

Serving the Community

It doesn't take much to accommodate the needs of customers with disabilities – here's how to do it!

ask me

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RGDATA
LOCAL SHOPS - LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Serving the Community

It doesn't take much to accommodate the needs of customers with disabilities – here's how to do it!

*Produced by RGDATA in partnership with the
Equality Authority*

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An abstract illustration with a warm orange and brown color palette. In the center, a blue speech bubble contains the text "Serving the Community". To the left, a white shelf holds a green cube, a blue cube, and three orange cylinders. In the foreground, a large yellow silhouette of a person stands on the left, and a white silhouette of a person sits on the right behind a desk. On the desk is a green box with a white label. The background features white line art of a door and geometric shapes.

Serving the Community

Foreword

“Serving the Community” offers information, analysis and practical advice on providing quality service to customers with disabilities. The Equal Status Acts which prohibit discrimination in provision of goods and services on nine grounds (race, age, gender, sexual orientation, family status, marital status, religion, membership of the Traveller Community and disability) are the starting points for this booklet. The Equal Status Acts require a reasonable accommodation of customers with disabilities where this does not give rise to more than a nominal cost. The booklet identifies the barriers experienced by people with disabilities and provides practical guidance for shops to understand and endeavour to meet the needs of customers with disabilities.

“Serving the Community” reflects a shared ambition of RGDATA members and the Equality Authority to contribute to the inclusion of people with disabilities at local community level. It is the product of a shared commitment to support local shops to comply with the Equal Status Acts and to promote equality for customers with disabilities.

The guidelines are distributed with a poster which we hope will find a place of prominence in shops around the country. The poster highlights the commitment of shop management and staff to identifying and meeting the needs of customers with disabilities. It is a key message of encouragement to customers with disabilities to talk over their needs and how they might best be met when they are shopping.

Customers with disabilities are the focus of this publication. The guidance can also serve as a foundation for making reasonable accommodation for employees with disabilities, which is required under the Employment Equality Acts. It can also provide a starting point for a quality customer service that takes account of difference across all the grounds covered by the equality legislation – gender, marital status, age, family status, disability, sexual orientation, race, religion and membership of the Traveller community.

Local shopkeepers have a sound knowledge of their customer base and are known and respected for their community spirit. “Serving the Community” and the guidance it provides will support and deepen a practice of quality customer service that is already widespread.

RGDATA and the Equality Authority are grateful to Maureen Gilbert who drafted this document and has acted as consultant to the project. Her expertise and knowledge has enriched and informed our shared ambition and commitment.



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Introduction

Independent family-owned shops serving local communities quite rightly pride themselves on knowing their customers and their needs. Their success depends upon it. But with so many customers and assistants coming and going, it can be hard to get it right for everyone.

Shops also have to be aware of a lot of legislation. This publication aims to help members of RGDATA to meet their obligations under the Equal Status Acts, 2000 to 2004 with regard to customers with disabilities.

The contents of this publication are mostly based on common sense. Following the simple suggestions in this booklet will ensure that you provide the very best service to your disabled customers and enhance your reputation as shopkeepers who really respond to the needs of the communities you serve.

What you are required to do for customers with disabilities under the Equal Status Acts

The Equal Status Acts, 2000 to 2004 prohibit discrimination, harassment and victimisation in the provision of goods and services on the following grounds: gender, marital status, family status, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability, race and membership of the Traveller community.

Direct discrimination, indirect discrimination and discrimination by association are prohibited. Discrimination is the treatment of a person in a less favourable way than another person is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation on any of

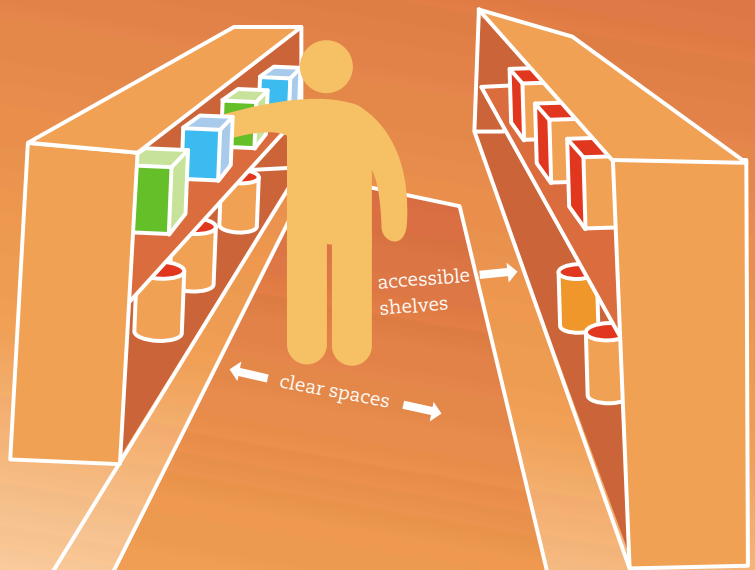
the grounds covered including disability. Discrimination by association involves less favourable treatment of someone because of their association with a member of one of the grounds including people with disabilities.

