

Making Connections for Accessible Greenspaces

Jane Stoneham, The Sensory Trust

With social inclusion, disability rights and countryside access high on the political agenda, and the introduction of related legislation and policy directives, there is increasing attention being given to ways in which excluded groups, such as people with disabilities and older people, can be more effectively engaged in the whole arena of greenspace design and management.

The Sensory Trust is a national organisation promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities to experience and enjoy the natural world. In 1999 we initiated Making Connections, a two year project funded by the National Lottery Charities Board to focus on accessibility and universal design in public greenspace and in particular the reasons preventing or dissuading use by disabled and older people.

The Making Connections project was based on the connection between people and the natural world and in particular on how opportunities to enjoy the natural world can be made available to everyone, regardless of age or disability. We were not presuming that disabled and older people have more interest in greenspace than anyone else, simply that there is a basic right for all people to have meaningful opportunities to enjoy, learn from and participate in the natural world.

The project was managed by Richard Price and involved national surveys exploring the views and expectations of disabled people and greenspace managers, and consultation with a wide range of individuals who shared experience, ideas and examples of good practice. With the User Survey we tried to target the non-users of greenspace to find out why they are not using these places and what would help encourage them to do so. Throughout

the study we were particularly keen to explore some of the following key issues that relate to accessibility in its broadest sense.

The missing visitors

Recent years have seen a significant increase in developments aimed at increasing disabled people's access to areas of public greenspace and countryside. Many of these projects have addressed the basic issue of physical access. Quite simply, if people cannot get around a site they will not be able to use and enjoy it. Understandably the first, and overriding, concern has therefore been to ensure that there are no physical barriers to people using a landscape and to design or modify paths and access routes to accommodate people with mobility impairments.

However, it has become increasingly apparent that this physical provision alone does not always lead to significantly higher levels of use by disabled people. It is not unusual to find examples where physical access improvements have been made but sites still remain relatively under-used by disabled and older people. This pattern of under-use had been expressed to us informally over many years by a wide range of site practitioners. It was also highlighted by a Countryside Agency survey (Chesters, 1997) that reported that the missing visitors to the countryside represent 40% of the population and are mainly people on low income or state benefit, reliant on public transport and including ethnic communities, elderly people and people with disabilities. The percentage of people who are being left out is a cause for concern and provided the main incentive for initiating the Making Connections project.

Desire to use greenspace?

The suggestion that these visitors are missing because they have no enthusiasm for using the

outdoors is sometimes made by those looking to justify lack of change or action. In common with a wealth of anecdotal reports, the Making Connections survey showed that people expressed a strong desire to visit public greenspace (81% said they were interested in visiting the countryside; 78% in outings or sightseeing). Respondents' most commonly held perceptions of these places were as settings for experiencing relaxation, beauty and wildlife. A significant number of people said they would like the chance to visit greenspace more than they do at the moment. One of the important questions for the project was: what stops them?

provide rich experiences and a means of disabled people connecting with the community and their surrounding environment.

Barriers preventing or dissuading use are diverse and interrelated. Physical barriers are interwoven with social and economic issues such as appropriate information, transport, poverty, social isolation, accompaniment, personal security, low expectations and discrimination. Barriers can prevent access but often they simply put people off bothering to make a visit, particularly for people who have to make more effort to go out.

