Liverpool City Region: Accessible Destination Report 2025











Introduction

The Liverpool City Region Destination Marketing project seeks to position Liverpool as a leading accessible tourism destination. By ensuring that planning, booking, travel, and on-the-ground experiences meet the needs of disabled visitors, the initiative aims to enhance visitor confidence, satisfaction, and economic contribution from this vital demographic.

Aims and Objectives

Our research focused on understanding and improving accessibility across the Liverpool City Region visitor economy by:

- Examining barriers to planning, booking, travelling, and experiencing venues.
- Evaluating accessibility from the perspective of disabled visitors with a wide range of access needs.
- Identifying practical, actionable solutions for regional stakeholders to implement, ensuring an accessible visitor journey.

The primary aim of this research was to provide detailed qualitative feedback specific to the Liverpool City Region, supplementing and building on existing accessibility work carried out by VisitEngland. While VisitEngland has developed toolkits and collaborated with partners to improve accessibility across the visitor economy, this project sought to capture lived experiences and uncover region-specific insights.





Methodology

Pre-Arrival Review

Accessibility advocate Carrie-Ann Lightley led an assessment of online resources, focusing on the availability, clarity, and completeness of accessibility information for venues, transport, information sites and booking platforms. Representation of disability was reviewed across this information to understand how confident disabled travellers may be when planning a trip to Liverpool City Region.

On-the-Ground Assessments

AccessAble Ambassadors, representing a diversity of disabled people, conducted mystery shopping at a range of venues across the region. Their evaluations covered:

- Planning, booking, and pre-visit information.
- Travel to and within Liverpool City Region.
- Accessibility of attractions, accommodation, and dining.

Participant Diversity

Ambassadors reflected a variety of access requirements, including:

- Mobility (wheelchair and non-wheelchair users).
- Sensory needs (users with sight loss and hearing loss).
- Neurodivergence (e.g., autism and cognitive needs).
- Hidden disabilities (e.g., stoma users).



Methodology

Ambassadors also reflected diverse traveller profiles, including lone travellers, families with children, couples, those travelling with carers, and those travelling with assistance dogs.

Scope

The research was conducted across the city region, with trips to Liverpool, Southport, and Wirral. Trip took place between October 2024 and January 2025, including during October half term. Visits to attractions, restaurants, and hotels provided insights into how these venues operated as they would to the general public, ensuring recommendations were practical and real-world.

Broader Activity

This study supplements the work of VisitEngland and aligns with the government's ambition for the UK to become the most accessible tourism destination in Europe by 2025. Its findings provide actionable insights into how Liverpool City Region can attract and accommodate a broader audience, tapping into the £274 billion potential of the "Purple Pound."

Pre-Arrival Information Review: Key Findings and Recommendations

95% of disabled people check accessibility information before visiting a new place. (Source: AccessAble Accessibility and You Survey 2023-24).

Disability is incredibly diverse. While the wheelchair user symbol is widely recognised, only 7% of disabled people are wheelchair users. In the UK alone, there are 16 million disabled people and 4.9 million carers, each looking for venues that will be accessible for their own unique requirements.



Key Findings - Venues

We reviewed the websites of 11 attractions, 5 hotels, and 10 restaurants. Our research found that –



All venues reviewed included information about physical accessibility, such as step-free access, the availability of wheelchair accessible rooms in hotels, and accessible seating areas at attractions.



45% of attractions and 40% of hotels included information about sensory accessibility, such as assistive listening devices, visual or vibrating alarms in hotels, audio guides and BSL tours at attractions. None of the restaurants included information about sensory accessibility.



27% of attractions included information about accessibility for neurodivergent visitors, such as sensory rooms, quiet hours, and sensory friendly theatre performances. None of the hotels or restaurants included information about accessibility for neurodivergent visitors.

Key Findings - Venues



None of the venues reviewed used social media to promote their accessibility, missing opportunities to engage and build trust with disabled visitors.



Of the 5 hotels reviewed, none included information on adjustable beds, hoists, or nearby accessible transport options.



Only 9% of attractions offered photos, videos, or visual aids to reassure visitors with accessibility needs. None of the hotels or restaurants reviewed offered these. Virtual tours and interactive maps were largely absent.