With regard to people with disabilities the Acts set out that providers of goods and services:

- must not discriminate against people with disabilities, including people with mobility, sensory, mental health and intellectual impairments
- must accommodate the needs of people with disabilities through making reasonable changes in what they do and how they do it where, without these changes, it would be very difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to obtain those goods or services – unless it costs more than a nominal cost.

Nominal cost exemption: Service providers are not obliged to provide special treatment or facilities where the cost involved is greater than a nominal cost. Nominal cost exemptions depend on the circumstances of each case. A recent Irish employment case considered “nominal cost”, stating that it “may not be the same for every employer or enterprise and the term may be interpreted in a relative sense. What is nominal cost for a large enterprise employing thousands of people will not be the same as that of a small business with two or three employees.”

Studies in the US show that more than half of accommodations made for people with disabilities cost nothing.



The Equal Status Act
allows you to take
positive action in favour
of people with disabilities.

Taking reasonable steps, generally known as **reasonable accommodation**, is not discretionary. It is the law. It is also a **simple, easily achievable aspect of quality customer service and ordinary common courtesy**.

The Equal Status Acts allow you to take positive action in favour of people with disabilities. In fact, **you can take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that people with disabilities can obtain the goods and services that you provide**.

For more information on the Equal Status Acts, 2000 to 2004 see section E6 of the RGDATA Fact File. The full Acts and further information are available on www.equality.ie, the Equality Authority's website.

Who are people with disabilities?

Disability doesn't just affect people who use wheelchairs or people who are blind. The Equal Status Acts define disability comprehensively (see appendix 2). It includes a wide range of people, such as:

- people who have limited mobility, perhaps because of arthritis or some other common condition
- people with visual impairments, perhaps caused by an age-related condition
- people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing
- people who have limited use of their hands
- people whose speech is hard to understand
- people who have learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities
- people with mental health difficulties.

The word “disability” refers to a range of impairments, for example, from partial sight to total blindness.

Some people have life-long disabilities, while others are temporarily disabled by a broken leg or a sprained wrist. Some people have only one impairment, while a number of your older customers may experience several impairments, though they are unlikely to refer to themselves as “disabled”.

When all these people are taken into consideration it's clear that a big proportion of the population has a disability of one sort or another. The one thing that is certain is that there are people with disabilities in every community in the country. If they are not coming into your shop there must be a reason for it!

Some issues to think about


People with disabilities living in Ireland face a lot of obstacles in their daily lives, including some which make it difficult or impossible for them to access what they want from their local shop. Unwittingly you may be making it hard for people with disabilities to shop with you. The obstacles that people with disabilities face include:

- communication: for example, inappropriate or disrespectful language, speaking too quickly or unclearly, providing information only in small print
- physical environment: for example narrow doorways, steep steps, poor lighting and signage, cluttered layout and lack of access to buildings generally

- negative attitudes towards customers with disabilities: for example, patronising attitudes and making assumptions about people's abilities and inabilities
- the way services are provided: for example, inflexible ways of doing things, poor training of assistants, unnecessary or complicated procedures.

Many barriers affecting people with disabilities are unintentional. You need to make sure that you are not unintentionally keeping people with disabilities away.

Reasonable accommodation will help you to overcome some of these obstacles. Positive action can eliminate them.



Knowing what disabled customers need will help you to provide reasonable accommodation.



Ask them!

Practical advice on how to make reasonable accommodations

The law requires you to take reasonable steps to provide special treatment or facilities where it is very difficult or impossible for people with disabilities to access the goods you sell or the services you provide, unless it costs more than a nominal cost (see page 8).

Knowing what disabled customers need will help you to provide reasonable accommodation. Ask them!

