

A Guide to Providing an Inclusive Experience post COVID-19

It is fair to say that all of our lives changed in the spring of 2020. Personally and professionally, many of us have experienced incredibly difficult times, and the pandemic hit disabled people particularly hard.

Whilst customers are keen to travel again, both locally and further afield, many are still conscious of their own health and safety in a different way to before. If you are looking for hints and tips on how to provide an accessible and inclusive experience to your visitors and guests in a post-COVID world, this guide is here to help.

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The Pandemic's Impact on Inclusive Tourism



Photo by Marcelo Renda:

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/anonymous-tourists-in-masks-on-bench-in-airport-4213043/>

Both the tourism market and disabled people were badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Here are just a few impactful statistics, all from the Office of National Statistics (ONS):

- Monthly air passenger arrivals to the UK fell from 6,804,900 in February 2020 to 112,300 in April 2020, a fall of 98.3%

- Accommodation and travel agency businesses saw the sharpest decline in turnover during the first national lockdown, falling to 9.3% of their February levels in May 2020
- More than 2.2 million people were advised by the government to shield during the coronavirus pandemic as they had been classified by the NHS as clinically extremely vulnerable
- Almost six out of every ten people who died from coronavirus were disabled.

In light of this, it is not surprising that many disabled people are still incredibly cautious about visiting and working in tourism environments that are communal, busy and socially engaging in their nature. So, what could 'safe inclusion' look like for disabled people, and what measures should be put in place to support guests, customers and staff members alike who have additional requirements and vulnerabilities surrounding the pandemic and our 'new normal'?

Achieving 'Safe Inclusion' as a Business



Photo by August de Richelieu:

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/business-people-wearing-face-masks-and-talking-4427957/>

The events of 2020 and 2021 led to many non-disabled people experiencing the same isolation and exclusion that many disabled people face regularly. Lockdown showcased to the nation how it feels to have external barriers preventing participation in everyday life.

As we emerge from these events, businesses and organisations in Birmingham, the West Midlands and beyond have the opportunity to remove those barriers and encourage participation and engagement as much as possible for everyone, regardless of impairment or additional requirements. But this also needs to be done with safety and comfort at the heart of any decision-making process. 'Safe Inclusion' is therefore the gold standard for many accessible tourism businesses to aim for. It satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong, but does so in a way that is cautious and considered, accepting that not everyone has the same levels of health, independence and related safety and security that these bring.

Several hints and tips on how best to achieve 'Safe Inclusion' as an accessible tourism business are provided below.

Inclusive Operational Hints and Tips for your Organisation post-COVID 19



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<https://www.pexels.com/photo/people-holding-clear-glass-bottle-3951862/>

1. Provide Information to Encourage Choice

Providing an inclusive, safe experience for any customers often relates to promoting choice, wherever possible. So, think about the information that would be useful to your visitors and guests in creating that autonomy. This is particularly relevant in the current times we find ourselves in where there are hugely varying reactions to, and opinions on, COVID-19 and whether we are yet in a post-pandemic world. Providing information allows your visitors to make decisions that are the right ones for them depending on how vulnerable they may be, whether or not they've been vaccinated, their current health status and many other variables.

- Sharing information on busy and quieter breakfast times at your hotel, or the most popular attraction within your venue, could be incredibly helpful to many of your guests wishing to plan for a slightly safer communal environment.

- Create a short guide to the measures you do have in place (if any) following the last couple of years. This, again, will help visitors to prepare in a way that best suits them. Can certain changes be made on request, such as staff members delivering room service at a distance, or museum receptionists being politely asked to wear a face covering? Make this clear too; it will help to remove any awkwardness for both parties.
- Do you have any expectations of your visitors and customers to help operations run smoothly? Share these in your guide too so that everyone is on the same page as much as possible.

