



Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum

Report from the Woodbridge Action Day

Introduction

Access to shops, businesses and other facilities in the larger towns in Suffolk Coastal has long been of concern to members of the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum.



As a follow up to the Felixstowe Action Day, held on Tuesday, 5th July, 2016, an Action Day in Woodbridge was arranged for Wednesday, 28th June, 2017. Members visited the shops and businesses in the Thoroughfare and streets adjacent to it, the Library, and attractions such as the Tide Mill and the Riverside Walk.

Acknowledgements

The Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum would like to thank Cllr Clare Perkins, the Mayor of Woodbridge, Members of the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum and the Suffolk Coalition of Disabled People for taking part in the survey and providing the information used in this report.



Disclaimer

It should be noted that this survey was undertaken in good faith and is based on members' observations and experiences on the day in question.

The survey is just a basic access check and the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum does not accept any liability for any loss, inconvenience or damage caused as a consequence of the use of any of the following information.

Recommendations

- Woodbridge is a lovely market town with many interesting things to do and to see. Better information should be available regarding access to attractions, shops and cafés on websites such as Choose Woodbridge and at the Tourist Information Centre in the Library.

- A meeting should be held with the Conservation Officer of Suffolk Coastal District Council in order to understand the restrictions placed in respect of improving the access to shops and businesses that are in listed buildings.

- Vehicles should be prevented from using the Thoroughfare from 10am to 4pm, and banned from parking on the pavements to provide a safer environment for all people.

- There are many bollards throughout Woodbridge which are painted black. These need to be highlighted with a contrasting band so they are more visible.



- Shops and businesses using portable ramps should be encouraged to make potential customers aware of these and provide a means of attracting the attention of staff for assistance. The Crown is a particular example where there is no way of knowing that there is a ramp available to gain entry.



- The pavements are obstructed by A Boards causing difficulties in negotiation. Their use should be reviewed and shopkeepers should adhere to the guidelines in place. The example of one A Board in the Thoroughfare as people leave the Turban Centre which advertises a number of businesses should be encouraged. Care should be taken with the use of hanging baskets so that they do not hang too low. The pavements should be well maintained to eliminate hazards and bumpy surfaces.

- Shopkeepers should be discouraged from displaying goods outside their shops particularly in the doorways.



- There are instances where the surfaces cause difficulties, such as the Station Car Park where the parking spaces for blue badge holders are often flooded, and the route from the Avenue Car Park to the Riverside Walk where the path is rough and hazardous.

- The accessible toilets need to be checked in more detail to ensure that they meet an acceptable standard.

Raising Awareness

This was not the prime purpose of the day but inevitably some useful feedback was provided from the experiences of members taking part in the survey.

The Mayor of Woodbridge, Cllr Clare Perkins kindly came along to experience shopping as a wheelchair user.

Afterwards, she provided the following text for this report:

“The Mayor’s Wheelchair Experience”

“Being confined to a wheelchair to get around or be visually impaired and have to negotiate one’s way around the streets and shops where one lives in order to shop is no one’s wish, but there are some who have no option.

We think we understand what it is like, but we don’t.

As an able bodied person and with no vision impairment I count myself as fortunate, having no problem at all with going where I want, into the shops that I like, and seeing all that the shops have to offer me.

*Imagine yourself in a wheelchair and unable to see properly, having to find the shops that you **can** get into, let alone **want** to get into, and negotiate your way around.*

I was asked recently by the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum to join them on their Woodbridge Action Day and see what it was like being in a wheelchair around our town.

It has opened my eyes to the difficulties that are encountered every day when in a wheelchair or being visually impaired in Woodbridge. We know that our town is an historic town, and with that comes all sorts of difficulties; notably uneven steps into shops and doors not wide enough to get through. This is expected to a certain degree as most of the shops are listed and unable to change, but it does not help those people who are in wheelchairs and want to go in.

I was very pleased to see that most of the shops came out and offered help, some have ramps, and others have bells to ring which certainly makes it easier to enjoy what is on offer inside. Some shopkeepers came out to ask if



there was anything in particular that I would like to see. That was very helpful, and it was lucky it was a fine day.

The more modern shops such as Boots, the Co-Op, Fat Face and W H Smith's and a few others are fine, but with the older shops and premises I found that doors open outwards for instance, or are so heavy making it impossible to open them and go through. A few independent coffee houses around the town are not wheelchair friendly, which, through no fault of their own, is unfortunate as it would be lovely to take a short break from the exhausting effort of finding somewhere to shop to have a cuppa and a breather. The owners and landlords of these buildings need to make these more accessible I feel, as we are becoming a Café culture led society and many a deal is done in such establishments over a cup of coffee. Wheelchair users are also business people and a deal or meeting over a coffee is important for them too.



I did not experience any negativity on this day towards my being in a wheelchair, however I am sure it was helped by my wearing the chain of office. I am sure that one can feel ignored or a nuisance as one is on a lower level in a wheelchair and to crane one's neck up to speak to someone puts one at an disadvantage.

