



Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum

Report from the Felixstowe 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 result, an Action Day in Felixstowe was planned for Tuesday, 5th July, 2016. Members visited the shops and businesses in Hamilton Road, the Sea Front Gardens, the Martello Park, and tried out the beach wheelchair to attempt to gain access to the beach.

Acknowledgements

The Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum would like to thank Cllr Jan Garfield, the Mayor of Felixstowe, Members of the Suffolk Coastal Disability Forum, the East Suffolk Association for the Blind, 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 any of the following information.

Recommendations

- A shuttle service should be considered during the peak season to assist people to access the town from the beach and vice versa. It could be a route using Convalescent Hill.
- A leaflet and on-line information should be prepared to provide disabled residents and guests with information about the facilities in Felixstowe, including its accessibility, location of accessible toilets, Changing Places facilities, car parking, the Sea Front Gardens, the Beach Wheelchair and the Martello Park. This would put all useful information 'in one place'.
- More information on the accessible (or step free) routes in the Sea Front Gardens would be very sensible. This could be developed to show the nearest toilets, access to the beach, and other facilities. A dropped kerb would be useful to access the path to the Gardens near the parking spaces in front of the Spa Pavilion (not the path to access the Theatre itself).
- The Shared Space area is very cluttered with A-Boards and advertising banners. These cause difficulties for people who are blind or visually impaired, guide dog users, and people with mobility difficulties. Clarification on the rules and criteria for using these (including the number, and type of advertising material used) would be welcomed.
- It was felt that some businesses would benefit from providing more training to their staff in disability awareness including dementia awareness.
- There was a general concern regarding the accessibility of fire exits in the shops and businesses and it was considered that a review of these should be taken out in conjunction with Suffolk Fire and Rescue.
- It would be sensible to conduct a proper trial in respect of the use of the beach wheelchair to assess its suitability for purpose.
- Information about the facilities at the Martello Park should be made more readily available particularly to families with disabled children.
- In respect of the gaps along the main path in the Martello Park, signage should be introduced to indicate which of the gaps are accessible to wheelchair users, those with mobility problems and people with pushchairs.
- It would be helpful to know which floodgates are left open during the winter and only closed in the event of bad weather.
- Doors of accessible toilets in car parks owned by Suffolk Coastal District Council need to be easier to open especially for unaccompanied wheelchair users.

Raising Awareness

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

The Mayor of Felixstowe, Cllr Jan Garfield, kindly came along to experience shopping as a disabled person.

She was able to try shopping using a wheelchair and also to try some spectacles that simulate eye conditions.



Afterwards, she said “It was a very interesting experience and a real eye-opener to put yourself in the position of someone in a wheelchair. I felt disempowered. The shopkeepers were lovely and really helpful but it was not easy to get into some shops – they don’t all have a ramp and getting up even a small step in a wheelchair is impossible, the aisles were very narrow in some shops, and some automatic doors swing outwards which was very difficult. I found that sometimes people in wheelchairs have to wait for staff to spot them and come and open doors and help, and you have to hover around outside if they are busy. I also found that people tend to talk to the person pushing the wheelchair and not the person in it – even though they knew I was the Mayor as I had my chain on and that I wasn’t disabled. That was very odd. One of the biggest and most surprising problems was being unable to use bank machines easily – not being able to get close enough and then feeling uneasy about people looking over your shoulder.”

Other surveyors using wheelchairs noted similar experiences and those who were blind or partially sighted also said that staff in shops and businesses talk to the person with them and not to them.



General Comments

There were a number of issues that affected the Shared Space in Hamilton Road and many of the businesses and shops in it.

- The cycles attached to the cycle racks through the Shared Space are a potential danger to blind and partially sighted people as the cycles can overhang the defining surface on the paved area.



- Many fire exits at the rear of shops and businesses are too narrow for wheelchair users and often accessed via steps.

- Many of the cafés do not have accessible toilets and rely on the fact that there are accessible toilets in nearby car parks. This is within the law if the toilets are within 100m of the café.

- In the Shared Space, it is not made clear to pedestrians what the sharing involves. Some drivers are considerate but not all. There were concerns that the speed limit at 20 mph is too high. Visitors do not know where the 'edge' of the road is and it is confusing for guide dogs who are trained to recognise kerbs.

- There are many obstructions, some of which are fixed such as the bins and cycle racks. However, many shops and businesses use A-Boards or banners to advertise their business. The number of these in use appears to be increasing. These cause difficulties for people who are blind or partially sighted or have mobility difficulties.



