

## Disability Access

# OPEN ACCESS

Retailers have made huge strides to improve access to their stores, but there is still more that can be done.

**Katie Kilgallen** takes to the streets of Cambridge with a wheelchair user

**T**wenty years ago, in one of the first issues of *Retail Week*, a disabled access campaigner called Rachel Hurst complained that shops were often inaccessible, trying on clothes was impossible and high till points made paying difficult for her.

Fastforward two decades – and two Disability Discrimination Acts (DDAs) later – and a visit to Cambridge city centre reveals that while retailers have made real progress in improving matters, there is still more that can be done.

The Department for Work and Pensions estimates the annual spending power of disabled shoppers to be £80 billion a year. And for retailers to increase their chances of getting a sizeable share of that sum, it need not mean a considerable investment. There is also a risk involved in not taking action, with the Disability Discrimination Act leaving retailers open to litigation from a vocal minority of disabled people.

Ramps, lifts and hearing loops (devices that transmit amplified sound to hearing aids) are much more prevalent on the high street today than they were in 1988, but Tracey Proudlock, founder of disability and access consultancy Proudlock Consultants, says there are still many examples of restricted access. Often they are simply a result of poor planning and lack of thought, rather than anything that needs major investment.



### MARKS & SPENCER

Located in an old building in the centre of Cambridge, this store had good, wide automatic doors.

Inside, apart from a blocked mirror, the store was reasonably easy to navigate. However, the small lift at the back of the store was a disappointment.

"It would be good if they could have looked at putting a slightly bigger lift in," says Proudlock. "They may think that not many people want to use lifts, but in the space of 30 seconds we saw a woman with a buggy and an older person with a white stick and his carer."



### CARPHONE WAREHOUSE

There was a step at the store entrance and no bell to get the attention of staff inside. Upon enquiry, it was discovered the shop didn't have a ramp.

Proudlock says: "It's very poor. It's a straight breach of the DDA." The manager came outside to explain and was apologetic. He said the restricted access was owing to the age of the building and that he had been in touch with head office about it.

He then suggested we try another Carphone Warehouse located in a shopping centre five minutes away, which did have good access.



### NEXT

There was visible signage at the front of the store to alert shoppers to the fact that the store was disability-friendly.

The lift at the back of the store was bigger than in the adjacent M&S. However, the store was cluttered and difficult to navigate in places. Stock had to be moved out of the way and it was sometimes an effort to manoeuvre a wheelchair around the product.

In order to reach the lifts, a stool had to be picked up and moved out of the way. Upstairs, there were some very narrow pathways in the homewares section.



### WHITE STUFF

There was a large step that stopped access and no bell to get the staff's attention, making it difficult for anyone shopping alone.

When asked, the store did have a ramp and staff were reasonably quick to get it, but they were not overly friendly or comfortable with the situation.

It was clear that the assistant setting up the ramp had never done it before, nor had he been trained to do it. Inside, although the store was reasonably clutter-free and spacious, there was no access to the fitting rooms.



Proudlock, who joined *Retail Week* in Cambridge, identified at least one or two examples during the three-hour shopping trip where retailers had left themselves vulnerable to DDA grievances. "Either they hadn't planned access or you couldn't even start a dialogue," explains Proudlock. "If you're that way inclined, you could very well make something of them."

Both retailers and disabled shoppers complain about the ambiguity of the law. 2004's DDA states that shops must take "reasonable steps" to remove physical barriers that make it unreasonably difficult for disabled people to receive a fair service. But in a fast-moving consumer environment, the definition of reasonable and fair service changes almost daily. Retailers are perhaps best advised not to simply look at adhering to the letter of the law, but to tackle the issue from a customer experience point of view. They need to ask themselves whether disabled customers are getting the same experience as other shoppers.

John Lewis says it aims to meet the "spirit, as well as the letter, of the DDA" and make shopping for its disabled customers "as pleasurable for them as for anyone else". The department store chain has conducted more than 200 access audits with disability consultants.

