



Accessible outdoor spaces

Outdoor areas consist of green spaces such as forests, trails, playgrounds, parks, historical buildings and grounds, woodlands, and nature reserves as well as blue spaces like lakes, rivers, and canals.

These environments support mental wellbeing and significantly enhance psychological health, reduce stress and promote physical activity, but can also present accessibility barriers to disabled people. The information below aims to address how the natural environment can be adapted to make it easier for disabled people to move around outside by providing information and practical solutions.

Top tip! Engaging disabled people early and throughout the process ensures the diverse needs of your audiences are met.

Green and blue spaces



Path width and length

Routes should be suitable for everyone and ideally a minimum of 1.5 metres (preferably 1.8m) wide. If the route to your activity or venue is not wide enough for wheelchair users and other pedestrians you could consider using another route, or some short-term solutions until it can be widened.

- **Temporary pathways:** Use timber planks or roll-out firm matting at the same level but to one side of an existing path or separately. Avoid coir or coconut matting as it is difficult for wheels and wears unevenly; use flat pile weather-resistant mats instead.
- **Path length:** If the route is very long, use two roll-out runners managed by two people (one placing ahead as the other is used).
- **Gates:** Ensure gates provide access for a variety of mobility devices. Aim for a minimum width of 1000mm, preferably 1200mm. Open-structure gates are beneficial for visibility unless security requires otherwise. See [AISF part B 5.6](#).



Credit: Calvert Trust

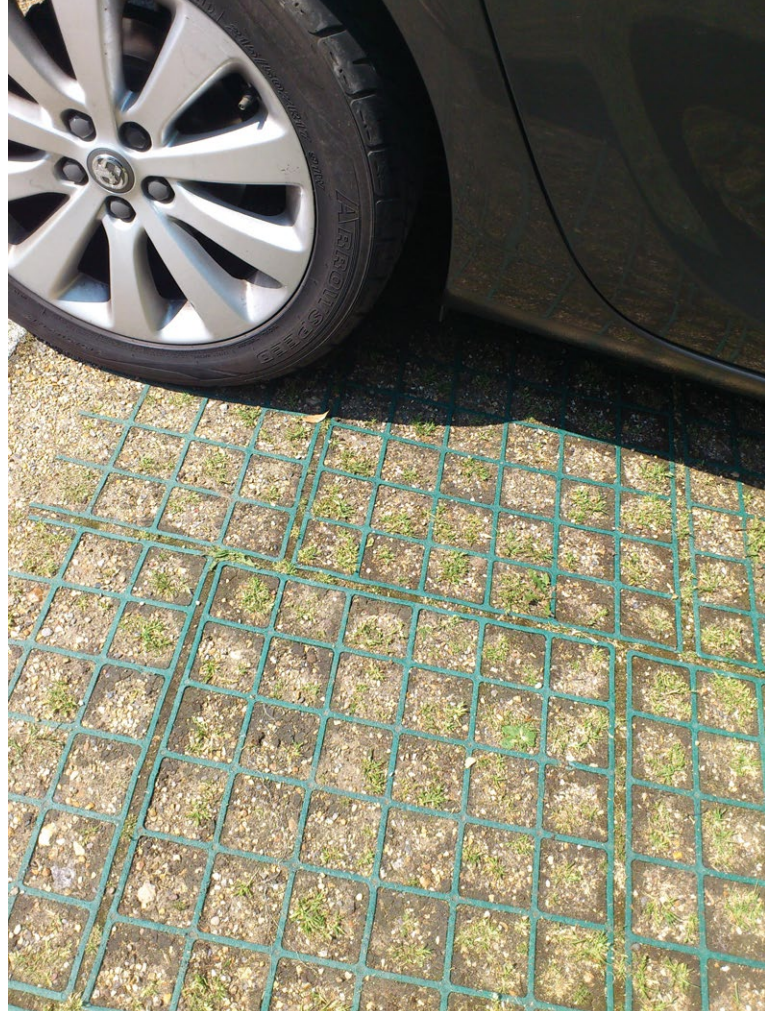
For establishing new routes, **AISF part B** offers guidance on widths, surface finishes, and other considerations for pathways. For nature trails, consult the **Sensory Trust's Outdoor Accessibility Guidance 2023**.

