As the average age of the UK’s population continues to creep upwards, the number of people with access needs is also on the rise. More than 11 million people in the UK are disabled, and the amount spent on trips where at least one member of the party has some form of impairment reached £12.4bn last year, according to new figures from VisitEngland (see infographic, left).

These guests tend to stay longer and spend more than the average visitor – their spending on domestic overnight tourism has risen by 33% since 2009, compared with a total increase in spending of just 11% in the sector as a whole.

But contrary to popular belief, recent surveys have revealed that only 6% of disabled travellers are wheelchair users. In fact, 47% have a long-term illness, 25% have a mobility impairment that does not require a wheelchair, 24% are deaf or have partial hearing loss, and the rest have either learning difficulties or sight impairment.

### Accessibility

Access all areas

With an increasing proportion of the travelling public having accessibility needs, more businesses are investing in access for all, writes Andrew Strange.
What the law says

The Equality Act 2010 requires service providers to take steps to address barriers that impede disabled people, such as:
1. Changing practices, policies or procedures where disabled people would be at a ‘substantial disadvantage’, for example, amending a ‘no dogs’ policy.
2. Making changes to a building's structure to improve access; for example, altering or removing a physical feature.
3. Providing auxiliary aids and services; for example, providing information in an accessible format or installing an induction loop for those with hearing aids. You only need to do what is 'reasonable'. This depends on factors such as the benefit for disabled people, effect on others and the affordability. To learn more, see The Pink Book.

Accessible facilities

You don't need to spend huge sums to make your accommodation or attraction more accessible – some changes can be made at little or no cost. For example, making sure your driveway or car park is evenly lit and free from trip hazards will help get your guests’ stay off to a good start.

Those who have difficulty standing for long periods will appreciate being able to sit on a chair in reception and use handrails to negotiate any steps. Additionally, setting aside an area away from music and noise is likely to be appreciated by those who have hearing loss as well as guests who prefer peace and quiet. Businesses with busy receptions might also consider providing a hearing loop to make it easier for people with hearing aids to understand the receptionist (available from www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/visitengland; prices start at £165).

The National Accessible Scheme (NAS) provides accommodation owners with a set of standards to improve access for all, as well as certification so that businesses can accurately promote their level of accessibility to potential guests. The entry-level mobility standard ‘One step ahead’ is accurately promote their level of accessibility to potential accommodation owners with a set of standards to improve

Providing information

Guests with access needs tend to research facilities in advance, and if they can’t find a clear description they may choose to go elsewhere. Whatever your level of accessibility, by publishing an Access Statement that details all of your business’s facilities and services on your website, prospective guests can easily decide if your venue meets their requirements.

You should also consider the readability of all of your customer information. By avoiding highly stylised fonts, extensive use of capitals and italics, and placing text over images, your information will be easier to read for everyone.

Anne-Marie Marsh and husband Barry own the five-star Gold Wallops Wood Cottages in Hampshire, opened their five holiday homes to guests in June 2014. The properties have been rated individually under the NAS according to their level of accessibility for mobility, hearing and visually impaired guests. Three units have facilities suitable for older and less mobile people with simple fixtures and fittings such as grab rails. The other two are designed for wheelchair users, with facilities such as wet rooms and specially designed kitchens. The cottages are on the ground floor and one has parking directly outside.

Ensuite bathrooms in the cottages have been designed with excellent contrast between floors, walls and furniture for those with limited sight. Braille notices can be added to appliances and cupboards on request and flashing lights alert guests with hearing loss to a fire alarm.

“We looked at it from the point of view of being able to broaden our appeal and set us apart from the crowd. The loyalty that disabled people have should give us a good level of repeat business,” says Andrew. “We've already had guests who found us because of the accessibility grading on the website.”

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Anne-Marie says: “On our website we make sure that we promote the rooms exactly as they are and give guests as much information as possible. We had a guest earlier this year who was paralysed from the waist down and had booked online with a small establishment. When she got there, that hotel wasn't suitable. She came to us in a panic because she didn't know where she was going to stay.”