Part of the problem posed by a historical place such as Cambridge is the number of stores in listed buildings. For that reason, the city's Hobbs store has significant access problems from the outside. But once inside it was clear that the retailer had made an effort. Proudlock says: "They have been very creative in areas where they could be creative. They didn't just sit back and say 'we're an old store'."

Proudlock was, however, more disappointed by what she found at big high street names like Carphone Warehouse. "Carphone Warehouse says a lot on its web site, but it doesn't make it happen. It doesn't translate into consistent behaviour," she says.

She also commented on the city's Topshop store's lack of a lift, but this could be accounted for by the fact that the store is relocating to the new Grand Arcade

## EASY WAYS TO IMPROVE ACCESS

**Start early:** The earlier you start to think about access after taking on a new property, the easier it will be to plan it into the design. Consider turning down properties where access is poor and then landlords will be forced to make improvements.

**Communication:** Have clear mechanisms in place for disabled customers to log complaints and queries, which could include putting forms and hotline numbers on display. Talking to local authorities about access issues should also be a priority.

**Staff:** Good staff training is essential. If staff are comfortable with and well-briefed about potential situations and problems then a negative experience can quite easily be turned into a positive one.

**De-clutter:** Keep on top of clearing walkways, leaving them debris-free and make sure paths are as wide as possible. Make sure facilities for disabled customers are signposted clearly outside and inside the store.



When you think about the sheer size and scale of their operations, they can and should do more

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development later this year and this new-build will mean that better access will be far easier to achieve.

Some trendy boutiques argue that including low till points or installing permanent ramps would detract from the look they want to achieve. But they also maintain that what they might lack in access, because of store design, can be compensated for with helpful and accommodating staff.

And yet at several other stores it was clear that staff were unsure of the right thing to do or say. When put on the spot, shop employees were often embarrassed and made up excuses, which often annoys disabled shoppers further. "It's unfair to expect staff to give support when they haven't been trained properly," says Proudlock.

There was a lot of evidence on the streets of Cambridge to prove that, over the past 20 years, significant strides have been made towards improving the shopping experience for disabled people. Then again, the level of service that retailers offer to all customers has also improved immeasurably. All retailers need to ensure they take the same approach with disabled customers as they would with everybody else and look at what they are able to do for them, as well as what they have to do. **RW**



### TOPSHOP/TOPMAN

The ground floor was easily accessible through the front entrance, however there was no lift to take shoppers upstairs to the menswear department.

The assistant was friendly and quick to stop what she was doing and arrange for someone from the menswear department to come and bring items downstairs.

They were apologetic about not having a lift, but said it was impossible because it was an old building. However, the store will soon relocate into a fully accessible new shopping centre development, which will resolve this problem.



### HOBBS

As a listed building, this store does have genuine access problems it cannot address.

There is a step at the entrance and the old doorbell is too high for anyone in a wheelchair to reach. However, once alerted, the staff inside were quick to set up the portable ramp located next to the door. Inside, it was easy to navigate.

The fitting room was the only fully accessible one that we saw that day. It was equipped with horizontal and vertical grab rails and a drop-down seat. There was an accessible till station complete with hearing loop.



### JOHN LEWIS

As a relatively new store located in the Grand Arcade, it was clear the store had been designed with access in mind.

The lifts were wide, as were the walkways. A leaflet was available at the lifts by the entrance outlining all the facilities the store offers, including manual or motorised wheelchairs or scooters, hearing loops, accessible toilets and fitting rooms, free delivery and special assistance with shopping.

Proudlock says: "They have put a lot of thought into how they use the space – it's not just ramps and lifts."



### REISS

Despite the store's location in an old listed building, the entrance on the corner was wide and sloped up into the shop, making it easy to access.

The front part of the store was spacious and straightforward to navigate. However, the back half of the shop had been built on a raised level and there was no ramp to access it.

All the fitting rooms were located on the split level. They were also far too small to accommodate wheelchair users comfortably and there were no grab rails or drop-down seats.