For many people, a short circular route promoted as 'easy access' for beginners will give confidence before exploring further. This is particularly true for people who struggle with orientation, or who are visually impaired, giving the assurance that you will finish the walk at the place where you started without any complex wayfinding. Good sight lines can also be reassuring for anyone concerned about personal safety or risk of trips or falls etc, when walking alone. Such routes should be less challenging with gentle gradients and suitable for people pushing buggies or wheelchairs, or using a self-propelled wheelchair.

Softer ground

Where ground surfaces are soft and formal access routes are unsuitable, such as across a field or on a canoe trail or leading to water, consider these support measures:

- **Temporary access solutions:** For temporary access across unstable surfaces like grass, shingle or gravel, lay down lightweight polyethylene matting or interlocking boards. These types of mats, often used at festivals and field events, are easy to install and can be bought or rented.
- **Grass mesh or honeycomb structures:** Use rubber grass mesh or concrete honeycomb structures, which allow grass to grow through while preventing the ground from sinking under wheelchairs or vehicles. Note: These measures are not suitable for fields where sports activity takes place due to the hazard posed to players wearing footwear with studs or spikes.



Outside lighting

At times, supplementary lighting is welcomed to help people safely negotiate any level changes or trip hazards or to feel comfortable outside.

Adding some sensor lighting around entrances and routes from car parking should be easy to organise and it is a cost-effective security measure as well as improving safety for everyone. There is a huge array of LED external lighting that can be solar or battery powered so there is no need to wait for an electrician. When considering longer-term lighting solutions, see **AISF part B 5.2**.

The use of energy saving LED external lighting on movement sensors with slow transitioning is helpful on primary routes, and the use of warmer colour temperatures will be less intrusive to surrounding wildlife.

External level changes

Paths and walkways should be level or gently sloping, avoiding any step changes. While step free is essential for wheelchair users, gradients may not be ideal for others. For example, disabled people with arthritis or joint conditions often find walking on sloping or ramped surfaces painful. If space allows, offer both ramps and steps to overcome a level change. There are many inexpensive smartphone apps that will measure gradients if you're not sure how steep an area is. On rural routes, you may need to find an alternative route or provide warning signs. See [AISF part B figure B 6](#).

Make your external steps easier to use by:

- **Contrasting step edges:** Make steps safer by painting or applying visually contrasting, slip-resistant tape (e.g. yellow or white) to the front edge of each step.
- **Adding tactile warning surfaces:** If there is no tactile corduroy warning paving at the top and bottom of external steps, consider adding contrasting self adhesive anti slip tape to alert people with visual impairments. See [AISF part B](#) for further guidance.
- **Adjusting open tread staircases:** Add timber across the back of open tread steps to prevent the foot from being placed too far forward when going upstairs. This is not necessary for steps only used to descend such as external fire escape stairs from upper levels.

See [AISF part B 5.5](#) for design of external steps. See [AISF part F](#) for guidance on fire and emergency evacuation.

Hazards

- **Dips and holes:** Temporarily fill any dips with suitable materials like post concrete or cold-lay macadam, which are ideal for small repairs.
- **Gratings or grids:** Ensure gratings or grids have no large holes to avoid entrapment of heels and canes. If necessary, cover or highlight these risks so people can avoid them.
- **Waterside routes:** Extra care is needed to address the risk of slipping and flooded surfaces at the water's edge. Consider options for safe water access, to allow activities such as swimming or canoeing and the use of specialised equipment.
- **Weather conditions:** Plan for wet weather, puddles and temporary flooding by noting where they form and setting up temporary diversions or bridges. Provide opportunities to avoid strong sunlight and glare; for example, trees, canopies, pagodas, parasols, and small gazebos can help.
- **Weather erosion:** Natural erosion can cause hazards such as flooding or collapsing banks. Be mindful of changing weather conditions around these areas and plan accordingly.
- **Other hazards:** Check for other hazards regularly. For example, overhanging trees may obstruct someone with a visual impairment or unenclosed livestock could pose a risk.



