Profiting through Accessible Tourism

VisitBrighton: Undertaking a destination access audit
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VisitBrighton commissioned a destination access audit and lead on improving the accessibility of Brighton for its visitors.

Visitor Services Manager, Suzanne Mantell talks about their approach to improving the quality of the visitor experience.

What is a Destination Access Audit?

A destination access audit takes a holistic look at a destination, focusing on the experiences of disabled people from arrival through to departure. However, older people, families with buggies and visitors with luggage will also benefit as they share similar experiences. The audit looks at how people arrive in the city - train, car, coach - and how they move around, as much as where they stay and what they do while they are here.

“...access audit identifies where accessibility improvements can be made to enhance the visitor experience for everyone”

Why did you decide to commission an audit?

We understand the value in being an accessible destination and we felt that we couldn’t be telling businesses to look at their accessibility without us looking at the city as well. It was important that we were seen to be doing our part and lead by example. It is pointless having an accessible product if you can’t get to it because the roads, pavements and parking are poor. The audit joins all the bits together.

So when Tourism South East came to us and asked if we would be interested in undertaking a destination audit we saw the real value in it. The amended Disability Discrimination Act was being introduced at the time (now Equality Act).
Who were involved?

We saw our role as the facilitator to bring different partners together. A lot of things the audit looks at are related to the public realm and not within our team's control, such as roads, pavements, parking and public transport. However, we discussed this with the Sustainable Transport and Seafront teams who could see the value in it and were signed up to the process from the beginning.

As a pilot destination, Tourism South East put up half the money. The rest was split equally between the Tourism, Sustainable Transport and Seafront teams.

“We saw our role as the facilitator to bring all the partners together”

What was involved?

A charity called Tourism for All (TFA) was chosen to complete the audit after a tender exercise. TSE, me as the project lead, the Seafront Team and Transport Team had a meeting with Brian Seaman from TFA to agree the boundaries of the project, how it would be carried out, what we wanted included and over what period. Brian consulted with the local access group and key stakeholders to seek their opinions about facilities and services in the area. He identified the barriers for disabled people and opportunities to improve accessibility for visitors.
What areas were audited?

We agreed for the audit to cover the main visitor area. It looked at means of arrival with an in-depth look at the train station, coach station and local bus company. It looked at parking for blue badge holders and threw up some really interesting facts. For example, a lot of blue badge parking is on a hill which could present a challenge for disabled visitors.

It looked at how people can access the beach and how far they could get to the sea. The report suggested matting on the beach, which the Seafront team bought, along with beach wheelchairs.

The audit also looked at some hotels in the study area such as The Grand and The Hilton. We shared the report with these businesses.

How have the findings of the audit been used?

There were no quick fixes for the public realm. The final report was really an education and information document to help with future planning. The report is a live document, which is referred to a lot, influencing our approach to certain projects. For example, work at the station done by Southern and the benefits of shared spaces informed the New Road development.

I shared the report with other internal teams, encouraged them to act on the recommendations and monitored their progress.

There were some things we could do very quickly. The audit included the VisitBrighton website and said people want to know facts like Brighton is on a hill.

“We rewrote the information on the website straight away and produced dedicated information sheets - a quick win.”

It would be interesting to redo the audit as part of our on-going monitoring to see how far we have come.
What are the benefits of the audit?

I found this to be something worthwhile doing for the destination and it was very straightforward from a client point of view. The audit focussed our minds and gave us a greater appreciation of different access issues. It emphasised the importance of accurate information for visitors, which we have since improved and has allowed us to market Brighton with confidence.

We saw improvements for the VIC in particular. When we relocated the centre we considered colour contrast between the carpet and counter, for example.

It is also a means by which we can involve and encourage private sector businesses to make improvements. Accessibility is not all about wheelchair users, we encourage them to think about others and the fact that they can purchase aids cheaply for hearing and visual impaired guests, such as large print and Braille menus. But of course the key thing is to ensure that we can give a warm welcome and great service to all our visitors.

“The report gave us a greater appreciation of different access issues”