so we urge designers and developers to get an access consultant involved in the earliest stages of a project. We also see the merits of helping people understand how to make their own premises accessible, so we are happy to share our ideas.

We present training sessions in person and online for clients, their staff and professional bodies. We use our website to share information about regulations and guidance around accessibility issues, with an up-to-date blog charting some of the day-to-day issues faced by disabled people.

We publish discussion articles in magazines, online and via LinkedIn to advise people about some of the barriers to access we have encountered, and how we have helped clients resolve any problems. This e-book is part of that process.

We are informed by direct engagement with disabled people, taking a pan-disability approach, because we recognise that they know best which aspects of the built environment are disabling for them.

We also receive feedback from designers and developers on practicalities, a process which can help everybody find innovative and effective solutions, and set new standards in best practice.

As members of the National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC), which is the only accredited body for access consultants in the UK, our findings feed into our peer group discussions. That can influence our work assisting government departments and professional bodies as the recognised authority on accessibility.

To be admitted into the NRAC, members have to demonstrate a unique combination of understanding in relation to legislation, technical standards and user needs applicable to disability access and inclusive design. We do this by maintaining our commitment to detailed and thorough consultation.

Case studies:

Flexible training programmes promoting accessibility

We continue to experience rising demand for our online training courses. We also deliver the service in other formats for clients in a wide range of business sectors, who see the benefits of promoting greater understanding of accessibility issues.

Working with one of Europe's leading disability and diversity consultancies, we produce definitive guides to show clients how they can make their premises, products and services more accessible.

Some operate internationally in pharmaceutical, retail, finance, media and more, and need a service that can easily engage audiences internationally, enabling businesses to standardise accessibility globally across their estates.

Our input is based on understanding that wherever they are in the world, what disabled people want are the same opportunities as non-disabled people.

Our approach is unique, based on years of successful experience and broad enough for clients to apply when trying to help people in a wide range of roles, an assortment of buildings and even different territories and regulatory regimes in the global marketplace.



Building bridges with communities

With work underway on a project costing more than £350m to improve a major road running right through a city centre, we were called in as part of the public engagement process.

Our role was to look at current access provision and to consider how it would be affected by the development. In doing that, we worked with other access consultants, local authorities, private sector contractors and representatives of community access improvement groups.

The project involves a 400m section of dual carriageway which is being rebuilt, widened and lowered to create an underpass. Our specific focus was on two new bridges, which, along with an existing pedestrian underpass, will provide the only means of crossing the road once traffic lights have been removed.

In the past, people have relied on light-controlled pedestrian crossings to move between their homes and a variety of amenities including shops, bars, restaurants and leisure and cultural sites.

Many also use those routes to go to and from work. It's therefore vital that the project improves accessibility for the local community.



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