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HIDDEN BARRIERS TO ACCESSING NATURE

Ensuring Inclusive, Safe, and Meaningful Outdoor Experiences for All

Parent and Carer Alliance CIC

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Introduction

Many nature venues appear open and accessible but still contain hidden barriers.

Disabled visitors and their families often face layers of challenges: safety risks, sensory overwhelm, social judgement, cost, and unpredictability.

True inclusion means going beyond ramps — understanding deep, lived barriers.



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Emergency Exits & Safety

Emergency routes often not usable for disabled visitors.

Lack of step-free evacuation paths.

Families need confidence they can leave quickly and safely.

Safety plans rarely come in accessible formats (visual guides, social stories, easy-read versions).



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Need for Guides & Assisted Access

Many visitors require:

- Human guides
- Orientation support
- Predictable routes
- Sensory-aware guidance

These supports reduce anxiety and make sites safely usable.





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Mobility Support: Land Trains & On-Site Transport

Long walking distances limit access to viewpoints and experiences.

Land trains, accessible buggies, or shuttle vehicles increase inclusion.

Without these, large sections of nature sites remain inaccessible.



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Secure, Safe Play Spaces

Children who do not understand danger or are flight risks require:

- Fenced or enclosed areas
- Soft surfaces
- Clear visibility
- Quiet zones
- Adaptive equipment

Parent carers need to know children are safe.





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Path Width & Physical Accessibility

Narrow, uneven, or muddy paths restrict wheelchair or pushchair use.

Wide, stable, well-maintained routes support:

- Wheelchair users
- Carers managing equipment
- Multiple children

Changing Places toilets are essential for longer visits.





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Sensory & Cognitive Accessibility

Activities often assume verbal ability, long attention spans, or strong fine motor skills.

Sensory overload is common in natural settings with noise, smells, or crowds.

Sensory alternatives and calm spaces are rarely provided.



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Need for Social Stories

Social stories help visitors understand:

What the site looks like

What will happen

What to expect

How safety and transitions work



These are vital for autistic visitors and reduce anxiety.



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Need for Social Stories

Birdland Park and Gardens Social Stories...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xG72iSurWSo>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57d-1Ju2i04>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xWVsbVDgzaA>





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Transport Barriers

Many nature sites are outside city centres.

Transport can be:

- Infrequent
- Inaccessible
- Expensive



Families of disabled children often cannot rely on buses or trains and must pay for taxis.



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Cost & Early Departure

Families may need to leave quickly due to overwhelm or medical issues.

Full-price tickets become a financial risk.

Helpful policies include:

Carer tickets

Flexible timed entry

“Try-out” sessions

Refunds or open return visits

Partnerships with disability organisations





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Activities Not Suitable for Disabled Young People

Activities often require abilities not shared by all children.

Few activities are:

Sensory

Adaptable

Predictable

Adding tactile, sound-based, and calm sensory experiences improves inclusion.





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Autism, Dysregulation & Safety

Dysregulation can be sudden and unpredictable for autistic young people.

Triggers include:

- Sensory overload
- Unexpected changes
- Demands that exceed capacity
- Crowds or noise



During dysregulation, children may:

- Bolt/run
- Freeze
- Melt down
- Become unable to communicate



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Many nature venues lack:

- Ways to summon help
- Staff trained in autism distress
- Safe de-escalation areas
- Clear emergency protocols

Families often avoid visiting because they cannot guarantee safety





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Caring for Parent Carers

Parent carers are often exhausted and emotionally stretched.

Nature can provide a break but only if the environment feels safe.

A simple gesture — such as a free cup of tea or coffee — shows care and appreciation.

This small kindness significantly improves their experience.



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Care Builds Trust

Families return to venues that treat them with understanding and compassion.

Many only visit a small number of trusted venues.

Consistent care builds loyalty and long-term engagement.



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The Purple Pound

The Purple Pound = the spending power of disabled people and their families.

Estimated over £274 billion per year in the UK.

Breaking down barriers increases:

Visitor numbers

Time on-site

Spending in cafés and shops

Memberships

Word-of-mouth recommendations



Inclusion benefits families and the venue's sustainability.



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Survey of 105 Families

Question: “What makes it difficult for you and your family to access an outdoor venue in nature?”

Results:

- 18% – Safety concerns (water, terrain, flight-risk)
- 17% – Health or fatigue factors
- 14% – Social barriers (stares and judgement)
- 12% – Unfamiliar location causing dysregulation
- 10% – Sensory challenges
- 9% – Cost
- 8% – Transport difficulties
- 2% – Eating unsafe items (PICA)



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Survey Reflections

Over 70% of barriers are sensory, emotional, social, or safety-based—not solved by ramps alone.

Families want to enjoy nature but feel unsafe, judged, or overwhelmed.

Transport and cost remain major practical blockers.

Families seek trusted, understanding venues where they feel valued.

Care, training, and thoughtful design reduce most barriers significantly.



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Recommendations

Clear, step-free emergency routes

Land trains / mobility shuttles

Secure play areas

Wide, maintained pathways

Changing Places toilets

Sensory maps & social stories

Sensory-friendly activities

Flexible ticket options

Staff trained in disability awareness

Visible care for parent carers





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Invitation to Collaborate

Parent and Carer Alliance CIC can support by providing:

- Accessibility audits
- Sensory-friendly planning
- Autism & SEND training
- Policy advice
- Partnership development
- Social story creation

We invite nature venues to work with us to create spaces that truly include every family.



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 **Thank You**

Thank you for your commitment to improving access to nature.
Your efforts genuinely matter to the families we support.

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Sessional Worker – Elise Fullard



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