

Applied Leadership and Management in the Workplace

Module Assignment Submission

Student Name:	Gareth Hood
Student Number:	2534693
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Introduction

A Complex Problem in School Premises Management: Improving Disabled Access to Sports Playing Fields

As a school caretaker or site manager, one of the most important responsibilities is ensuring that the school environment is safe, secure, functional, and accessible to all pupils, staff, and visitors. The role extends beyond routine maintenance and cleaning because decisions about the physical environment can have a direct impact on pupils' educational experiences and their ability to participate fully in school life. One complex problem that can arise within a school estate is inadequate or non-existent disabled access to outdoor sports playing fields.

In the school environment considered in this assignment, pupils can access the main school buildings and some internal facilities, but there is no suitable accessible route to the sports playing fields. The existing route is unsuitable for wheelchair users and may also present difficulties for pupils with mobility impairments, parents or visitors with disabilities, and individuals using mobility aids. This creates a significant operational, educational and equality issue. Although the playing fields are physically located within the school site, they cannot be considered genuinely accessible if a pupil cannot independently or safely reach them.

This problem is complex because it involves more than installing a ramp or improving a path. It requires consideration of legislation, safeguarding, health and safety, funding, grounds maintenance, drainage, weather conditions, accessibility standards, consultation with pupils and parents, and the practical demands of physical education (PE) and extracurricular sport. The solution must also balance competing priorities within a limited school budget.

The Equality Act 2010 establishes important duties concerning disabled pupils and accessibility. Schools are required to have accessibility plans aimed at increasing disabled pupils' access to the curriculum, improving the physical environment, and improving access to information (Equality Act 2010, 2010). Current Department for Education guidance also emphasises the importance of accessible and inclusive school estates, including outdoor areas (Department for Education, 2026a). Therefore, the lack of access to the playing fields should not simply be viewed as a maintenance defect. It should be treated as a strategic accessibility issue requiring planned management intervention.

Identification and Definition of the Problem

The first stage in addressing a complex workplace problem is to define the problem accurately. In this case, the problem is not simply that a path is uneven or that the grass becomes muddy during periods of harsh weather. The underlying issue is that the current site arrangement does not provide a suitable, safe, and reliable route for disabled users to reach the outdoor sports facilities.

This creates an inequality between pupils who can access the fields without difficulty and those who cannot. For example, a wheelchair user may be unable to participate in PE lessons taking place on the playing field. A pupil with a mobility impairment may require another person to assist them across an unsuitable surface. A pupil with limited mobility could also be placed at greater risk of slipping or falling during wet conditions.

The consequences extend beyond physical access. PE is part of the school curriculum, and sports can contribute to pupils' physical health, confidence, teamwork, and social development. If a disabled pupil is routinely unable to access the same facilities as their peers, they may experience exclusion or reduced participation.

The problem should therefore be defined as:

The school does not currently provide a suitable, safe, and reliable accessible route between the main school facilities and the outdoor sports playing fields, creating potential barriers to equal participation in PE, sport and wider school activities for disabled pupils, staff, and visitors.

Why the Problem Is Complex

The issue is complex because several varied factors interact.

The Equality Act 2010 protects disabled people from discrimination and places specific accessibility responsibilities on schools. The legislation requires schools to develop accessibility plans that improve the physical environment and increase disabled pupils' participation in the curriculum (Equality Act 2010, 2010). The Department for Education confirms that schools have responsibilities concerning disabled pupils' access to the school environment and curriculum (Department for Education, 2018).

a health and safety dimension. An inaccessible route may create hazards such as slips, trips, falls, unstable surfaces, steep gradients, or difficulties in emergency situations. A route that is acceptable during dry weather may become hazardous after heavy rain. The caretaker or site manager therefore needs to consider accessibility throughout the year rather than only under ideal conditions.

a financial dimension. Schools operate within limited budgets and must prioritise expenditure against numerous competing demands, including building repairs, heating,

security, cleaning, grounds maintenance and statutory compliance. A new accessible path could require capital expenditure that is not immediately available.