Many kinds of reasonable accommodation cost very little or nothing at all, like **making sure that shop assistants have a positive attitude**. Some can be part of regular routines, like **ensuring that floor surfaces are safe** for everyone to walk on or **briefing staff about disability-related issues**. Some require a little more forethought, such as **making sure that everything is maintained in good working order**. Making sure that **access for people with disabilities** is taken into account when upgrading premises or carrying out routine maintenance can be very cost-effective.

Reasonable accommodation benefits everyone. For example, **installing automatic doors** is well worth the financial outlay – it accommodates people making deliveries and people pushing buggies and carrying heavy bags, as well as being essential for people with mobility impairments.

Because all businesses and premises are different it is not possible to make a definitive list. The ideas in the framework that appears below are not exhaustive and are meant to provide a simple guide to some common aspects of making reasonable accommodations.

1. Consulting your present and potential customers

It is important to check with customers with disabilities to see if what you do and how you do it excludes them unintentionally. Talking to people with disabilities will also help to get ideas about what changes you might need to make to improve your service to disabled customers. You can canvas the views of people with disabilities by:

- putting up a notice and asking for ideas to be put in a suggestions box
- inviting regular customers with disabilities for a cup of coffee and a chat about how the shop can be improved to suit their needs better
- asking the opinion of other disabled people you may know
- contacting local disability groups and asking their advice.

2. Premises

First, *people with disabilities need to be able to find your premises and get inside*. You can make sure that this is possible by:

- clearing the pavement outside your door of obstructions, such as parked bicycles, signboards and bins
- eliminating steps and trip hazards outside your premises
- contacting your local authority about improving the pavement and providing a disabled parking place outside your shop

- making sure exterior signs are clear and obvious
- ensuring that the entrance to your shop is well-lit
- making sure that there are no steps, lips or saddles at your door and that it is wide enough to admit wheelchair users and people pushing buggies (at least 800mm clear opening width)
- using textured rubber matting to indicate the position of the entrance to visually impaired people
- installing automatic doors or, at the very least, doors that are easy to open.

Next, you need to *ensure maximum access to the goods you sell and the services you offer*. It will make a safer and more convenient shopping environment for everyone. You can do this by:

- making sure that doors, aisles and checkouts are wide enough to allow everyone to get around easily (in the ideal situation aisles would be at least 1500mm wide and doors and checkouts 800mm wide)
- making adjustments to the layout of the shop to make it easier for everyone to use
- eliminating steps and changes of level in the shop
- eliminating trip hazards, using non-slip floor coverings which are kept dry and replaced when worn – it's safer for everyone
- keeping aisles free of obstructions and free-standing displays
- providing trolleys that are easy to push and which don't jam
- making sure that as much of your stock as possible is available at heights that everyone can reach – the

zone 450-1300mm above finished floor level is the most accessible for everybody

- making sure that refrigerated cabinets and other units are as easy to open as possible (wall-mounted units incorporating sliding doors with easy-grip handles are best)
- ensuring that self-weigh and other self-help facilities are at appropriate heights, easy to reach and to use, with big buttons, pictures as well as words etc
- making sure that price labels are well-placed, in large bold print and are generally easy to see and read, with tactile indicators where possible
- improving your lighting and ensuring that there is no glare
- improving your internal signage so that customers don't have to go round the whole shop looking for something. Where possible, use symbols as well as words – not everyone can read or make themselves understood with ease if they ask for assistance
- making sure that counters, customer service points, cash desks and so on are visible, easy to approach and at the right height (at least one section of each should be only 750mm high)
- providing a seat for customers with disabilities who find it hard to stand for long – it helps older people, pregnant women etc as well
- making sure that everything in your shop is maintained in good working order.

You also need to *be sure that people with disabilities will be able to leave the premises quickly in an emergency*. You can do this by:

- installing alarm systems that incorporate flashing lights as well as sounders
- ensuring that emergency exits are clearly marked with tactile materials and accessible to everyone, that the routes to them are free of obstructions.

3. Customer service

Like everyone else, people with disabilities want to be treated with appropriate respect and courtesy when they come into your shop. Like everyone else, they also want to do their shopping independently and only seek assistance when it is really necessary. At the same time they need to know that if they do ask for help they will be facilitated cheerfully and efficiently. You can ensure all this happens by:

- including a section in your customer care plan on providing quality services for people with disabilities
- providing training for your staff so that everyone who works in the shop can serve disabled customers confidently and respectfully and knows how to offer and provide appropriate assistance
- making sure that management shows a good example
- making sure that everyone who works in the shop is aware of disability-friendly features of the premises and services
- helping everyone working in the shop to use language about disability that does not cause offence – see appendix 1 for a quick guide to correct terminology
- making it clear that guide dogs and other service dogs can come into the shop

- moving to a brighter area to accommodate someone who is lip-reading – making good eye contact in bright surroundings will assist all your customers and fosters an open, accessible, customer-focused atmosphere
- include a section on helping people with disabilities in your safety statement and plan.