Key Findings - Information Sites and Booking Platforms

We reviewed the websites of 8 key regional and national information providers, including booking platforms. Our research found that -



Visit Liverpool's Accessible City Guide offers insights into accessible accommodations, attractions, and transport options, helping visitors plan journeys that accommodate various accessibility requirements.



Filters for sensory or cognitive needs were missing on all booking platforms reviewed.

Recommendations



Enhance Accessibility Information

- Provide comprehensive physical accessibility details for venues, including room dimensions, door widths, bed heights, and bathroom facilities like rollin showers.
- Highlight key facilities for sensory needs and neurodivergent visitors, such as assistive devices, quiet zones, and sensory friendly spaces with bookable times.
- Include transport details within accessibility information, such as nearby accessible bus stops, parking options, and wheelchair accessible taxis.



Use Visual Content

• Incorporate photos, videos, and virtual tours showcasing accessibility features to inspire confidence during the planning stage.



Collaborate with Accessibility Experts

• Partner with organisations from the <u>LCR Accessibility Marketplace</u> to create structured, trusted and reliable accessibility information which aligns with the above recommendations.

Recommendations



Strengthen Social Media Engagement

- Encourage disabled visitors to share feedback on venue experiences through platforms such as surveys, review sites, or comment cards.
- Promote accessibility on social media channels using testimonials, photos and videos of accessible features, and case studies highlighting successful adjustments.



Ensure Website Accessibility

• Comply with <u>WCAG standards</u> – including screen-reader compatibility, and provide simple, clear language and captioned videos.

Visitor Journey and Experience: Key Findings and Recommendations

Planning and Booking

95% of disabled people said they had felt anxious before visiting somewhere new due to worries about accessibility.

Planning ahead to visit new places is a common practice, with the typical time spent researching accessibility information before visiting a venue ranging from 20 minutes to 1 hour.

(Source: AccessAble Accessibility and You Survey 2023-24).



Key Findings - Planning and Booking

7 Ambassadors planned and booked trips to the Liverpool City Region, researching accessibility information across attraction, hotel, restaurant and transport provider websites, as well as booking and information sites. Our research found that –



85% of Ambassadors found their trips easy to book, but only 43% found accessibility information that was easy to find and use. While AccessAble and some venue websites provided structured information, other platforms lacked clarity and consistency.



Key gaps included missing information on sensory and cognitive accessibility features and accessible transport routes.

Key Findings - Planning and Booking



Recommendations



Standardise Accessibility Information Across Venue Websites

- · Create dedicated accessibility sections for all venue websites.
- Describe <u>key accessibility features</u> for physical, sensory and cognitive needs.
- Signpost to local accessible transport information.
- Include this information in an <u>Accessibility Guide</u>. VisitEngland's recommended format is an <u>AccessAble Detailed Access Guide</u>.



Leverage Digital Tools to Inspire Confidence

• Ensure your Accessibility Guide provides high-quality photos, videos, and virtual tours of accessibility features. These tools can help visitors assess suitability and plan their trips with confidence.



Facilitate Pre-Arrival Communication with Venues

• Offer direct contact options for accessibility enquiries, such as live chat or a dedicated phone number or email service, to build trust with visitors.

Recommendations



Promote Accessible Booking Features Online

- Work with booking platforms to incorporate clearly labelled accessibility features.
- Enable online booking for accessible rooms to streamline the process for disabled travellers.



Expand Accessible Itineraries Across the Region

- Develop region-wide accessible itineraries connecting major attractions, transport routes, and dining venues.
- Include step free routes, accessible locations, and real-time transport updates.
- Begin with key visitor hubs, ensuring the itineraries are scalable and inclusive for diverse needs.

Visitor Journey and Experience: Key Findings and Recommendations

Travel to and Within the Region

In 2022, disabled adults in England made 25% fewer trips than non-disabled adults. (Source: National Travel Survey).