Also, there are technical issues. Outdoor accessibility depends on the surface, gradients, drainage, width of the route, changes in level, gates, thresholds, lighting, signage, and maintenance. The route also needs to remain accessible after construction. A well-designed path that becomes obstructed by leaves, mud, vegetation, or damaged surfaces will not provide effective long-term access.

The school must understand the needs of the pupils who will use the route. Accessibility should not be designed solely from the perspective of someone inspecting a plan. Sport England's current guidance emphasises consultation, inclusive design, and consideration of the needs of different users when designing and operating sports facilities (Sport England, 2024).

Consequently, the problem cannot be solved through one isolated maintenance task. It requires collaboration between the site manager, senior leadership, governors, SENCO, PE staff, pupils, parents, contractors and potentially the local authority or responsible body.

Legal and Policy Considerations

The Equality Act 2010 is central to the problem. Disability is a protected characteristic under the Act, and schools have duties to avoid unlawful discrimination. Schools are also subject to specific accessibility planning requirements. Schedule 10 of the Equality Act requires schools to prepare accessibility plans addressing access to the curriculum, improvements to the physical environment and access to information (Equality Act 2010, 2010).

This is particularly relevant because the playing fields form part of the school's educational environment. A pupil who cannot reach the fields may be prevented from participating in activities that other pupils can access.

Government guidance explains that schools must plan for disabled pupils and ensure that disabled children are not disadvantaged because of their disability. Reasonable adjustments can include changes to the physical environment and the provision of appropriate support (Department for Education, 2026b). It is important, however, to distinguish between individual reasonable adjustments and the school's wider responsibility to plan an accessible physical environment.

The Department for Education's 2026 guidance on inclusive education estates is particularly relevant to the role of a caretaker or site manager. It provides guidance for people involved in planning, managing, and maintaining school estates and identifies practical adaptations to buildings and outdoor spaces (Department for Education, 2026a).

This demonstrates that accessibility should be incorporated into estate management rather than treated as an issue solely for teaching or special educational needs staff.

Building Bulletin 104 also provides guidance concerning buildings and grounds for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and includes consideration of outdoor areas (Department for Education, 2026c). Although guidance does not automatically mean that every existing school must immediately meet every recommendation, it provides useful professional evidence when considering improvement works.

Sport England's Accessible and Inclusive Sports Facilities guidance is also relevant. The guidance is aimed at planners, designers, building owners, and operators and covers external areas, wayfinding, changing and toilet provision, emergency evacuation, consultation, and management (Sport England, 2024). This supports the argument that accessibility needs to be considered throughout the entire user journey, rather than simply at the entrance to a building.

Stakeholder Analysis

The most important stakeholders are disabled pupils because they are directly affected by the problem. Their experiences should inform the design of the proposed solution. Different disabilities may require different considerations, so consultation should not assume that all disabled users have identical requirements.

Parents and carers are also important stakeholders. They may be able to provide valuable information about the practical difficulties experienced by their children. Their involvement can also increase confidence that the school is taking the problem seriously.

The SENCO has a key role because they understand the needs of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and can contribute to individual support planning. The PE department is also important because staff understand how the fields are used and what activities need to take place there.

The headteacher and governing body or responsible body have responsibility for strategic decisions and funding. They need sufficient evidence to make an informed decision about investment.

The caretaker or site manager is a central operational stakeholder. The site manager understands the condition of the grounds, drainage, access routes, maintenance requirements, contractor arrangements, and potential practical constraints. However, the site manager should not be expected to make the decision independently. The role is to provide professional site information and coordinate practical implementation.

Other stakeholders could include the local authority, academy trust, estates team, occupational therapists, accessibility specialists, and contractors. Where significant building or landscaping works are proposed, professional advice may be necessary.

Investigation and Evidence Gathering

The first stage would be a physical access audit. This should record the route from the accessible entrance or appropriate drop-off point to the playing fields. Measurements should include route width, gradients, changes in level, surface condition, drainage, gates, and potential obstructions.