4. Marketing your services to people with disabilities

You will need to let people with disabilities know about the steps you are taking to ensure that you provide reasonable accommodation. You can do this by:

- telling people with disabilities about the helpful services you offer (eg home delivery)
- advertising in ways that target people with disabilities (eg letting local disability groups know what you offer, using local radio as well as local newspapers)
- encouraging people with disabilities to make suggestions for improvements and to tell you what they need
- Putting up the poster provided by RGDATA and The Equality Authority in a prominent place.

Some of the actions detailed above are common courtesy. Some will require you to make changes. Others are just part of what you already do. Shopkeepers who pride themselves on treating all customers with thoughtfulness and respect are well on their way to providing reasonable accommodation. It is part of any quality customer service.

Changes made to accommodate people with disabilities will:

- make all customers feel valued
- make the business accessible to a wider market
- make the premises easy to get round
- make people who work in the shop more aware of the needs of all customers
- provide a service that people want to return to
- benefit other customers – and the people who work in the shop
- enhance the shop's positive public image
- improve customer and community relations

all of which will have a positive knock-on effect on business! People with disabilities are more likely than others to **shop locally**. They can also be **loyal customers**.

Get it right for people with disabilities and you get it right for practically everyone!

What do people with disabilities expect?

Customers with disabilities have a right:

- to access and to avail of goods and services without discrimination
- to make reasonable requests for special treatment or facilities if they need them to access goods and services.

Get it right for people
with disabilities and you
get it right for everyone!



Like any customer, they expect to be listened to if they make suggestions, if they tell shop assistants if they are having difficulties in accessing goods or services or if they make complaints.

Remember, if a business fails to make reasonable accommodation and/or discriminates against a person with disabilities, it may be in breach of the Equal Status Acts. Customers can make complaints to the Office of the Director of Equality Investigations – the Equality Tribunal.

How to get more information

- For further information and regular updates about reasonable accommodation visit the Equality Authority's website: www.equality.ie. The Equality Authority's Locall helpline 1890 245545 is also available to assist with information on the equality legislation or with support materials.
- RGDATA's Fact File, newsletter, website (www.rgdata.ie) and helpline (01 283 4188 and 01 288 3749) are also there to help you.
- For more information on how to make your premises as accessible as possible consult Building for Everyone, published by the National Disability Authority (NDA) in 2002 and available through your local public library or directly from the NDA (01 608 0400).

Appendix 1: Language Can Be Important

You can cause offence unwittingly by using inaccurate language when addressing people with disabilities or talking about disability. Here are a few points to remember:

- the term **person with a disability** or **people with disabilities** does not cause offence
- many people find the terms like “the disabled” or “the handicapped” offensive
- people with disabilities often find words like “victims”, “suffering from”, “tragic”, “brave” etc patronising.

Medical terms and descriptions (eg “she’s arthritic”, “he’s an epileptic”) can cause offence. If you need to refer to different categories of people with disabilities the following language helps:

- wheelchair users (people are not “in wheelchairs” or “confined to wheelchairs” – by contrast, they are a liberating form of transport)
- people with mobility impairments
- people with visual impairments
- people who are deaf or hard of-hearing
- people with learning disabilities or intellectual disabilities
- people with mental health difficulties
- non-disabled people (not “normal” or “able-bodied” people).

Appendix 2: How the Equal Status Acts define people with disabilities

In the Equal Status Acts, 2000 to 2004 “disability” means:

- (a) *the total or partial absence of a person’s bodily or mental functions, including the absence of a part of the person’s body*
- (b) *the presence in the body of organisms causing, or likely to cause, chronic disease or illness*
- (c) *the malfunction, malformation or disfigurement of a part of a person’s body*
- (d) *a condition or malfunction which results in a person learning differently from a person without the condition or malfunction*
- (e) *a condition, illness or disease which affects a person’s thought processes, perception of reality, emotions or judgement or which results in disturbed behaviour and shall be taken to include a disability which exists at present, or which previously existed but no longer exists, or which may exist in future or which is imputed to a person.*

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