On the whole I was very pleased with the reaction I received from shops and people during my short time in a wheelchair. There are, of course, problems that I was not aware of at all until I experienced them, and of these I am now enormously aware.

Wheelchair users are on the whole ignored, and they have many more situations to deal with than we as able bodied persons do not even think about .

Cars are a real problem, especially when they use the Thoroughfare when they shouldn't. Wheelchairs should have the right of way, I feel during the hours of 10am - 4pm, when cars should not be there. However rules are flouted and cars do not stop and let a wheelchair user pass before moving on. This is appalling .

As I write this, I witnessed this today (July 15th): a woman wheelchair user had to pull her wheels back and forth off the road three times to allow cars through during the no entry time span. Each car could have stopped to allow her through, but they did not. They expected her to move out of their way, which she did, but It was not without effort and she was quite distressed at

the end. I was horrified at watching this, and saw that the drivers had no patience at all nor a willingness to wait.

Woodbridge, I am sorry, to say is not wheelchair friendly, but that is not its fault. It is an historic old town and it has beautiful old shops that we are all proud of and love. However I do believe that more could be done to make life easier for wheelchair users and people who are visually impaired to get around.



As Mayor of Woodbridge, I would be happy to discuss how the town could help more to make life a bit easier for those who use a wheelchair or are visually impaired to get around.

I would like to thank you for giving me the opportunity to see life from a different perspective.”

General Comments

There were a number of issues that affected the access to many of the shops and businesses in Woodbridge.

- Vehicles were often left thoughtlessly obstructing the pavements making it difficult for many people to negotiate them.

- Pavements were not always well maintained causing trip hazards and a bumpy ride for wheelchair users.



- The use of A Boards to advertise businesses appears to be increasing and it is particularly disconcerting to encounter an A Board advertising a business that is on the other side of the street. These cause difficulties for people who are blind or partially sighted or have mobility difficulties.

- There are many bollards in both the Turban Centre and the Thoroughfare that are painted plain black. These are difficult for people with visual impairments to locate and need to be highlighted in a contrasting colour.



- Some of the hanging baskets hang too low and are a hazard to people with visual impairments.

- A number of the shops and businesses appear to have portable ramps but do not always advertise this or have any way of enabling a person who needs assistance to attract the attention of staff. Some of the portable ramps are too steep and consequently are dangerous to use.



- Goods are often obstructing shop doorways or encroaching on to the pavement making it even more difficult to access the shops.



- Certain surfaces such as cobbles, uneven paving, the flooded area in the Station Road Car Park, and the poor access from the Avenue Car Park to the Riverside Walk all create additional difficulties.



- There is a lack of specific information for disabled visitors to Woodbridge on websites such as Visit Woodbridge and Choose Woodbridge.
- All cash machines (ATMs) are difficult to access for wheelchair users as people behind them can see their transactions and possibly also their PIN numbers. They are not practical for people with visual impairments to use.

Detailed Comments

Parking in Woodbridge

There are a number of car parks in Woodbridge which are the responsibility of Suffolk Coastal District Council. Those detailed below were visited by surveyors.

Hamblin Road	There are four blue badge parking bays outside the toilet block. These are separated from the main Hamblin Road 2 car park by the public highway. Parking in these bays is free for up to a maximum of three hours for valid Blue Badge holders. There are signs placed on the toilet block wall indicating this. NB: This is because it is not feasible to put a ticket machine in this location and Suffolk Coastal
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	<p>District Council does not expect blue badge holders to cross the highway to reach the ticket machine in Hamblin Road 2 car park.</p> <p>However, our surveyor felt that the car parking spaces adjacent to the toilets are not deep enough so the cars overhang the road. The signage is fine though it is not clear if there is a time limit or a charge for using these spaces.</p> <p>There are other spaces for blue badge holders in the main Hamblin Road 2 Car Park.</p>
Station Road	<p>There are some spaces for blue badge holders. Unfortunately, three of these were unusable on the morning of our survey due to flooding. To avoid the flood, it was necessary to cross a cobbled area to access the station, the Riverside Theatre and the Whistle Stop Café. The surface within the car park is poor.</p>
Oak Lane	<p>This is the nearest car park for Woodbridge Library which houses a number of services that can assist people. There is limited space for blue badge holders. As this is a very busy car park it is likely that the space will be in constant use.</p>
The Avenue	<p>The car park has one space for blue badge holders beside the accessible toilet block. The surface is uneven near the entrance.</p>

Accessible Toilets

Hamblin Road	<p>There is one accessible toilet situated in Hamblin Road adjacent to the four parking spaces for blue badge holders. The footpaths here are narrow in places resulting in wheelchair users having to use the road. The lock to the door of the accessible toilet was not working on the day of our survey. The flush handle on the toilet is too high for wheelchair users to use.</p>
The Avenue Car Park	<p>There is an accessible toilet in the Avenue Car Park behind the Adnams Shop. There is no signage from the main road to indicate that there are toilets in this area. The parking space, beside the toilet block, for blue badge holders is not adequately marked. There is potential at this location to install a Changing Places facility.</p>
Elmhurst Park	<p>There is an accessible toilet in Elmhurst Park which has recently been shut due to vandalism.</p>

Shops and Businesses

It was felt that approximately 50% of shops and businesses in Woodbridge are reasonably accessible but many would be improved by not being overcrowded with displays of goods.