The audit should be undertaken in different weather conditions where possible. A route that appears suitable in summer may become unsuitable in winter because of standing water or mud. The site manager should therefore consider seasonal conditions and the long-term maintenance implications.

Photographic evidence and a simple site plan can be useful when presenting the problem to senior leaders or governors. The evidence should demonstrate the existing barrier rather than simply describing it.

The investigation should also include consultation. Disabled pupils should be given an opportunity to explain what prevents them from accessing the fields and what would make the route usable. This is consistent with inclusive design principles promoted by Sport England, which emphasise placing people at the heart of the design process (Sport England, 2024).

Risk Assessment

A formal risk assessment should be completed before implementing any changes. The Health and Safety Executive's general approach to risk management emphasises identifying hazards, deciding who might be harmed, evaluating risks and implementing suitable controls.

Potential hazards include slips and trips, uneven ground, steep gradients, unstable surfaces, vehicle movements, gates, and restricted routes. There may also be risks associated with construction work itself.

For a wheelchair user, an uneven or soft surface could cause loss of control or make the route impossible to negotiate. For a pupil with limited balance, an uneven surface may increase the risk of falling. In an emergency, an inaccessible route could create additional difficulties for evacuation or emergency access.

Several workable solutions could be considered.

Temporary Assisted Access

The lowest-cost solution may be to provide temporary assisted access using staff support or suitable temporary equipment.

This could potentially allow an individual pupil to participate while a permanent solution is developed. However, it should not become the long-term answer. Requiring a disabled pupil to depend on staff assistance when other pupils can independently use the route may not provide an equitable experience.

There are also safeguarding and staffing issues. Staff cannot necessarily be expected to provide physical assistance outside their training or job role. Temporary measures should therefore be clearly defined as interim controls rather than a permanent solution.

Constructing a Dedicated Accessible Route

A more comprehensive solution would be to create a permanent accessible path from the school buildings to the playing fields.

The route could use a durable, stable surface designed for outdoor use. Appropriate drainage would be necessary, and the route should be designed so that it remains usable throughout the year. Gates and access points should also be considered.

This option is likely to provide the most sustainable solution, although it would require greater capital investment. It may also require professional design advice, quotations and potentially planning or other approvals depending on the site.

Relocating Activities

A further option would be to move certain PE activities from the playing fields to accessible areas elsewhere on the site.

This could be useful as a short-term measure but does not solve the underlying accessibility problem. It could also reduce the quality and range of PE opportunities available to disabled pupils.

Therefore, relocation should only be considered as an interim arrangement while permanent improvements are investigated.

Recommended Solution

The preferred approach would be to develop a permanent accessible route to the playing fields, supported by temporary arrangements during the planning and construction period.

The reason for selecting this option is that it addresses the root cause rather than repeatedly managing the consequences. It would improve access for wheelchair users and

other people with mobility difficulties and could also benefit many other users, including pupils with temporary injuries, staff carrying equipment and visitors.

The design should consider:

- a stable and durable surface;
- appropriate width;
- manageable gradients;
- suitable crossfalls;
- effective drainage;
- accessible gates;
- appropriate thresholds and transitions;
- adequate lighting where necessary;
- clear signage;
- safe separation from vehicles;
- emergency access;
- maintenance requirements; and
- the needs of different users.

The final design should be checked by an appropriately qualified professional before construction.

Financial and Resource Considerations

Cost is likely to be one of the most significant barriers. The school may have competing demands for capital expenditure, so a strong business case is required.

The business case should not focus solely on construction cost. It should consider the whole-life cost of the solution. A cheap route that requires frequent repairs, becomes unusable in winter, or needs regular specialist maintenance may be more expensive over time than a higher-quality installation.

The site manager should obtain several quotations where appropriate and ensure that contractors understand the accessibility requirements before pricing the work. The school should also investigate whether capital funding is available through the local authority, academy trust, school improvement programme, or other funding sources.

A phased approach could be used if the complete project cannot be funded immediately. For example, the school could first undertake a professional accessibility audit and design, followed by drainage and ground preparation, and then complete the permanent route when funding is available.

