



Access for All

by Nicola Campbell

For the past seven years I have worked specifically with young disabled people who have hearing impairments, visual impairments, learning and physical disabilities, providing them with a range of challenging opportunities that are “changing lives and building futures” across Northern Ireland. I have recently completed an MA in Disability Studies at Leeds University where my dissertation was on ‘A study into the barriers which young disabled people face when trying to access Outdoor Activities in Northern Ireland’.

My passion for working in the outdoors with young disabled people got me thinking about a number of barriers and issues that they face and how we as outdoor practitioners can help to address some of the barriers.

There are three areas related to working with disabled people in the outdoors that I would like to share, based on my experience in Northern Ireland. These are centred on: Why do disabled people want to participate in outdoor activities?

What are the barriers preventing them from doing so?
How do we as outdoor practitioners address and overcome these barriers?

The main focus of this article is based around the social model view of disability which defines disability in terms of the restrictions and barriers which society imposes on disabled people, in forms such as prejudice, exclusion, inaccessible environments and transport.

Why do disabled people want to participate in outdoor activities?

Disabled people participate in outdoor activities for exactly the same reasons as their non-disabled peers; reasons which include improving fitness, developing new skills,

experiencing new activities, having a personal challenge, meeting people, making new friends and for enjoyment. By being involved in outdoor activities the young people are being provided with opportunities through which they can grow in terms of increasing their self-esteem and self-confidence. So in saying this you would imagine there to be more disabled people taking part in outdoor activities, but this is not the case.

My work is in Northern Ireland where we have identified a number of barriers which are preventing them from doing so.

I will try and address some of these barriers in the next section, and suggest ways we as practitioners could start taking small steps to help overcome some of these barriers and make the work that we do more accessible to these young people.

What are the barriers to participation and how do we as outdoor practitioners address and overcome these barriers?

Inaccessibility of activities and equipment

Research shows that disabled people do not have the same opportunity to participate in the more adventurous activities such as canoeing, abseiling and climbing. They tend to be offered lower risk activities like orienteering, archery and team games. This is due to activity providers not having the facilities or the resources that are required to make activities more accessible. Disabled people are therefore isolated from their non-disabled peers and find that they spend most of their activity sessions sitting watching their friends having a fun time. One young person that I chatted to commented 'I'm fed up listening to my friends go on about how enjoyed abseiling. It is one of their great ambitions in life to be able to do this, but I have never had the opportunity to do it and from what I can see I never will'.

Disabled people participate in outdoor activities for exactly the same reasons as their non-disabled peers

Basic adjustments could be made by centres in order to make accessing activities and equipment easier for disabled people to be included. Starting by looking at a person's *abilities* and not their *disabilities*, instructors can approach the person to chat with them about what they are able to do, movement that they have etc and talk to them about the activity and what it involves. Adjustments to activities can be made for example, fitting seats into open canoes which would provide back support for wheelchair users, having pulley systems, full body harnesses or kite seats for climbing walls and abseils. It is important that you try and get the person to do as much for themselves as possible. We have found it useful to have extra staff available for activity sessions which include disabled people.

Inaccessible buildings In order for disabled people to get full use out of a centre's facilities they need to be able to move around freely, conveniently and safely at all times. Poor facilities such as parking spaces, signage which is very hard for someone with a learning disability or visual impairment to read and understand, not having accessible toilets and changing areas are all barriers preventing the use of a centre.

Centres need to make at least one car parking space accessible and make sure that there is a clear sign to mark it. Other helpful measures include installing grab rails around the centre and in the toilets and changing areas, having a shower chair installed, making sure there is enough manoeuvrability space to get around as well as having ramps and lifts in place. Visual clues are a good way for getting around and having fixtures and centres need to make sure that fittings are at the appropriate level for all to use.



Transport Many outdoor centres within Northern Ireland would require a disabled person catching a couple of buses in order to have access to that centre. If you are a wheelchair user the chance of actually getting a bus which is wheelchair accessible is low (this is changing in N.Ireland and more and more buses are wheelchair accessible) and then whenever you get to the centre you are confined to their grounds and onsite activities as minibuses used at the centres to transport people to off site activities are not accessible.

One way of overcoming the transport issue is to be in contact with organisations which may provide accessible transport especially if a centre knows that they are going to have someone with a physical disability participating in activities which are off site. Another way is to ask if parents or relative would be available to support in anyway with regards to transport.

Family support and perception Many parents and guardians have concerns about letting young people participate in outdoor activities. They have not got the knowledge and background information required in order for them to feel happy and confident about letting their child undertake such activities and being safe in other people's hands whenever they are away from home.

Simply meeting with parents beforehand to put their minds at rest and let them know exactly what activities are going to be done can help. The centre could also produce information resources in various formats on activities that are on offer and which would make it easy for disabled people to find out about outdoor activities that are accessible to them.

Lack of trained staff Not having the staff that are sensitive to a person's needs in order to help and support them. Disabled people may need extra help with getting around facilities and with putting on activity equipment, and if you do not have the staff available for support, you will be put under pressure.

At least one member of instructional staff at outdoor centres should have undergone some form of disability equality training. There are many courses available that individuals can go on or you can get someone in to run a day's Disability Equality Training Course for the whole staff team. This would help instructors to understand the meaning of disability, the appropriate language to use and how they can change their own practices and strategies to implement change into their own working environment. There are a number of disability organisations around N.Ireland that offer these courses and there are various other courses which look at specific impairments, and centres should encourage instructors to visit centres

that are already working with disabled people to see best practice. The Calvert Trust (www.calvert-trust.org.uk) also runs a five day Disability Awareness Training Course in the Lake District which specifically focuses on outdoor activities and young disabled people and is accredited by the BCU and MLTB.

Economic Issues Many disabled people do not have paid work and may be involved more in volunteering which obviously affects the amount of money that they can spend on activities. Participating in outdoor activities can be expensive and therefore activities are low on their priority list. The cost makes them harder to access and therefore tends to put them off participating.

Centres could look at specific funding strands which would allow them to access funds that they could use to keep the costs down for the individuals. Sometimes the organisations that are looking to participate in activities have funding to cover some costs, so ask them initially if they have a budget. Maybe an arrangement could be made so that payment could be made in instalments. Outdoor centres need to make reasonable adjustments to the way that they deliver a service, so that all disabled people can use their facilities. Outdoor centres could gain information from the Equality and Human Rights Commission website (www.equalityhumanrights.com) on what their responsibilities are as a service provider under the Disability Discrimination Act and advice would also be given on how to meet these.

A way forward

In the future I would like to see Belfast Activity Centre, where I work, offering specialised training to other outdoor practitioners and providers on working with disabled people in the outdoors. One way of doing this will be through the new UKCC Awards and the Continuous Personal Development modules which all new coaches under this Award will be subject to. My next task is to look at how I can get more disabled people joining accredited awards at the end of a programme with ourselves. It could be for instance a First Aid Certificate, OCN Level 1 Award, Canoeing Certificate, John Muir Award, Leave No Trace, etc.

I hope that this article has shared my understanding of the issue and set you thinking about what barriers are in place at present in your organisation and what can be done in the near future by us as outdoor practitioners to address these issues and help to provide 'Access for All'. ■

Authors Biography

Nicola Campbell is the Senior Disability Project Worker at Belfast Activity Centre (www.belfastactivitycentre.com), which is a charity aimed at engaging young people aged 14-25 from all backgrounds in long and short-term programmes of activity which provide them with the opportunity to explore and advance their personal and social development mainly through the medium of Adventure Learning and Outdoor Activity.