

Access Consumer Research

Background and Objectives

GfK, an independent research agency was commissioned by VisitBritain to conduct research in 2007.

The main objective of the research was to explore the needs, expectations and experiences of disabled people and their carers in selecting accommodation for a short break or holiday.

Publication Information

Prepared by Quality Department

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Methodology

Considering the topic of this research, it was decided that a qualitative approach was the best suited to provide an in-depth understanding as to the awareness and experience of Accessibility in England. A two-stage qualitative methodology was adopted for this research programme.

Stage 1: Focus groups

The first stage of research involved conducting five focus groups with people with different types of disability and carers during June & July 2007. The five separate groups were people with: hearing impairments, visual impairments, mobility impairments (non wheelchair users), mobility impairments (wheelchair users) and carers of either hearing, visual or mobility impaired consumers all of which had taken a holiday in England in the past 2 years. Members of the groups had different degrees of severity of their impairment. The focus groups were undertaken in London, Birmingham and Manchester. Each focus group lasted for approximately 2 hours. Each group involved six participants.

Stage 2 – In depth 1 on 1 interviews

In depth interviews were conducted to explore an individual or couple's experiences in detail, exploring circumstances, attitudes and events to build a picture of decision-making. Five depth interviews were conducted each lasting approximately 1 hour.

Key Findings

Top line findings:

- Planning and booking holidays can be particularly problematic for consumers with a disability.
- Advance planning and extensive research needed before booking suitable accommodation – often using a variety of sources and asking around for word of mouth experiences.
- According to the participants in the research there is currently no comprehensive source of information relating to accessible accommodation in England. If there was this would remove significant barriers when planning a holiday, including psychological barriers such as 'worry', 'fear', 'anxiety'.
- The guide was seen as useful and welcomed in principle.

Main Motivations:

Information Sources: It was evident that informal information sources, in terms of word of mouth recommendations from friends and relatives and previous visits were most influential in encouraging respondents to book accommodation based on its accessibility.

Booking a holiday was quite stressful and worrying for all groups, particularly:

- Deciding where to go (destination needs to be accessible as well as accommodation),
- The need to plan well in advance of the break/holiday to ensure all needs were accommodated,
- There was a feeling of 'making do' with what was there – where provision was lacking consumers were 'making do' which detracted from the whole experience,
- There is a lack or incomplete description of accommodation available,
- Travel operators and booking offices often didn't have the relevant information although when a particular agent was found to be helpful and understood the needs of an individual all holidays were booked through this one agent (the individual never went anywhere else),
- Call centres were sited as a problem and often did not carry the relevant accessible information about individual properties they were a particular worry for hearing impaired guests trying to communicate.

Formal or published information sources, particularly the internet were important. Accommodation operators' websites were of high importance by all groups when looking for accommodation or holiday ideas. All groups highlighted the lack of information on accessibility as an issue when trying to find suitable accommodation. Many would not pick up the phone to ask questions about the accommodation unless there was some information about the accessibility of the product featured on the website or in brochures. Adverts in magazines and newspapers, although used occasionally, were not usually the primary source.

Main sources were word of mouth, brochures from accommodation operators and travel agents, local tourist boards and most important was the internet (whether accessed by themselves, family or friends on their behalf). The internet is largely used in an exploratory manner as ground work for finding out suitable destinations and accommodation and is supplemented by phone calls and checks.

Many holiday makers, particularly those in the visually impaired group (especially those with guide dogs), favoured visiting the same place again and again if it met their needs as they felt they 'knew' the place as did their dogs. When visiting a new place it was confusing and worrying; both dog and owner had to learn routes, obstacles and dangers each time a new place is visited thus it is not as relaxing or as easy as going to a familiar place.

Important factors in decision making:

Both sensory and mobility impaired groups mentioned the following as being important to them:

- Accessible accommodation – minimal stairs, need for ramps, lifts and wheelchair access. Ground floor accommodation, procedure for evacuation in case of emergency, adequate lighting
- Familiarity with location and accessibility of surrounding area – Distance to places of interest, amount of walking required and the terrain
- Safety from injury – inside and outside accommodation e.g. safety rails, cliffs, steep steps etc
- Absence of loud music /entertainment – particularly important for hearing impaired guests
- First impressions of hotel and staff when making initial enquiries – if not forth coming about accessibility and facilities for disabled people then guests assumed that they haven't got a positive attitude to welcoming disabled guests and they are not welcome.

- Travel to and from the accommodation – majority of respondents drove to the destination with family or friends as it offers flexibility, comfort and guests know what to expect (not reliant on another company/staff)

Most Positive Experiences: The most positive experiences were to be found at properties where there was a high level of customer service and awareness from staff.

Important factors to make a perfect holiday:

Essential features highlighted were: Accessible accommodation, on site car parking, detailed information about the whole location, personal safety, accessible surrounding areas and good customer service.

Desirable features highlighted were: Suitable entertainment for all, good transport links, nice environment e.g. romantic if couples, good weather and good mix of visitors – disabled and others.

Carers were particularly worried when going on holiday with dependents as they are passionate about the needs of their dependents, conscious that the holiday should be happy and enjoyable for their dependents, worried about dependents being upset or dehumanized.

Threats to the perfect holiday:

- Insensitive, uncaring poorly trained staff
- Unsuitable surrounding area – distances, obstacles and terrain were particularly mentioned
- Finding out too late that there might be accessibility issues with the accommodation
- Problems with transport
- Worry connected to accessibility from all groups – the carers want to ensure that they have made suitable provisions and the dependents worry about spoiling the holiday experience for the individuals or groups they holiday with when there is not adequate provision.

Main ways to overcome threats:

- Checking ahead – check in advance the provision and reconfirming details before and after booking.
- Availability of detailed information about the property and surrounding area.
- Staff attitude – to have a more positive attitude towards disabled customers should be encouraged e.g. via training
- Willingness of staff to communicate with disabled people – communicate directly with the disabled person and not through other guests in the party.
- Customer attitude – disabled people need to have a positive 'can do' attitude to the problems they encounter to prevent general alienation of disabled people.

Conclusions:

- The priority when holidaying for disabled people is the location and provision in the accommodation and surrounding environment. Information must be more readily available.
- There needs to be more choice of accommodation to meet their needs with a range to suit budgets and types.
- Avoid staff assuming that the main priority is their disability – VisitBritain must not promote a dependency culture.
- All welcome the NAS and congratulated VisitBritain on being forward thinking and would like all hotels and holiday accommodation included in it eventually.