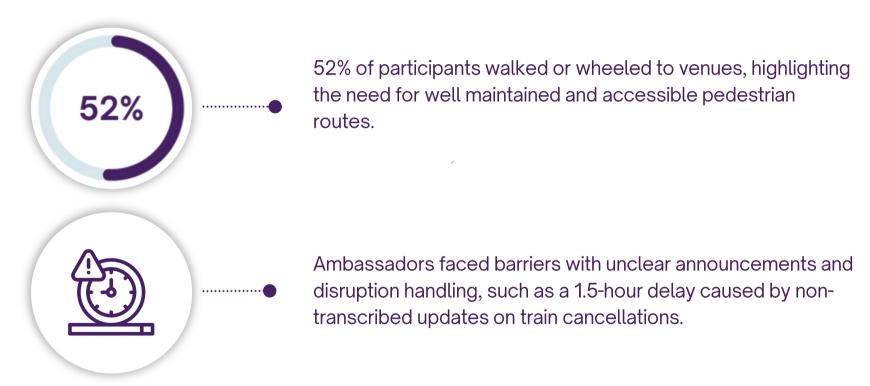
For many, the accessibility of public transport, clear wayfinding, and reliable disruption communication are critical factors in planning travel.

Without these, disabled travellers are often excluded from opportunities to explore new destinations.

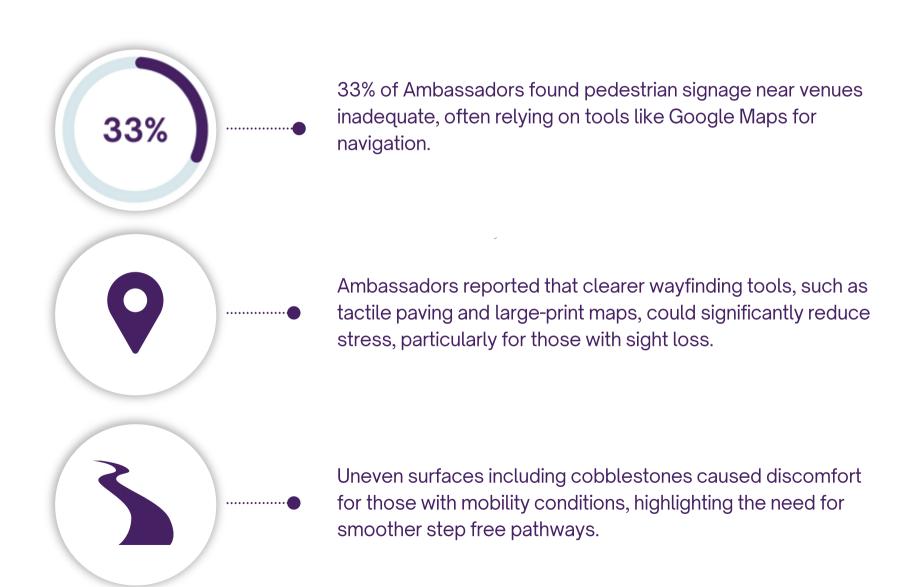


Key Findings - Travel to and Within the Region

7 Ambassadors travelled to and within the Liverpool City Region, capturing the accessibility experience of train, bus, MerseyRail, and MerseyFerry transport. Accessible parking for those travelling by car was also considered, as well as pedestrian routes. Our research found that -



Key Findings - Travel to and Within the Region



Recommendations for Local Authorities



Enhance Pedestrian Wayfinding

- Install consistent, visible signage near public transport hubs, side streets, and major attractions.
- Prioritise highlighting step free routes and ensuring clear wayfinding.



Audit and Improve Surface Conditions Around Key Venues
Commission accessibility audits to identify and improve uneven surfaces such as cobblestones.

Recommendations for Transport Providers



Standardise Accessible Real-Time Updates

• Ensure real-time updates include transcribed announcements, visual displays, and audio notifications. This ensures that all users can navigate confidently.



Expand Accessible Transport Alternatives During Disruptions

- Develop detailed guidance and ensure alternative accessible options are well communicated during service interruptions.
- This should include step free routes, replacement services, and clear signage at disruption points.



Enhance Accessibility Information

- Ensure websites offer clear timetable information, step free route descriptions, and detailed information on accessibility for physical, sensory and cognitive needs.
- Provide details of any assistance available for disabled travellers, whether advance booking is required, and how to book.

Visitor Journey and Experience: Key Findings and Recommendations

Accommodation

In the UK, 32% of disabled people report that their accessibility needs are not met by hotels.