Handrails

Where possible, it's good to follow the guidance for internal stairs and ramps from the section on **Approach and entrance**, but in many rural areas, such structures aren't always practical. Instead, subtle interventions may be needed to help users. Steps cut into a riverbank can provide some assistance, but offering tethered items like a strong grip handle or a securely fixed rope can be helpful, especially where railings or guardrails aren't available. These simple solutions can improve safety and accessibility in more natural settings. Handrails are crucial for irregular steps or small landings where the risk of falling is higher. Any securely fixed handrail is better than none. See **AISF part B 5.6**.

Waterside

For accessing the waterside, consider all parts of the trail or route as set out in **Accessible outdoor spaces**. **Think about potential start and finish points**, including all possible positions for viewing, as well as slipways, launch/landing stages for entry and exit points for paddlers and swimmers. People may be carrying or pulling craft and equipment, so an easy route is especially important.

- **Accessing rough terrain:** Some people will own or hire an all-terrain wheelchair for accessing rough terrain, others may choose to use a beach wheelchair. Beach wheelchairs are designed to make challenging terrains such as beaches and sand dunes more accessible. Both options could be available for loan or hire on arrival. There are a large range of all-terrain wheelchairs available so involve disabled people and seek specialist advice when needed.



- **Sloped access:** It is important to have easy access to get into and out of the water. This includes to supervise or help someone swimming or using equipment. Where possible, it is better to provide steps cut into the bank or a ladder at a 45-degree angle rather than upright, to make it easier for people to climb, especially for older people and people with a range of physical impairments. Adding easy grip handrails to any slope or ramp is a key safety consideration.
- **Hoists:** A removable hoist could also be provided to assist with transfers for those who need extra support.
- **Slipways, platforms and landing stages:** If using timber slipways, make sure the slats run opposite to the direction of travel to avoid wheels getting trapped as the gaps may widen over time. A wider platform, at least 2 metres in width, will allow wheelchair users to pull alongside for easier transfers to kayaks or other crafts. Landing stages that are designed to give access to both sides of the craft are also helpful in enabling easier assistance. Platforms over the water should include edge barriers for safety and be slip-resistant. Options include metal or recycled plastic materials, but if using timber, it will need regular treatment to prevent algae buildup, or rubber matting can be used on top to prevent the surface from becoming too slippery.

- **Changing water levels:** Where water levels may change, as they do with beaches, harbours, rivers and estuaries, the tidal variation needs to be considered from the start. Displaying and communicating these variations helps users plan their arrival and departure when water levels are safest. In some cases, a floating pontoon might be needed to accommodate changing levels. As this can impact on the angle of the pontoon or landing stage, it is important to inform users so that they are not caught out by a steep gradient during their visit.
- **Lighting:** It can also be useful to have solar lighting available, especially if people are using the facilities around dusk or returning later than expected. This is particularly important where surfaces might be slippery and where wet feet and hands could affect stability and grip, helping to prevent accidents in low light.

When organising water activities it is important to consider the comfort and safety of everyone involved, particularly young children, older adults, and people with certain medical conditions or disabilities.

- **Seating:** For places where people will be for long periods, such as for fishing or spectating, it is helpful to provide a firm surface and some seating with back and arm supports.
- **Hot and cold temperatures:** It's also important to think about hot weather and how to reduce risks of sunstroke or sunburn. Choosing locations that offer natural shade from trees, or bringing temporary canopies, can help protect participants from strong sunshine and overheating. Cold water temperatures cannot be controlled in rural settings so consideration should be given to keeping warm after activities. Options, like foil blankets, towels, and robes, can make a big difference. It's also helpful to think about finding places where people can shelter after leaving the water.