2. Prepare for those who Lipread

Be mindful of those needing to lipread, and be prepared to make adjustments for this if wearing masks. Masks of course create visual barriers to the face, but also often lead to less clarity of speech. Below are a few measures that you can take to ensure those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing still have an inclusive, equitable experience when visiting your organisation or business:

- Remove your mask, ensuring you speak to the customer at a safe one to two metre distance that you are both comfortable with.
- Introduce transparent face masks for your team. These will enable lipreaders to see your lips and find cues to better follow the conversation. Transparent masks can be bought from the [Disability Horizons shop](#), amongst others.
- Use other resources at your disposal. Have a notepad and pen or your phone at hand in case you need to write short, simple sentences (not complex essays!) to explain a point. Gestures may also be appropriate in some instances, and remember to use your surroundings to help someone gain that all-important context. Whatever you do, do not shout or get frustrated; patience and empathy are the very best resources anyone can have.

3. Online Adjustments are Key

And what about ensuring inclusive provisions for those disabled people who want to engage with their local attractions and events but simply cannot return to in-person travel and meetings just yet?

- Whether you work at a museum, attraction, sporting facility or theatre, might it be possible to showcase your exhibits and events online? Perhaps you can ensure matches and matinees are recorded, or ask a member of staff to film a personalised tour of particular artworks that can be uploaded to the internet. This would allow those who are still vulnerable (but also those with fluctuating conditions and/or other work or family commitments who cannot attend events in-person) to feel included and valued, wherever they are. A small subscription

fee could even be collected for the service, as long as this does not outweigh any costs for an in-person visit.

4. Challenge Yourself in terms of Accessibility

And finally, let's be honest: we still live in relatively uncertain times. Should you need to make quick adjustments to your online booking system or in-person queuing system, for example, please ask yourself 'is this new way accessible?' before you finalise any decisions. Remember that not everyone is able to communicate or navigate in the same way, so providing choice and options, where possible, is advisable.

Creating an Inclusive Job Market



Photo by Kampus Production:

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photograph-of-an-office-team-working-together-6248972/>

It is not just your customers you need to focus on as an accessible tourism business or organisation. As expectations of how and where we work have changed for good, how might you be able to use this to your advantage in terms of inclusive recruitment and retention of staff members? According to a survey conducted in 2020 by disability charity, Leonard Cheshire, disabled people have been hit harder than most, with 70% of those surveyed having seen a reduction in their income as a result of the pandemic.

Of course, in the travel and tourism industry there will always be a great need for front-facing team members and in-person interactions, but perhaps you now have sales, marketing or admin roles that can be undertaken via hybrid means such as working from home. This will be great for a disabled applicant who may struggle to come into the office more than two or three days a week. Make sure any elements of flexibility are clear on your job advert, and specifically welcome applications from those with differing protected characteristics.

If anything positive has come out of the last couple of years, our business meetings now often have accessibility features as standard! Make the most of your Zoom or Teams capabilities such as live captioning and the ability to spotlight sign language interpreters, by [learning more about them here](#).

In a post COVID-19 world, regular check-ins with all your team members - and especially those with additional requirements - are more important than ever. Create an open forum every quarter in which staff members can feedback how they feel about certain safety measures. Asking the following questions may be helpful:

- Are sanitising touchpoints for customers working well?
- Do your front of house employees feel they have the autonomy to choose whether or not they wish to wear a mask, particularly as and when new variants are introduced?
- In their opinion, is familiarisation and pre-tooling information for guests having the desired effect?
- Similarly, how do staff members feel about their own end-to-end journeys and measures within the workplace?
- Are they comfortable travelling into work in their usual way?
- Are flexible working hours and/or hybrid working means helpful, particularly now the rush hour 'squeeze' is returning on public transport?
- And ask them openly: are there any other elements that would make their working days feel both safe and inclusive?

Further Information and Guidance

Many thanks for reading this guide, we hope you found it useful.

Best of luck on your accessibility journey! Further information and ongoing COVID-19 guidance can be found at [Visit Britain](#).