Wildercombe House in Ilfracombe. As part of their marketing materials, they provide a branded Access Statement that details which areas have level access and vital measurements such as door widths. It also sets out features such as the flashing lights and pillow pads that vibrate if the fire alarm rings, and makes it clear that assistance dogs are welcome — a legal requirement.

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Top tips

• From subtitles on the television to seats with arms, there are many simple things you can do to improve accessibility. Find out more at www.visitengland.org/access.
• Enhance your marketing information by publishing an Access Statement that provides all accessibility information in one document. Use VisitEngland’s free online tool.
• Disability awareness training will help both proprietors and staff better understand the needs of disabled customers. Sign up for VisitEngland’s online course, with limited free places available.
• More than 10 million people in the UK have some form of hearing loss. Find tips on how to welcome them in the Listen Up! guide.
• Around 7,000 people have an assistance dog. VisitEngland’s Take the Lead guide explains why welcoming these animals is important for your guests and your business.
• Don’t know where to start when it comes to marketing your accessibility? The VisitEngland Speak Up! guide is full of tips for small and medium-sized tourism businesses.

All these resources and more are available at www.visitengland.org/access.
Learning as you go

Fairhaven Woodland and Water Garden is a 130-acre park set in the Norfolk Broads and offers access to some of the area’s natural beauty. There are almost four miles of accessible paths, although with some roots growing close to the surface, mobility scooters with thick tyres are available. Benches have also been placed at regular intervals for anyone who needs a break, including those with pushchairs and young children.

With help from the Norfolk and Norwich Association for the Blind, Fairhaven also created a sensory garden with scents, sounds and colours that are attractive for partially sighted guests.

Considering accessibility before starting any refurbishments not only benefits your customers, but also your budget, as Manager Louise Rout explains: “When the car park was resurfaced, it had to be re-laid after a visitor pointed out it wasn’t suitable for wheelchair users. “We have 130 acres of woodland and water gardens. Anyone who likes to get out into the wild should be able to enjoy it. We have tried to make sure we are as accessible as possible and have even ridden the mobility scooters around the site ourselves.”

“Whatever their requirements, we start by asking: ‘How can we help you enjoy your day?’”

Great service

If you recognise the requirements of people with access needs by offering excellent service, the news will soon spread by word of mouth. You could, for example, acknowledge the essential role of a carer and have a free ticket or adjoining room policy. Another simple but effective service is to fast-track anyone who has trouble standing or waiting, such as children with autism, so that they don’t have to wait in a queue. If a reception desk is too high, a guest might appreciate being checked in their room or a lounge area, and some may benefit from help with filling out forms.

A VisitEngland Access for All Gold attraction, Sandcastle Waterpark in Blackpool is the UK’s largest indoor waterpark and offers features including water slides, fun pools, a wave machine, a lazy river and water chutes. Marketing and Development Manager Jane Kelly explains that Sandcastle’s focus on providing excellent service for those with access needs begins with committed staff. “Whatever their requirements,” she says, “we start by asking: ‘How can we help you enjoy your day?’”

This means that recruiting people with helpful and cheerful attitudes is just as important as swimming ability, even for lifeguards. All staff go through an induction process, which includes disability awareness training. Staff include water ambassadors who can spend time with disabled children or their siblings, and a Guest Service and Inclusion Manager, who is responsible for ensuring that guests with access needs feel welcome.

While information for guests is available on the waterpark’s website in large-print, audio and video formats, there is also a hotline that those with access needs can call if they wish to speak to someone. Staff also talk with visitors to find out how to enhance their experience.

After learning that some children, particularly those with autism, were becoming stressed because the pool was loud and busy, staff decided not to use the public address system or play music. This lesson also led to the waterpark organising regular out-of-hours events for these children.

Managing Director John Child explains: “We didn’t set out to make additional income from accessibility, but we have. The main drive has been to make sure that all of our guests have a great time, but as a consequence we have become busier, without a doubt.”

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