(Source: Handiscover).

Ensuring that hotels deliver a seamless and accessible experience is crucial for enabling disabled guests and their companions to enjoy their stays with confidence and ease.



Key Findings - Accommodation

6 Ambassadors stayed in 5 hotels across the Liverpool City Region, with stays ranging between 1 and 2 nights. Our research found that –



Key Findings - Accommodation



Recommendations for Hotels



Standardise Room Accessibility Features

- Ensure accessible rooms meet essential needs, including:
 - Lowered light switches and accessible plug sockets near beds.
 - Hoist compatible beds with adequate clearance underneath.
 - Assistive devices, such as vibrating alarms or visual doorbell indicators for sensory needs. If possible, provide these in standard rooms too.



Introduce Quiet Zones and Enhance Lighting

- Designate specific areas in lounges or lobbies as quiet zones, with minimal noise.
- Ensure key areas like reception desks are well lit to aid lip reading.



Position Accessible Toilets Strategically

- Ensure accessible toilets are conveniently located near public spaces such as dining areas, lobbies, and conference rooms.
- Features should include hooks, shelf space, and waste bins for stoma users.
 Colostomy UK's Guide to Stoma Friendly Toilets has detailed guidance.

Recommendations for Hotels



Enhance Staff Training for Accessibility Needs

- Invest in training to equip staff with the skills to:
 - Operate accessibility tools such as vibrating alarms and hoists.
 - Provide clear guidance on room adjustments or modifications.
 - Offer support for guests travelling with assistance dogs.



Review Booking Information Pre-Arrival Guidance for Accuracy

- Check information about your accessible facilities on third party websites and booking platforms.
- Ensure accessible facilities are described accurately at the online booking stage.

<u>VisitEngland's Technical Guidance for the Built Environment</u> provides more detail on inclusive design principles.

Visitor Journey and Experience: Key Findings and Recommendations

Attractions

In the UK, 73% of disabled people have had to change or cancel plans due to a lack of accessibility at venues.

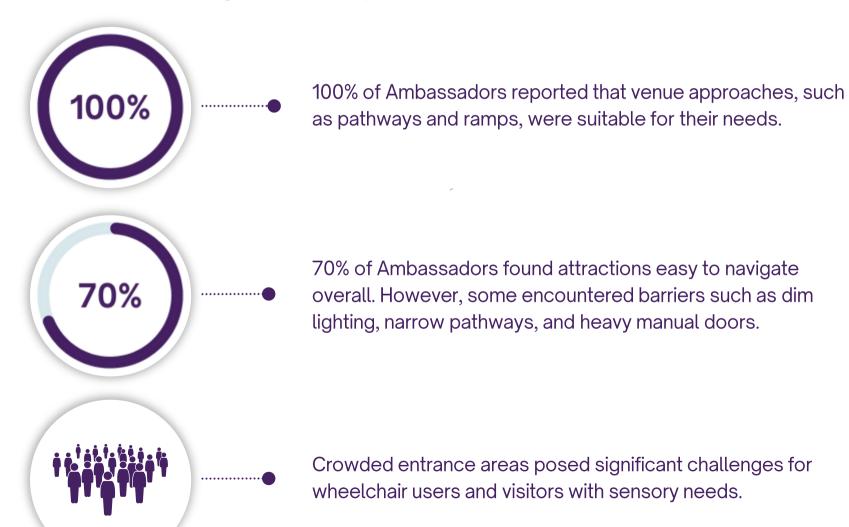
(Source: AccessAble Accessibility and You Survey 2023-24).

With disabled people and their companions contributing an estimated £14.6 billion annually to England's tourism sector (Source: VisitEngland), ensuring that attractions are accessible is not only a matter of inclusivity but also a significant economic opportunity.



Key Findings - Attractions

7 Ambassadors visited 14 attractions across the Liverpool City Region, including cathedrals, cinemas, museums and galleries, safari parks and stadiums. Our research found that –



Key Findings - Attractions



One attraction was reported as having a Changing Places toilet available for those with additional needs. One attraction had an accessible toilet that felt neglected and had not been cleaned.



