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Four out of five British high streets serve up second class service for disabled people

On the eve of major new consumer laws requiring businesses to be more user-friendly for disabled people, a survey by the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) shows that disabled people are getting a second class service and encountering major problems on four out of five of Britain's biggest high streets (1).

On Friday 1st October 2004, every business, large or small - from the local shop to restaurants, health clubs, dentists and supermarkets - will need to become more user-friendly for around 10 million disabled people in Britain.

But with three days to go until the legislation bites, an NOP survey for the DRC of major high streets across the country shows that the majority of shops, cafes, restaurants, cinemas and pubs are still problematic for disabled people and have not made substantial improvements to comply with the October legislation.

The legislation, introduced under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, will affect over 2 million British businesses. The legislation requires companies to open up their businesses to disabled people and has been on the statute books for nearly 10 years (2).

Under the current legislation any business or service used by the general public has had to make gradual changes, such as not refusing to serve a disabled person and ensuring that guide dog users are allowed into restaurants. However, the biggest change comes into effect this Friday when businesses will finally have to address the problems their buildings cause for disabled people - such as steps, heavy doors, bad lighting, lack of signage and lack of colour contrast. Failure to act could result in legal action.

The DRC survey reveals that:

- in 4 out of five city centres disabled people encountered major problems getting into services - encountering steps, heavy doors, narrow entrances and bad layout inside stores; in fact not one disabled shopper had an enjoyable, hassle free shopping trip.
- nearly a quarter of all the 88 major high street outlets surveyed were rated as poor or very poor by disabled shoppers;
- one fifth of the disabled shoppers said they would not go back to the high street they visited;

- overall, problems with getting in and around added an extra 2 hours to disabled people's shopping trips;
- overall, 4 out of 5 disabled people had serious problems with cinema access. In three locations disabled people couldn't get in at all;
- a lack of large print information in key places like cafes, restaurants and cinemas and almost a complete lack of induction loops were found;
- one third of public toilets were difficult or impossible to access;
- four out of five disabled people encountered problems with lack of space between tables in restaurants, cafes and pubs.

Bert Massie, Chairman of the DRC said: "Disabled people will have real consumer rights for the first time and no longer have to put up with a second class service or being treated as second class citizens.

"Whilst it's clear that some shops and services are getting it right for the disabled consumer there are those that have done little or nothing to prepare for the legislation. For them there will be nowhere to run and nowhere to hide as disabled people's complaints will now be backed by law."

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