Implementation Plan

Implementation should take place through a structured project.

to obtain agreement in principle from senior leadership and the governing body or responsible body would involve commissioning an accessibility assessment and producing an outline design with disabled pupils, parents, SENCO, PE staff, and other relevant stakeholders obtaining quotations and identifying funding selecting a contractor and developing a construction programme. The school should ensure that safeguarding and site security are maintained throughout the works.

The route should be tested by intended users rather than simply inspected visually the site manager should then introduce the route into the planned maintenance programme. For example, inspections could check for damaged surfaces, vegetation growth, drainage blockages, standing water, damaged gates, and other obstructions.

Communication and Leadership

The site manager should communicate the problem in terms that are relevant to different stakeholders. Senior leaders may need information about legal responsibilities and costs. Governors may require evidence supporting capital investment. Teachers may need information about temporary arrangements during construction. Pupils and parents need reassurance that their experiences are being taken seriously.

Effective communication also reduces resistance to change. Some staff may initially view the problem as a low priority because most pupils can access the fields. The site manager should explain that accessibility is not based on the majority experience. A facility is not fully inclusive if a minority of pupils are unable to use it.

Evaluation of the Solution

The project should have measurable outcomes. Whether disabled pupils can access the playing fields safely and reliably.

The school could monitor whether disabled pupils are able to participate more consistently in PE and extracurricular activities Feedback could be collected from pupils, parents, staff, and PE teachers.

The site manager could monitor defects, drainage problems and maintenance requests during the first year The school should review whether the improvement has reduced barriers to participation.

The evaluation should take place after completion and again after an appropriate period of use. Accessibility should be regarded as an ongoing management responsibility rather than a project that ends when the contractor leaves.

Reflection on the Role of the School Caretaker Manager

This problem demonstrates how the role of a caretaker or site manager has developed beyond basic maintenance. The site manager is responsible for understanding how the physical environment affects the people using the school.

A traditional approach might have been to repair obvious defects when they occurred. A modern estates-management approach is more proactive. It involves identifying potential barriers before they cause accidents, complaints, or exclusion.

The problem also demonstrates the importance of balancing competing priorities. The site manager may have to manage urgent repairs, statutory checks, security, cleaning, heating, and grounds maintenance while simultaneously progressing a strategic accessibility project.

Professional judgement is therefore essential. The site manager needs to understand when a problem can be resolved internally and when specialist advice is required.

The issue also demonstrates the importance of evidence-based decision-making. Rather than arguing simply that the route "looks unsuitable", the manager can produce measurements, photographs, risk assessments, user feedback, legal requirements, quotations, and maintenance information. This creates a stronger case for investment.

Conclusion

The absence of disabled access to a school's outdoor sports playing fields represents a complex problem involving equality, education, health and safety, finance, estate management, and inclusion. It should not be treated simply as a grounds-maintenance issue.

The Equality Act 2010 and associated accessibility requirements provide an important legal framework. Schools are expected to plan for accessibility and improve the physical environment so that disabled pupils can participate in education. Current Department for Education guidance also reinforces the importance of inclusive school estates and accessible outdoor environments (Department for Education, 2026a).

The most effective solution is likely to be the development of a permanent accessible route to the playing fields, designed around the needs of actual users and supported by appropriate professional advice. Temporary arrangements may be necessary while the permanent project is being developed, but they should not replace a sustainable solution.

The project should begin with a detailed site audit and consultation with disabled pupils and other stakeholders. This should be followed by risk assessment, design development, cost assessment, funding identification, contractor selection and construction. Once

completed, the route should be incorporated into the school's planned maintenance programme and regularly evaluated.

For the school caretaker manager, the issue demonstrates the importance of proactive facilities management. Effective school estate management is not simply about keeping buildings operational; it is about creating an environment in which every pupil can participate safely, confidently and with dignity. Improving access to the playing fields would therefore represent not only a physical improvement to the school site but also a practical demonstration of the school's commitment to equality, inclusion, and the educational needs of all pupils.

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