- **Secure storage:** Having secure localised storage where groups can keep towels and robes is useful for when leaving the water.
- **Toilets:** The proximity of toilets to water activities is important. These need to be reliable, properly equipped, and easily accessible to local amenities. If there are no appropriate facilities nearby, setting up accessible compostable toilets near the water can make a big difference in whether someone feels comfortable participating or not.

For more information on accessible blue spaces see **British Canoeing – Delivering a paddle trail, design guidance.**



Credit: Calvert Trust

Access and route information

A short circular route provides assurance that you'll finish where you started without complex navigation, offering confidence for further exploration. Good sight lines are reassuring for personal safety. These routes could be less challenging and suitable for buggies, wheelchairs, or self-propelled wheelchairs. For longer routes, provide key route information such as distance, gradients, rest opportunities, surface material type, and whether dogs are permitted. For examples of accessible route maps, see the [Canal and River Trust's Accessibility Map](#). You could also offer guidance in advance on essential items for participants to bring, such as protective clothing, basic first aid supplies, and foil blankets or leg covers for wheelchair users on exposed routes. The Disabled Ramblers Association offers many helpful tips at [Disabled Ramblers](#).

External signage



Signs and waymarkers

Clear and accessible signage is helpful for everyone. The way in which information is relayed is important, as not everyone is able to read a variety of text sizes and formats. This section covers simple ideas to create good inclusive signage.

- **Landmarks and signs:** Look for landmarks and signs that will help people navigate the journey easily and reassure people that they are heading in the right direction. This can be particularly true for rural green and blue spaces, where signs may be less frequent. Regularly check and maintain signs, as foliage or damage can obscure them.

- **Directional arrows and distances:** In addition to giving advance information about the journey (see [Journey planning](#)) frequent directional arrows and distance markers (in miles or kilometres not walking time) should be placed along trails. Signs should be placed at decision points where a choice of routes is available and repeated along longer routes to show people are heading the right way.
- **Gradients:** Supply information on any steep or uneven gradients and offer alternative routes if possible.
- **Temporary signage:** Temporary signs could be used when organising a one-off event. Ensure you follow the same guidelines as permanent signage and use inclusive formats and size, including symbols and arrows, when required.
- **Font size, tactile, background:** For the majority of people BLOCK CAPITALS are harder to read, especially for people with dyslexia or visual impairments as there is no shape to the word. Start a sentence with an uppercase letter and then use lowercase. Use plain text such as Arial or Calibri.
- **Colour and shape:** Colour can be a useful aid in helping people remember their way. Utilise colour and shape for directional cues, combining them to aid navigation. Some people are unable to accurately tell the difference between some colours, but by combining colour and shape you can still provide directional cues for everyone.
- **Colour contrast:** Use of icons to support different communication needs. Ensure consistency of their design..
- **Sign height:** Ensure signs are positioned at an appropriate height for visibility and readability for both pedestrians and wheelchair users.

For more information on inclusive signage, see [AISF part E](#).



In addition to considering formal signage, waymarkers such as posts with colour coding are common features in walking trails. These are often damaged or removed over time or become faded, so they need routine inspection and replacement. Metal discs often prove more robust on rural areas, rather than just painted markings, and can be more reliable.

Where there is no map display board readily available, consider adding some matt laminated simple maps at key decision points, with 'you are here' markers.



Technology

Technology is increasingly being used for wayfinding and orientation, from online compass apps, to locational tags such as What3Words – these applications are really helpful to aid independence and as a safeguarding measure on rural walks where getting lost is a possibility. QR codes can also be easily added along trails to provide more information about a location, whether it's details on geographical features, elevation, or even safety warnings, like areas that are prone to flooding.

Creating an app group can be a great way for users to share updates about a trail or route, like notifying others about a fallen tree or a blocked entrance. It helps keep everyone informed about any changes or issues that might affect their experience

Play, spectating and rest areas



This section offers ideas to improve disabled people's experiences as spectators and in outside rest areas with family or friends. It also aims to ensure disabled children have the opportunity to be active in play areas.