However, the other approximately 50% are not accessible because of barriers such as steps at the entrances or narrow doorways. In some instances temporary ramps are available but the availability of these is not always publicised so wheelchair users are not aware of their existence.



More detailed access information provided by our surveyors regarding shops and businesses in Woodbridge is available on request.



The Thoroughfare

A Boards	There are lots of A Boards along the pavements which create hazards for wheelchair users, people with visual impairments and people with pushchairs or buggies. There is a larger A Board near Browsers which advertises a number of shops to the right of the Thoroughfare (coming from the Turban Centre) thus reducing the number of smaller A Boards.
Display of Goods	Too many shops display their goods on the pavement outside the shops.
Building Works	There was scaffolding obstructing the pavement outside one business in the Thoroughfare with no means to get round it easily.
Hanging Baskets	There were hanging baskets hanging too low in the street outside Barretts.

Parking on Pavements	Cars and vans parked on the pavement were also a hazard especially from their overhanging wing mirrors.	
Condition of Pavements	Paths were uneven and there were many pot holes to negotiate.	

The Turban Centre

The Turban Centre is approximately 20 yards from the nearest parking for blue badge holders in Hamblin Road. The footpaths are of a good width and signage to the shops is good. The slope in the Turban Centre is steep for anyone self-propelling their wheelchair and it is also hard for anyone to push a wheelchair user up it.

Access Issues	<p>The steps leading down towards the Co-op only have one handrail on the right (descending).</p> <p>The ramp is quite steep for people self propelling wheelchairs and for people pushing wheelchair users.</p>	
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Quay Street

Pavements	The pavements in Quay Street leading down to the Railway Station, the Theatre and the Riverside are very narrow.	
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St Johns Street and New Street

St Johns Street	This is very narrow with cars parked on the pavement. All businesses in this street have high steps.
New Street	This is very narrow with cars parked on the pavement.

The Riverside



Signage	The signage to find the Riverside Walks is very poor and is only indicated from the Avenue Car Park by a Public Footpath sign. Therefore, it is not clear whether this goes to the river.
Footpath from the level crossing in the Avenue to the Riverside	<p>The footpath from the level crossing in the Avenue to the Riverside is totally unmade up and is hazardous to wheelchair users, people with mobility difficulties and people with pushchairs and buggies. The signage here is poor and not easy to follow. It looks like an unmade road.</p> <p>It is dangerous and needs immediate improvement to give appropriate access to the River, the Shelters and the Tea Hut. Suffolk County Council has been made aware of the issues here but there are some complications because of its use by the Boatyard.</p>

The Riverside Theatre



Parking	The nearest parking is in the Station Car Park where there are some spaces for blue badge holders. Unfortunately, three of these were unusable on the morning of our survey due to flooding. To avoid the flood, it was necessary to cross a cobbled area to access the station, the theatre and the Whistle Stop Café.
Paths and Walkways	The paths and walkways are very uneven in places and not good for people using manual wheelchairs or who are visually impaired.
Signage	The signage is limited.
Restaurant	It is possible to access the restaurant but it is narrow. There is limited space in the outside seating area.
Access to the Theatre	The Theatre is accessible and it is possible to get to the bar and restaurant areas as well as the auditorium. A small number of spaces can be made available for wheelchair users. There is an accessible toilet.

The Library



Parking	There is parking for one blue badge holder in the nearby Oak Lane Car Park about 40m from the entrance but the location of this space is not obvious.
Access	There is a very long permanent ramp to the entrance door, this door is automatic. In the spacious seating area inside, a wheelchair user would not be able to access all the shelves.
Accessible Toilet	There is an accessible toilet within the building.
Signage	The Suffolk Coastal District Council Enquiry sign still needs to be better placed.
Staff	Members of staff were very helpful, but on talking with them, our surveyor felt that they would benefit from having more disability awareness training.

The Tide Mill



Parking	The nearest parking is in the Station Car Park where there are some spaces for blue badge holders.
Signage	There is no obvious signage from the Station Car Park to locate the Tide Mill.
Paths	The paths leading to the Tide Mill are very uneven.
Access	The Pit Floor is accessible and it is possible to watch a film here but there are steps to the other floors of the building making it inaccessible for wheelchair users but it is understood that this is a very old building.
Information	The Tide Mill Living website does not have very much information on it to assist disabled visitors.