80% of reported positive interactions with staff, who were helpful and friendly. Some participants noted a lack of proactive support, particularly at entrances and reception desks, which could have alleviated challenges such as crowds and door accessibility.



14% of attractions did not have information available in alternative formats, such as large print or audio guides. One attraction played videos without subtitles. One theatre attraction had limited performances with subtitles.

Recommendations for Attractions



Enhance Signage and Wayfinding

- Install clear signage from car parks to venue entrances, with large print maps and visual markers.
- Introduce tools like app-based navigation and tactile maps.



Improve Entrances and Toilets

- Ensure step free entrances with automatic or push-button doors, addressing challenges with manual doors.
- Maintain clean, functional accessible toilets and expand facilities like Changing Places toilets to meet diverse needs.



Provide Accessible Information

- Create detailed guidance on step free routes, sensory friendly zones, and available adjustments for disabled visitors.
- Offer materials in alternative formats, such as large print and audio guides.
- Ensure all videos feature captions.

Recommendations for Attractions



Expand Accessibility Training for Staff

• Train staff to proactively assist at busy points like entrances, and to communicate available concessions for disabled visitors



Designate Quiet and Relaxation Zones

• Provide quiet spaces with reduced noise and soft lighting to support neurodivergent visitors.

Visitor Journey and Experience: Key Findings and Recommendations

Dining Experiences

In the UK, 14% of disabled people report difficulties when visiting pubs or restaurants.

(Source: <u>Papworth Trust's Disability Facts and Figures</u> Report).

By addressing accessibility and staff training, restaurants can better serve this customer base.

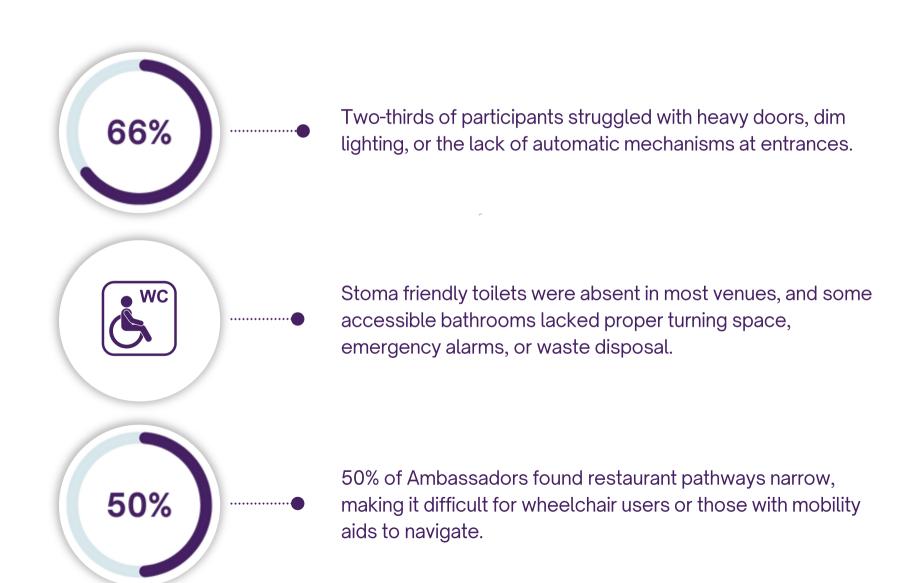


Key Findings - Dining Experiences

7 Ambassadors visited 11 cafes and restaurants across the Liverpool City Region, from chain restaurants to independent eateries, and attraction cafes. Our research found that –



Key Findings - Dining Experiences



Recommendations for Cafes and Restaurants



Optimise Restaurant Layouts for Accessibility

- Ensure pathways are at least 1.2 metres wide and consistently clear of obstructions to facilitate wheelchair access and ease of movement.
- Dedicate specific seating areas for guests with mobility needs and offer quiet zones for guests with sensory needs, featuring adjustable lighting and reduced noise levels.



Upgrade Entrance Accessibility

- Improve entrance lighting to enhance visibility for visitors with sight loss or low vision, ensuring safe and welcoming access.
- If you can, equip main entrances with automatic or push-button doors to ensure ease of access for wheelchair users and those with mobility needs.