- All cash machines (ATMs) are difficult to access for wheelchair users as they cannot get near enough to them and people can see their transactions and possibly also their PIN numbers. They are not practical for people with visual impairments to use.



- A number of people commented on the difficulty of reaching the town centre from the promenade and vice versa. However, on the whole, people felt that the shared space area was of benefit to many disabled people, particularly wheelchair users.

Detailed Comments

Shops and Businesses in Hamilton Road



It was felt that the majority of shops and businesses in Hamilton Road were reasonably accessible, provided that staff were helpful and that shops were not overcrowded with goods or the aisles too narrow. However there are still some shops with small entrance steps, preventing easy access.

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

Sea Front Gardens



Parking	Parking provided by Suffolk Coastal District Council is available for blue badge holders in front of the Spa Pavilion and along the Sea Front. Blue Badge holders must pay for parking but get double time.
Kerbs	A dropped kerb would be useful to access the path to the Gardens near the parking spaces in front of the Spa Pavilion (not the path to access the Theatre itself).
Condition of paths and walkways 	The paths are wide enough for wheelchair users but not so wide that wheelchairs can pass each other easily. The surface is relatively good but there is still some loose gravel which prevents the tyres of wheelchairs gripping well and causes them to slip. Additionally people walking may find this loose gravel slippery. Presumably it is anticipated that the surface will bed down in time.

<p>Signage</p> 	<p>The signage in the Gardens is of little use to wheelchair users and people with mobility problems as it does not identify routes which are accessible through the gardens. So people have no idea which path to follow. More information on the accessible (or step free) routes would be very sensible. This could be developed to show the nearest toilets, access to the beach, and other facilities. It is possible for someone using a power wheelchair to go up (and down) the Pram Walk to get to the top of Bent Hill though the slippery gravel caused some minor difficulty.</p>
<p>Barriers or Obstacles</p> 	<p>There are a number of flights of steps preventing wheelchair users from accessing the whole of the gardens.</p> <p>Additionally some of the slopes are rather steep which again prevents access.</p>
<p>Toilets</p>	<p>There are accessible toilets at the far end of the Spa Pavilion.</p>
<p>Any other comments</p>	<p>There is a fair amount of seating in the gardens, some of which can be reached by wheelchair users.</p> <p>It is noted that the Gardens have been restored as a result of a bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund and, as such, cannot be made fully accessible to everyone. However, the Gardens are well worth a visit as they are very attractive and there are plenty of places to sit overlooking the sea that can be reached by the majority of visitors.</p>

The Beach

It is difficult for wheelchair users to access the beach due to the drop from the promenade to the beach and then its make-up of shingle and sand.



Beach Wheelchair

A beach wheelchair is available to borrow which can be taken on to the beach.



Publicity	The availability of the beach wheelchair does not appear to be widely publicised.
Useability	The wheelchair was not easy to use and it is recommended that a proper trial takes place to assess its suitability for purpose. Difficult to push on sand with an adult in the buggy.

Martello Park



Parking	<p>The best parking for disabled people would be the South Car Park as this is close to the toilets and refreshment kiosks.</p> <p>There are spaces for blue badge holders.</p> <p>There is also car parking at the North Car Park and on street near the main entrance in Sea Road.</p>
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<p>Condition of paths and walkways</p>	<p>The main path is excellent, it is wide enough for two wheelchairs to pass each other, a hard surface, and is level throughout the park. All paths have a good surface and accessible.</p>
<p>Seating</p>	<p>It would be helpful to have more seating along the main path in the Park as it is a long way from the Sea Road entrance through to the South Car Park.</p> <p>There did not appear to be a picnic table that could be used easily by wheelchair users (though we may have missed it!).</p>
<p>Signage</p>	<p>The signage is good throughout the Park, with a clear contrast between lettering and background. The map is also easy to understand. The information boards about the Martello Tower are clear and interesting.</p>
<p>Barriers or Obstacles</p>	<p>There are gaps along the main path where it is possible to access the sea front. However only one of these appeared to be easily accessible for wheelchair users. There was no signage to indicate which were accessible and which were not though of course it was easy to see the shingle. There were flood gates to close the gaps but it was not known whether one of these is open during the winter.</p>
<p>Toilets</p> 	<p>There is a Changing Places facility next to the South Car Park which has clear instructions about how to obtain a key for this. All other toilets were unlocked and the accessible one was clean and well equipped. The door was stiff to open.</p>
<p>Any other comments</p> 	<p>The play equipment was inclusive and means that disabled children are catered for. Information about the facilities at this Park should be made more readily available to families with disabled children.</p> <p>There was evidence of good use by local people using mobility scooters.</p>