

Presentation on accessible infrastructure in tourist sites 19 January 2007

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Maria Nyman and I work as a policy officer at the European Disability Forum, the representative organisation of the approximately 50 million disabled people in the European Union.

EDF considers access to the built environment as a priority in our work, because an accessible infrastructure means a significant change in the daily lives of disabled people and therefore leads to a more inclusive society. Despite this, limited legislative proposals have been made in the area and there is still a lot to desire when it comes to access to the built environment. There is a tradition of discrimination by design by not respecting design for all principles, but fortunately the awareness of the need for an environment that respects the needs of its users is raising among policy makers, public authorities and industry.

Why is an accessible built environment important?

Well, because the population in Europe is diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, physical, sensory and intellectual capabilities. But the built environment does rarely reflect this fact, including in the tourism sector.

A person is only disabled to the extent that the environment in which the person finds him- or herself does not meet the needs of that person.

A wheelchair user's horizontal and vertical mobility in a building is only reduced to the extent that the dimensions of the building do not allow him or her to get around independently, or if an accessible lift is not installed. In the same way, the ability to move around in a building experienced by a person with an intellectual disability is in many ways determined by the character of the layout of the building. Does it have a simple structure? Is it easy to find points where there are people to give a helping hand if needed? Are the signs used intuitive and easy to understand?

In the case of a blind person, tactile markings on the floor, lifts with audio signals as well as buttons marked with Braille, recognizable patterns in the layout of a building and many other things are important features that can allow the person to get around easily.

Accessibility is first and foremost a rights issue. The social benefits are in themselves reason enough to create an accessible society. The need to take a holiday and enjoy tourism can be a particularly important for disabled people and their families in order to relax and to recuperate from the stress they experience in their daily lives.

Design for all also creates value for owners: A building that meets accessibility requirements will be able to adapt easily to changing needs, including the ageing or emerging disabilities of its occupants. The value of accessible buildings is higher

than less-accessible properties that would require extensive adaptations in the future.

A standard on access to the built environment is under elaboration as you know, but there can be accessibility needs that are not dealt with in the existing legislation and standards, therefore there is always a need for consultation with users.

Today, the standard of access that a disabled tourist can expect in so-called “accessible” tourist sites across the EU varies considerably. This means that disabled tourists and their families only have limited confidence in the declarations made by service providers regarding the level of access they provide to disabled customers.

What accessibility or design-for-all SHOULD mean, is equal access. This means for example that a wheelchair user should be able to enter a restaurant by the main entrance, not the kitchen door. It means being able to access all parts of the hotel you stay in and that you have paid for. It means being able to access the beach as anyone else even if you are a wheelchair user. And so on.

Currently, no standard exists to determine how the disability symbols should or can be used. The labels schemes that are used in different Member States are often used inappropriately as marketing tools. For example, hotels often declare that they are wheelchair accessible, using the wheelchair symbol, even though they are not fully accessible for wheelchair users.

This can be the result of lack of knowledge rather than a lack of good intentions. Therefore I re-iterate that it is important to consult with independent accessibility experts or organisations of disabled people before making costly adaptations.

Another difficulty for disabled tourists is that accessible hotels or accessible rooms in hotels are often more expensive than non-accessible alternatives. This means that there is a discrimination of price for disabled tourists compared to non-disabled tourists. Therefore, it should be possible to make a reservation for a certain category of room, and if those rooms turn out not to be accessible, then the price for the accessible room should at be the same as for the category you asked for.

Finally, no more money should be spent to build up new barriers for disabled people: all new infrastructure in tourist destinations **MUST** be accessible, and renovations and major construction work must ensure accessibility.

This was just a short introduction on the EDF policy on access to the infrastructure in tourist destinations, but please do not hesitate to ask questions during the discussions.

Thank you.