

**Europe for All – a Stakeholder Conference on Accessible Tourism
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**Cllr. Constance HANNIFFY
Offaly County Council
Midland Regional Authority
Border Midland and Western Regional Assembly
1st Vice-President – ECOS Commission
Committee of the Regions**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start by thanking the conference organisers for the invitation to be with you today and to welcome the opportunity to have a discussion on key issues for Accessible Tourism.

As you may know, the Committee of the Regions is the representative body of local and regional government in the European Union and is consulted directly by the other EU institutions on a range of policy matters, including Economic and Social Cohesion, Social Policy and Employment. I am the 1st Vice-President of the Committee which considers these issues in more detail within the Committee of the Regions and I am delighted to have this opportunity today to give a brief overview of some aspects of Accessible Tourism where local and regional government can play, and already does play, a significant role.

I am also the proprietor of a tourism business, so I have first hand experience of some of the issues under discussion.

Unfortunately, the Committee of the Regions has not had too many opportunities to discuss tourism or tourism accessibility issues but we did respond to the Commission's Communication on A European Action Plan on Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities in 2004, which I will draw on during this presentation.

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Tourism is an important issue for us, as for a number of authorities, it is a vital force in economic re-generation and development strategies, both in city and rural locations, and is seen as a sector which has the potential to expand and deliver lasting growth and jobs. Furthermore, in most Member States, local and regional government is responsible for the planning of the built environment and for enforcing building regulations, providing essential services, enabling development and acting as the regulating and licensing authorities for a range of standards and services.

Therefore, there is a specific role and interest for local and regional authorities in Accessible Tourism and an obligation to provide a number of the essential needs of, and services for, people with disabilities. We recognise also, that improved accessibility will not only result in economic benefits to the tourism industry but will also assist better social integration.

Across the Member States, there are a number of initiatives that have been introduced by local and regional government which are furthering accessibility, especially in the provision of tourism information via website and other media, in a format that is usable by people with various sensory impairments (such as my own Regional Authority in Ireland, where next week we will launch a comprehensive regional tourism guide containing specific information on accessibility). Other initiatives include the provision of signage with tactile markings or the provision of sufficient and appropriate car park spaces and other services at tourism locations. While a number of these are now required under various national regulations, a number of other projects have gone further and have been co-funded using a number of EU funding programmes.

While some work has been done at European level, and the efforts of the Tourism Unit within DG Enterprise and Industry must be recognised, more can be done to:

- Raise the level of awareness of the importance and significance of making travel accessible to everyone;
- Promote greater accessibility to tourism for travellers with disability by working towards recognised standards for tourism accessibility across the EU;
- Better and more structured involvement of organisations representing people with disability to help identify areas to be modified and/or improved in order to support full accessibility to travellers with disability; and
- Facilitate the exchange of information and experience of best practices among all stakeholders, and I include local and regional government here.

As part of the awareness raising process, work has already been done to try to demonstrate the business case for developing accessible tourism. The European Commission in its 2004 Guide on 'Improving Information on Accessible Tourism for Disabled People' stated that about 37 million people are disabled in the European Union. Furthermore, the Society for Accessible Tourism Hospitality¹, estimated that there are some 859 million persons worldwide with disabilities. While there may be variations in reported disability rates from region to region because of different methodologies used, there is still a significant market. Allied to the increasing average age of the population across Europe and the developed world, the market is growing and dramatically expanding.

While proving the business case is one thing delivering it is another. A number of the barriers can be easily overcome with careful planning and consideration and with little cost. However some barriers will require a more substantial resource

¹ Society for Accessible Travel & Hospitality (SATH), *Open world for disability and mature travel*, New York, Issue 4, 2002.

investment. Also, the tourism sector is typified by a predominance of small and medium enterprises, which have limited capacity for innovation, change and investment.

A number of EU funded programmes provide some opportunities in this regard. In particular, EU Regional Policy, through the Structural Funds, provides regions with financial resources to develop their growth potential, by modernising physical and ICT infrastructure, supporting employment and SME creation, developing research and innovation capacity and providing education and training opportunities for the labour force. It is estimated that a total of €500 billion of public and private funding will be available through these national and regional programmes from 2007-2013. Regions across the European Union are currently in various stages of preparing their operational programmes and I am sure that a number of these will be looking to the tourism sector, as a potential growth sector.