Upgrade Bathroom Facilities

- Introduce stoma friendly features, such as shelf space, hooks, and appropriate waste disposal units, in accessible bathrooms. <u>Colostomy UK's</u> <u>Guide to Stoma Friendly Toilets</u> has detailed guidance.
- Ensure accessible toilets meet industry standards, incorporating emergency alarms, grab rails, and adequate manoeuvring space to accommodate all users. VisitEngland's Technical Guidance for the Built Environment provides more detail on inclusive design principles.

Recommendations for Cafes and Restaurants



Enhance Staff Accessibility Training

- Provide comprehensive training for staff on proactively assisting guests with mobility aids or sensory sensitivities, such as rearranging furniture and recognising individual needs.
- Expand allergen training to improve staff confidence and accuracy in addressing dietary requirements, ensuring a safe and inclusive dining experience.



Improve Alternative Entrance Signage

• Where accessible main entrances are not feasible, ensure alternative entrances are clearly signposted and easy to locate, with appropriate lighting and signage at both street level and main access points.

Key Findings - General Destination Experience

We asked 7 Ambassadors to give their opinion on various aspects of Liverpool City Region as a destination. Our research found that –



Ambassadors rated navigation as "Good" (3.9/5). Major routes were generally accessible, but 28% found display maps and information boards to be "Adequate," highlighting the need for more detailed and user friendly visual aids.



Public toilets were rated as "Good" (3.6/5), reflecting overall satisfaction. However, 33% of participants noted gaps in availability, particularly for accessible and stoma friendly toilets, underscoring a need for more inclusive facilities across key areas.

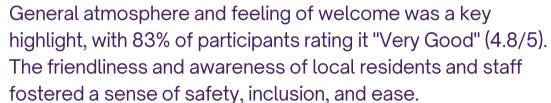


Public areas received positive feedback, with an average rating of 4.14/5. Ambassadors appreciated the clean and well-maintained environment across the region.

Key Findings - General Destination Experience

We asked 7 Ambassadors to give their opinion on various aspects of Liverpool City Region as a destination. Our research found that –





Recommendations for Local Authorities



Strengthen Wayfinding Tools

- Introduce accessible display maps, tactile markers, and Braille signage at key locations, particularly near attractions and transport hubs.
- Ensure consistency in signage across the region, with clear, large print and intuitive visual aids for visitors with sensory or cognitive needs.



Expand Accessible Toilet Facilities

• Increase the availability of accessible and stoma friendly toilets in public areas, attractions, and key transport hubs. Include emergency alarms, clear signage, and appropriate turning space for wheelchair users.



Maintain High Cleanliness Standards

• Sustain the current focus on cleanliness while prioritising accessible spaces, ensuring regular checks and maintenance of facilities like toilets and ramps.

Recommendations for Local Authorities



Enhance the Nightlife Experience:

• Expand accessibility in nightlife venues, including step free entrances, quiet zones, and sensory friendly lighting, to further build on the positive feedback.



Foster Inclusive Community Initiatives:

 Continue hosting outdoor and accessible events that bring the community together, ensuring these spaces feel welcoming and inclusive for all visitors.



Conclusion

The Liverpool City Region demonstrates great potential as a leading accessible tourism destination, supported by its welcoming atmosphere, vibrant offerings, and the commendable steps already taken to improve accessibility. Key findings from the report highlight several strengths, including generally positive visitor experiences and strong staff engagement across venues. However, significant gaps remain, such as inconsistent accessibility information and inadequate wayfinding tools. These barriers, if unaddressed, may hinder the appeal of the Liverpool City Region to a wider audience of disabled visitors.

Implementing the outlined recommendations will drive meaningful change. By improving accessibility information, enhancing accessible venue features, and leveraging digital tools, the Liverpool City Region can instil confidence in disabled travellers, creating seamless and supportive visitor experiences. These measures will not only attract more visitors but also unlock the economic opportunities presented by accessible tourism, including the "Purple Pound."



Conclusion

To ensure long-term success, a collaborative path forward is essential. Stakeholder engagement must remain a priority, with local authorities, businesses, and accessibility experts working together to implement changes effectively. Establishing robust monitoring frameworks will allow progress to be tracked, ensuring accountability and the identification of areas for further improvement. Regular evaluations and feedback mechanisms will be critical to refining strategies and addressing challenges.