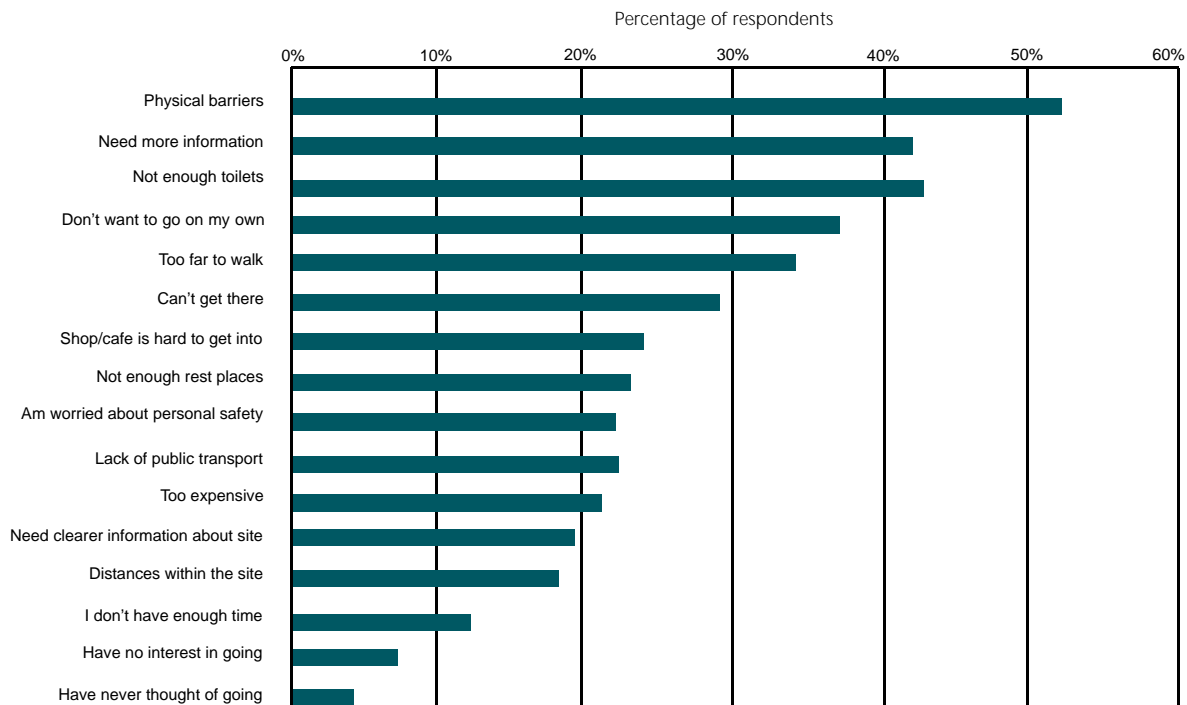
Accessible greenspace

Accessibility is a complex issue and relies on both physical factors (such as distance from home) and socio-cultural factors (such as people wanting to go somewhere and feeling comfortable there). These social factors are generally less obvious but often very significant in determining the quality of visitor experience. The project was designed to address accessibility in terms of these socio-cultural factors, in particular highlighting ways that greenspace can

The following graph (Graph 1) shows the results of one of the questions in the User Survey which asked respondents to identify barriers in greenspace.

It is useful to note that lack of information was highlighted as a significant barrier and there is a definite need for more attention to be given to the whole issue of how and where information about greenspace is provided.

Graph 1
Question: What puts you off visiting one of these places?

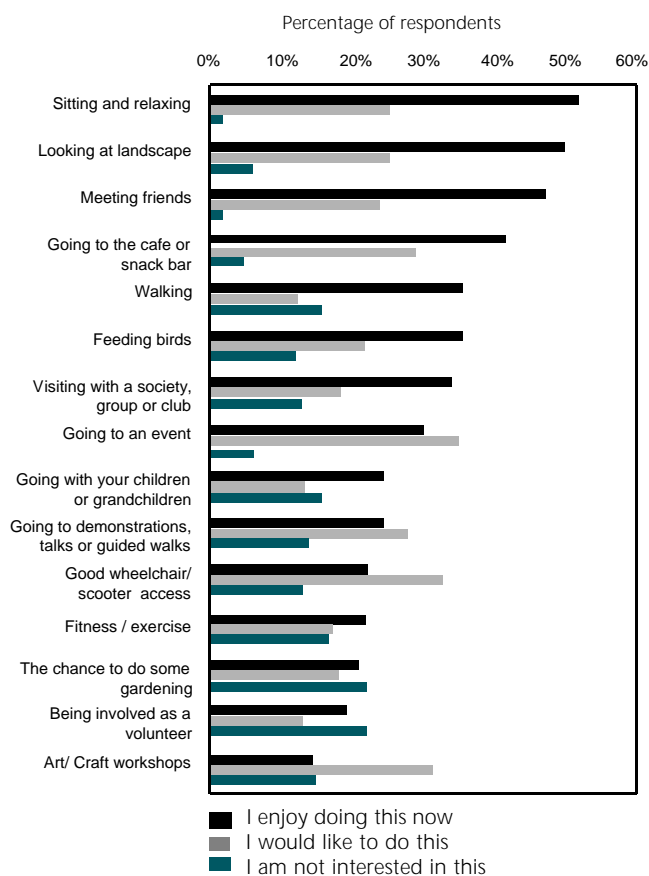


Quality of experience

The project was based on the principle that people should have an equal quality of experience, not just access to and around a place. The reward of going somewhere must outweigh the effort of getting there and this requires careful attention to the range of attractions and benefits that greenspace can offer. This includes a wide range of passive experiences, such as sitting or walking in pleasant surroundings, but also (importantly) other more active involvement for example through social contact, volunteer programmes, outings and events and education.

The following graph (Graph 2) is based on data from the User Survey and shows the associations that people made with greenspace.

Graph 2
Question: If your local greenspace could provide the following opportunities, which would be of interest to you?



Maintaining the integrity of greenspace experience for disabled visitors is important. One of the greatest challenges in natural landscapes is how to make them available to people without destroying their special qualities. The spirit of the place is often related to natural beauty, and absence of overt management, and can be easily destroyed by efforts to make it accessible. Sensitivity in design is therefore important, for example the selection of hard materials that blend with the landscape.

It is important to remember that people usually make the decision to go outside when they are indoors. This makes it particularly important to consider those factors that may motivate people to visit greenspace. For example, information and publicity materials they receive, the access between their home and the site and availability of transport.

The Results

The result of Making Connections is a publication that draws on the experience and opinions of disabled people and greenspace managers to illustrate the challenges and opportunities involved in opening up public greenspace to a wider audience. Making Connections was as much about raising questions as identifying possible answers and we hope it will serve as a useful tool in the increasingly active debate about universal design, participation of people and accessibility.

Making Connections: A guide to accessible greenspace by Richard Price & Jane Stoneham (114pp) is available from the Sensory Trust, £12 (students & not-for-profit organisations), £15 (standard) incl. p&p.

*For more information about our work:
 Sensory Trust, Bath Brewery, Toll Bridge Road, Bath BA1 7DE. Tel. 01225 852554. Fax 01225 851000.
 E-mail: sensory@sensorytrust.swinternet.co.uk*