The Community Strategic Guidelines call on Member States and Regions to pursue the objective of equality between men and women at all stages of the preparation and implementation of Programmes and projects for the Structural Funds, but little mention seems to be made to equality on other grounds, such as disability. In a number of Member States there are national provisions for this, but the guidance at European level does not specifically recognise this. Maybe this is something which should be clarified and pursued further if necessary, especially during this, the Year of Equal Opportunities for All.

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Drawing on the Committee of the Regions' opinion on the European Action Plan on Equal Opportunities for People with Disabilities, I would like to highlight a number of general principles which would help accessible tourism development.

Firstly, there is the need to mainstream disability into all relevant policy areas and to apply a more **holistic approach** to accessibility issues. For example, a successful accessibility project would focus not only on providing accessibility to one attraction, but would also provide links to other attractions by means of an accessible transportation system. This implies the need to:

- Develop accessible tourism in a context of national, regional and local strategies that would help organisations deliver accessible services;
- Develop tourist areas to meet the full range of consumer needs: transportation, accommodation, access to tourism sites and services;

The second general principle is the need to foster enhanced **partnership and collaboration**. Multi-sector collaboration can generate creative responses to a problem, using resources and talents from the private, public and not-for-profit sectors. Partnerships between organisations can also improve coordination of services and resource utilisation and offer an opportunity to include all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of projects. In this regard local and regional authorities could and should:

- Identify organisations for persons with a disability and foster their participation in accessibility issues.
- Study, and if necessary, improve existing organisational networks for barrier-free tourism.
- Promote the participation of various disability organisations as an integral part of successful planning and development of projects.
- Increase participation of organizations for persons with RPA as advisors to training institutions and policy-making bodies concerned with accessible tourism services.

Thirdly, the promotion of accessible tourism requires **gradual implementation**, as human and material resources must be mobilised for a new project. It takes time to implement change, create consensus and engage all stakeholders. This is particularly so in the tourism sector, given its disparate nature and the predominance of SMEs in the sector. Local and regional authorities can play a role here in enabling and supporting change, but also in setting targets and timetables for delivery.

A key principle must be the **provision of information** that is reliable, accurate and accessible for all users. There is some role here for local and regional authorities, as well as other statutory bodies, in terms of:

- Developing and disseminating accurate and readily available information on accessible tourism products;
- Providing information and guidance to tourism operators and service providers about how to better cater to tourists with disabilities;
- Providing information to the tourist at destinations, which is clear and in various formats, such as signage and information displays;
- Develop a recognition programme, such as annual awards for best accessibility practices;
- The Committee would also like to see support for a European network of local and regional authorities to exchange information on disability policy and good practice on accessibility.

The development of **education and training**, with a focus on awareness and sensitivity, is another target area for future work to promote accessible tourism. There is some role here for sub-national authorities with competences in this area, such as:

- Developing educational programmes aimed at tourism service providers on disabled persons' right to access and customer services for persons with disabilities;
- Invite the collaboration of organisations dedicated to disability concerns, the tourism industry and the education sector; facilitate the development of the required training programs.

Furthermore, greater effort could be made on the employment of people with disabilities in the tourism sector.

Finally, on-going **research** is essential in order to define the size and features of the market of travelers with disability and of tracking changes and progress.

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In conclusion, it is accepted that people with a disability have a right to, and do want to, enjoy travel and leisure experiences. Like everyone else, tourists with a disability want to visit places with which they identify, places consistent with their lifestyle, where they can find pleasure, safety and comfort. Unfortunately, however, their travel experiences are still characterized by numerous constraints and I hope that during the next two days that this conference will help raise awareness of the needs to make tourism accessible and will stimulate ideas for future policy and practice.

We, at the Committee of the Regions, look forward to the deliberations of this conference and working with all stakeholders to ensure that we can assist in truly developing a Europe for All and tourism accessible to all.

Thank You.