As the Liverpool City Region continues its journey towards becoming a leading accessible destination, prioritising accessibility cannot be overstated. Accessible tourism is not just an economic opportunity; it is a commitment to enabling all individuals, regardless of their needs, to explore and enjoy everything the region has to offer. With sustained collaboration, the Liverpool City Region can set a national benchmark, proving that accessibility is key to a thriving and resilient visitor economy.



Research methodology - Pre-Arrival Information Review

Accessibility advocate Carrie-Ann Lightley led an in-depth assessment of online resources to evaluate the availability, clarity, and completeness of accessibility information for planning a trip to the Liverpool City Region. The review aimed to understand how confident disabled travellers may feel when accessing and relying on pre-arrival information. The assessment included a wide range of platforms and resources to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of pre-arrival accessibility information:

- Venues: Websites of 11 attractions, 5 hotels, and 10 restaurants were assessed.
- **Booking Platforms:** 8 key national and regional booking and information platforms were included in the review (e.g., AccessAble, Tripadvisor, and Booking.com).
- Regional Information Providers: Visit Liverpool, Visit Southport, and Visit Wirral were analysed for their accessibility information and representation of disability.





The evaluation focused on the following key areas:

Availability:

- Whether accessibility information was provided at all.
- Representation of disability across the information.

• Clarity:

- The ease with which disabled travellers could locate accessibility details.
- Use of plain language and the inclusion of visual aids, such as photos or videos.

Completeness:

- Coverage of physical accessibility details, such as step free access, parking, accessible toilets.
- Information about sensory accessibility, such as assistive listening devices, visual or vibrating alarms, audio guides and BSL tours.
- Inclusion of information on adjustments for neurodivergent visitors and hidden disabilities.

Confidence-building Features:

 Use of testimonials, case studies, or feedback from disabled visitors to provide reassurance.

The pre-arrival review was conducted in October 2024.



Research methodology - Visitor Journey and Experience

On-the-ground assessments were carried out by a group of seven AccessAble Ambassadors with diverse accessibility needs and traveller profiles. The aim was to evaluate the accessibility of the visitor journey across Liverpool City Region, focusing on transport, accommodations, dining, and attractions.

Ambassador Profiles

Accessibility Needs Represented:

 Conditions affecting mobility, sight loss, hearing loss, neurodivergence, and hidden disabilities.

Traveller Profiles:

- Solo travellers, couples, and those travelling with carers.
- Travellers accompanied by assistance dogs.
- Families with children.

Travel Methods:

- Ambassadors travelled by car or public transport, including train and bus.
- Ambassadors travelled from across the UK, including locations such as Hertfordshire, Kent, West Yorkshire, Scotland, and from within Merseyside.





Scope of the Research

Ambassadors conducted their assessments across Liverpool City Region, including Liverpool, Southport, and Wirral. Visits took place between October 2024 and January 2025, covering off- season and periods of high activity, such as October half term, to ensure findings reflected realistic conditions.

Evaluation Approach

Ambassadors spent varying amounts of time in the region, ranging from day trips to twonight stays, and assessed:

- Transport Infrastructure: Public transport hubs, taxi availability, and parking provision.
- Accommodation: A representative selection of hotels.
- Attractions: Cathedrals, cinemas, museums and galleries, safari parks and stadiums.
- **Dining:** Restaurants and cafes.

Assessments were conducted under real world conditions, as venues operated as they would for the general public. This ensured that findings and recommendations were practical and actionable.



Research methodology - Visitor Journey and Experience

Assessment Criteria

Research was guided by structured criteria that focused on:

Ease of Planning: Accessibility of information prior to arrival.

Physical Accessibility: Evaluation of ramps, step-free access, wide doorways, and other structural features.

Sensory and Neurodivergent Facilities: Availability of quiet rooms, assistive devices, and tactile maps.

Staff Preparedness: Ability to assist disabled visitors and provide accommodations as needed.

Overall Visitor Experience: Ambassadors evaluated how accessible and welcoming the region felt overall.

Thank you to all Ambassadors for sharing their lived experience.