Play areas

All children love to play. It is a key element of learning and developing physical and cognitive skills. If you have areas where it is safe for children to play away from vehicles, it is easy to add a variety of features for them to explore. This does not need to be a formal enclosed area with accessible play equipment, although these are recommended and welcomed wherever possible. It could be the introduction of a few paving slabs suitable for hopscotch, some stepping stones, a large log/fallen tree, a grassed slope, and/or sensory planting for imaginative play and exploration. Paving slabs made from recycled rubber make a safe alternative within formal play areas which should be step free with a variety of reach heights for interacting with nature.

See [AISF part B 5.11](#).

Sense's Sensory Walks document provides great advice on using your senses to connect with your surroundings whilst being active. Read more on accessible play facilities in [AISF part B 7](#) and [resources at PiPa Play](#).



Credit: Sport England



Credit: RNIB

Viewing areas

Some disabled people may find spectator or viewing areas difficult. Sight lines are often designed around average eye level and not someone who may, for example, sit very low in a wheelchair. Ensure viewing areas, including sports stands, nature hides, or observation points, have clear sight lines for both seated and standing users.

Here is how you can improve accessibility:

- **Removable seating:** When thinking about inclusive seating, removable seating from tiered banks of spectator areas can help to accommodate wheelchair users.
- **Provide the best view:** Where is the best view of the court, field or activity? For example, is there a higher bank that can be reached to provide good sight lines from a wheelchair, and can wheelchair access be made possible?
- **Raised seat heights:** Can anything be provided to raise the seat height? For example a firm cushion or a raised platform with ramps at one or both ends?
- **Spectator area:** Can seating be provided close to the activity for people who cannot stand for long? Could spectators be encouraged to bring their own seating? Is there an area with a firmer surface where this is possible without sinking into the ground when the ground is wet?
- **Offer inclusive commentary:** Provide verbal descriptions for those unable to see the activity.
- **Inclusive display:** Can you project information onto a TV or digital display? Use large numerals or boards to show scores for individuals with hearing loss.
- **Floodlights:** Use on external activity areas. They will enable everyone to play beyond daylight hours and will particularly benefit older people and people with visual impairments.

See [AISF part B 5.6](#) for stepped seating dimensions.



External seating and shelter

Disabled people may require rest points on a route, whilst spectating or pausing between taking part in activities. Provide seating along routes and at events for both rest and spectating. Consider:

- **Versatile seating:** Use existing landscape features. For example, low walling around flower beds can make useful ad-hoc seats, and features such as boulders or steps. Ensure surfaces are not too high or low, but be mindful that higher ledges such as walls or railings can offer an opportunity to lean or perch against.
- **Provide seating:** Provide chairs or benches with arm and back support for greater comfort, especially for people who cannot stand for long periods or sit on the ground.
- **Personal seating:** Encourage people to bring personal seating if practical to do so. Sturdy but lightweight, foldable chairs with arm and back support are ideal.

Top tip! Inform people in advance about seating options, specifying whether seats are covered or uncovered. This is especially important for those who need rest and cannot sit on the ground, and it helps everyone prepare for varying weather conditions or seasons.

For design of external seating, see [AISF part B 5.7.1](#).

Terraces and decking

If you have external areas with timber decking, these can become very slippery in wet weather particularly from algae growth and will need regular treatment to prevent this. The use of rubber matting on top of decking can be a useful temporary solution. See [AISF part B 5.3](#).

Key actions

We have reached the end of this section. Have a look through the list below and

☒ **check the boxes** that apply to your space. Note any areas for improvement.

Green and blue spaces:

Have you provided accessible arrival information about the facilities at your locations for visitors who arrive by walking, wheeling or cycling?

Have you identified all-weather routes with adequate lighting and clearly marked hazards?

External signage:

Is your signage clear, easy to read and understand?

Have you tested routes to ensure they are easy to navigate, and informed visitors of any helpful technology that may support them?

Play, spectating and rest areas:

Have you provided rest points or shelter? These are really useful along walking routes or in any spectating areas to ensure comfort and accessibility.

Are your play areas accessible, inclusive and easy to find?



Credit: Calvert Trust