The Hytte: Achieving exceptional quality and accessibility
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The Hytte was designed to provide fully accessible 5 star accommodation. With top national accessibility ratings and awards, occupancy levels have been over 90%.

Sonja Gregory and her husband, Simon, opened The Hytte, (pronounced ‘hutta’) near Hexham, Northumberland in April 2006. The 4-bedroom, self-catering accommodation is built in the style of a traditional Norwegian timber mountain lodge, complete with grass roof. The Hytte particularly targets elderly visitors and groups/families with members who have impairments or are wheelchair users.

Owner Sonja Gregory talks about their approach to improving the quality of the visitor experience.
Why did you decide to make The Hytte fully accessible?

We were aware of our obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act (now Equality Act) to be more accessible. Also, I looked at various local tourism brochures and was amazed that I couldn’t find any accessible accommodation listed. I found it was the same when I asked at my local Tourist Information Centre. We were therefore determined to ensure The Hytte was accessible and we felt if we were going to do it then we wanted to do it properly.

“I was amazed that I couldn’t find any accessible accommodation listed in local brochures”

Where did you go for advice on being accessible?

Initially I contacted our area tourist board for advice. I then attended a Welcome All course, which I found to be a really good introduction. Out of the course I joined the National Accessible Scheme (NAS), which I saw as a recognised tool to inform guests of our accessibility. We were awarded ‘Access Exceptional’ for mobility under the NAS. We were also rated as suitable for visually impaired guests and for guests with hearing impairment.
Would you advise others to join the NAS and is it expensive?

Yes, I would certainly advise everyone to join. You are given the book containing all the criteria and although this can appear rather daunting at first, there is advice available from VisitEngland, who runs the Scheme. You can then look through and decide which level is practical for your business, just as you would for the Quality Scheme.

We found the NAS criteria particularly useful when planning The Hytte. If you’re building somewhere from scratch then making it accessible should be no more expensive. For example, we put standard shower fittings in the shower and wet room; the only extra expense was £10 for an extended rod for the shower so it can be higher or lower.

We also put in a standard kitchen and just lowered one of the units so it was accessible for a wheelchair user. When an existing business comes to replace an old kitchen, they can easily take accessibility into account when planning the new one and it should cost them no more.

What has being accessible meant for you as a business?

Our annual occupancy levels reached 92.5%. I would say that 65-75% of the groups who have stayed with us have had someone with an impairment – for example, a group stayed with us recently with four wheelchair users. I do believe that being accessible is a key reason for us achieving an increased, high occupancy level in such a short time.

Have you had to compromise on quality?

Quality plays an important part in the experience we try to offer our visitors – we have a 5 star rating. There is no need to lose quality to be accessible; there’s no conflict. For example, I only have small rugs in one of the bedrooms so that wheelchair users can push them under the beds out of the way. When I explained this to the assessor, he agreed that this was no detriment to achieving a high quality grading.

“There is no need to lose quality to be accessible; there’s no conflict”
How do you reach your potential markets and ensure your information is accessible to all?

We advertise on specialist websites such as Good Access Guide. We have our own website, which is now fully accessible. The web is very important for this market and I would say the majority of our bookings come from the internet.

All our brochures are in large print. Several elderly visitors have said that they particularly liked our leaflet because they didn’t need to put their glasses on to read it! I think the larger print encourages everybody to pick up the brochure and read about us.

What key information on accessibility do you think guests need?

We provide full information on our accessibility and all our facilities. Our Access Statement provides complete information with descriptions of all the rooms including door widths, height of beds, turning space, outdoor access, etc.

We promote the fact that we are in the NAS and have been rated ‘Access Exceptional’. One guest making a booking said she thought the place sounded fantastic just from the information given on the website.
How do you know you are getting things right for your guests?
We often get repeat bookings: three lots of guests have each stayed twice in the last seventeen months and one set have stayed three times! One lady, looking after a party of children with physical and learning difficulties, was moved to tears when I showed her round recently; she said it was so nice compared to some of the places they had been forced to stay in before.

We invite feedback from guests and listen to their requests. We are still learning from experience. For example, one lady asked about a commode, which we didn't have; we've now bought one on the basis that if one guest would find it useful then others will.

What advice would you give to businesses looking to be more accessible?
I would say join the NAS, attend a Welcome All course and generally become more aware and interested in how accessible other places are (or aren't).

Visit www.thehytte.com
For guidance on how to improve accessibility please visit www.visitengland.org/access www.visitengland.org/nas