



Disability Unit

RiDC

Accessibility of private sector products and services for disabled people in the UK

Executive summary

Background

The development of the National Disability Strategy found that more evidence is needed about disabled people's access to, and experience of, physical and digital products and services. As a first step, the Disability Unit (DU) commissioned the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (RiDC) to develop research to better understand the barriers experienced by disabled people in different sectors and at different stages of the customer journey.

A survey was designed by RiDC, working with an advisory group of 12 'experts by experience'. This group helped shape the research and interpret survey results. Two focus groups were also conducted.

The survey ran from 12 September to 19 October 2023. The survey was shared through RiDC's network and through social media, and respondents to the survey were self-selecting. There were 1,545 valid and fully completed responses. Data was also collected on impairment type and other demographic characteristics.

Aims and objectives

The aims of the research were to:

- explore the accessibility of sectors for disabled people and how these sectors were used
- understand the barriers disabled people face at each stage of the customer journey
- explore what could help improve disabled people's experiences in accessing private sector products and services

Scope

This research asked questions about the following sectors:

- wellbeing, personal care and beauty
- financial and legal services
- retail
- technology
- sports and exercise
- entertainment, leisure and hospitality
- household goods and services
- couriers, delivery and postal services
- other

Other sectors, such as transport, private health care, medication or aids, were excluded as there was a high degree of overlap between public and private sector products or services, or because existing research was already available.

Main findings

Access barriers by sector

Respondents were asked to select all sectors in which they had experienced barriers or accessibility issues in the previous 12 months. The 3 sectors in which respondents most frequently reported access barriers were:

- retail (65% of respondents)
- entertainment and hospitality (57%)
- wellbeing, personal care and beauty (49%)

In all impairment groups, retail was the sector with the highest proportion of respondents reporting access barriers. The percentage ranged from 61% of those with a hearing impairment to 80% of those with a dexterity impairment.

People with a social impairment were most likely to report experiencing barriers in the financial (45%) and sport (53%) sectors.

People with a learning impairment were most likely to report experiencing barriers in the wellbeing (62%) and household goods and services (50%) sectors.

In the technology sector, the highest percentage of respondents experiencing a barrier were those with a vision impairment (47%), while in the entertainment sector it was respondents with a dexterity impairment (68%).

Inaccessible products and services by subsector

For each sector that respondents had identified as their top 3 most inaccessible, they were asked in which (single) subsector they experienced the most barriers or accessibility issues when trying to buy or use products and services in each sector. For each sector, the least accessible subsectors were as follows:

- wellbeing: hairdressers, barbers and beauticians (35% of respondents)
- finance and legal: banking products and services (56%)
- retail: groceries and grocery shopping (37%)
- technology: phone, computer or tablet hardware or software (41%)
- sport and exercise: gyms and leisure centres (65%)

- entertainment and hospitality: restaurants, cafes and food establishments (24%)
- household goods and services: white goods and kitchen appliances (23%)
- couriers and delivery services: online shopping delivery services (29%)

Least accessible stages of the customer journey

The research also asked about respondents' experiences at 8 stages of the customer journey:

- searching for and researching the products or services
- finding accessibility information on a specific product or service
- travelling to and from buying or using the product or service
- buying the product or service
- using or accessing the product or service
- dealing with customer services post purchase
- returning faulty or badly advertised products
- other

The findings indicate that respondents faced barriers at each stage of the customer journey, and that overcoming these barriers came at a cost to respondents in terms of money, energy, time and social interaction. The customer journey stage that appeared most problematic to respondents was using or accessing the product or service, while the sector that was most challenging across the whole customer journey for respondents was the Technology sector.

Common challenges identified across all sectors included inaccessible information or services, inaccessible building and infrastructure, inaccessible product design or use and negative attitudes from staff or the public.

Recommendations

Respondents were also asked a multiple-choice question on the most important single thing the government could do to make products and services more accessible. The most common answer was making accessibility standards mandatory rather than voluntary (40%), followed by developing inclusive design principles (16%).

Throughout open text survey questions and focus groups, respondents gave their input on how to tackle inaccessibility across the sectors and customer journey, these responses have been grouped into 4 themes:

- working together: using co-design to develop an accessibility framework for government and the private sectors – businesses should work with disabled consumers to understand the customer journey and how their policies, practices and products can enable or disable people
- build accessible environments: have digital and physical spaces be built around accessibility requirements
- enable support: build accessible support networks and provide disability training for staff, tailored to the sector and needs of disabled consumers
- standardisation and enforcement: create detailed and enforceable accessibility requirements for private sectors to meet a broad range of access needs and enable widespread accessibility – respondents saw this as important to reduce compounding barriers to the customer journey and achieve equality as a disabled consumer