

BUILDINGS' SERVICES UPGRADE TO MEET REQUIREMENTS OF DISABILITY DISCRIMINATION ACT

Electrical and specialist sector contractors could benefit from a potential workload boom as buildings accessed by the public have to be upgraded in order to meet the latest requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), says the Electrical Contractors' Association (ECA).

The Act is unusual in that it has been implemented in three stages. Since 1996, service providers must not discriminate against disabled people. Since 1999, service providers had to alter services so as to not discriminate. Finally from 1st October 2004, the third stage calls upon service providers to ensure that there are no physical barriers to access. It is this last stage where electrical and specialist sector contractors stand to benefit.

The Act's definition of 'service providers' is very wide. Generally, it includes all places open to the public such as retail outlets and shopping centres, hotels, bars and leisure facilities, restaurants and theatres, airports and hospitals, as well as libraries, banks and care homes. Places of education are covered by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001.

In terms of disabled access, the Act calls for three types of systems or installations to be considered: access, communication, and alarms. It is where these considerations have an impact on the physical elements of a building that the electrotechnical building services may need alteration or upgrading.

"Under the provision of the third stage of the Disability Discrimination Act, many companies and organisations may have to upgrade their buildings in order to meet the legal requirements", said Giuliano Digilio, head of technical services at the Electrical Contractors' Association (ECA). "This could mean a significant increase in work for electrotechnical industry contractors".

In particular, Digilio points out that alterations may be necessary to enable longer evacuation times for disabled people, enhanced emergency lighting for visually impaired people and audible announcements for those hard of hearing: “Existing fire safety, emergency alarm systems and procedures may need to be modified to allow extra time for evacuation. Specific modifications such as flashing beacons may be required for those hard of hearing, whilst emergency escape lighting may need to be improved, along with tactile and high contrast signs for visually impaired people.”

For the day-to-day operation of the building services, electrical controls should be at a height accessible from a wheelchair. Light switches etc. should generally be 1000mm from the finished floor level and socket outlets or similar at 450mm from the finished floor. General lighting installations should be to the Chartered Institution of Building Services Engineers (CIBSE) standards and lighting codes, with consideration given to the provision of LED lights inset into ramps. Where possible, lifts should have an audible announcer and controls should have Braille markings and be well lit. Toilets should be suitably modified and have a disabled toilet alarm system installed.

“The upgrading of buildings services to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act could have significant impact on both existing and new installations,” said Digilio. “Electrical and specialist sector contractors should be ready to assist their clients in the implementation of the Act.”

ENDS

Note to Editors:

The ECA represents the interests of 2,200 member companies involved in electrical installation work. Collectively, the member companies have an annual turnover of more than £4.5 billion, employ over 30,000 operatives and support 8,000 apprentices in craft training. The role of the ECA is to provide a focus for the electrical industry in terms of safety, training, qualification, technological development and industry performance.

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