



ricability

Fit to Equip?

**Final year report
prepared for the
Department of Health**

Summary

**Assist UK
Ricability**

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Introduction

Fit to Equip? was a three year project carried out jointly by Ricability and Assist UK with funding from the Department of Health Third Sector Investment Programme. This is the final report of the project and summarises the findings from the three years' work. It follows and replaces interim reports written and published in the previous two years.

Aims of the project

The main aim of the project was to improve the standard of retail services for Assistive Technology (AT) equipment in order to help ensure that disabled people end up with the right equipment and at a reasonable cost. To do this the project was designed to provide information on the current standard of retail services, based on inspections by disabled people and to monitor how this changed over the three year period. The project was designed to have several practical outcomes and long term benefits:

- guidelines for AT retailers
- a system of evaluation and quality assurance, which has disabled consumers at its heart
- a national network of trained disabled inspectors
- a practical template that can be used by local authorities and others who need to accredit retailers

To achieve these outcomes the project had five main components:

- The development of new standards for retailers of AT equipment, based on disabled consumers' aspirations and experience of using existing retail outlets.
- Anonymous, realistic inspections by disabled people to provide evidence on how far retailers meet these standards in practice.
- Work with individual retailers to improve local standards. This was to be carried out by Disabled Living Centres (DLCs) using inspection reports and their own experience.
- The publication of information annually to give an overall picture of national retailer standards.

- The publication of a consumer checklist guide to help the AT consumer to choose the most appropriate retailer.

Participating organisations

Assist UK

Assist UK led the project and provided organisational and administrative support. It was responsible for the overall direction of the project, recruitment of and liaison with participating DLCs. Assist UK was responsible for training courses for retailers and for higher level training and further outreach on retail standards.

Ricability

Ricability was responsible for the research: focus groups, development of standards, recruitment of additional inspectors, training of inspectors, design of questionnaires, organisation of fieldwork, results analysis, report writing and publicity.

Disabled Living Centres (DLCs)

DLCs worked under the direction of Assist UK to provide a level of practical input throughout the course of the project. Their main tasks were to

- identify potential mystery shoppers
- be involved in the development of national standards for retailers
- build a relationship with local retailers and provide local intelligence of how they work
- act as a focal point for the project locally
- contribute to national reports
- work with local retailers to help them meet the needs and expectations of disabled people based on the results of the inspections.

During the project, inspections were based around the catchment areas of a number of DLCs:

- Bristol
- Dunstable
- East Sussex
- Hillingdon
- Newcastle-upon-Tyne

- Nottingham
- Bexley
- Doncaster
- Manchester

In addition, disability groups that expressed an interest and assisted with identifying people as mystery shoppers in the project were based in:

- Croydon
- Coventry
- Lancaster

Method

Setting standards

In the first year of the project, 5 focus groups were held with expert disabled people, occupational therapists and DLC staff to discuss what disabled consumers could expect from retailers of AT equipment.

The focus group discussions were based on areas already covered by the British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA) www.bhta.net and the Community Equipment Dispenser (CED) www.cedonline.org.uk accreditation schemes. However, the groups looked in detail at the process of an older/disabled person buying equipment from a local retailer, the barriers people face, the retail situation as it is now and ways in which standards and services may be improved (Annex B: Development of Standards available as a separate document)

A detailed checklist was drawn up with targets for a wide range of criteria considered as being important for consumers, including: access, staff training, information, customer care and after sales service. We compared these targets with the BHTA Code of Practice, Community Equipment Dispenser standards and developed suggested criteria for Gold, Silver or Bronze levels of retail standards. The checklist provides a comprehensive view of consumer standards. (Annex A: Consumer Retail Standards available separately).

The Consumer Retail Standards checklist was then used as a benchmark for the evaluation of retailers providing the basis for the questions in a detailed inspection questionnaire (Annex C: Mystery Shopping Questionnaire available separately).

Mystery Shopping Inspectors

A panel of 86 inspectors was recruited through Disabled Living Centres, interviewed and selected. Inspectors had a wide range of physical and cognitive impairments and of ages. During every training session, it was clear that many of the disabled people had a great deal of knowledge and experience of shopping for assistive technology

products. This local practical knowledge was used as a basis in selecting retailers to inspect and appropriate products.

Mystery Shopping Inspections

For each inspection, the mystery shopper assessed the retailer/shops and completed a detailed questionnaire (Annex C: Mystery Shopping Questionnaire) reporting on the following aspects:

- Access inside and outside: car parking, impression of the shop, public transport availability
- Stock and display: type of equipment sold, assessment, product information, demonstration, delivery and fitting, price, insurance, advice on funding, guarantees, complaints procedures, returns.
- Staff: disability awareness, greeting and welcome, product knowledge, was the older/disabled customer regarded as the main shopper or was their pa/carer

The mystery shoppers asked about larger items of equipment – beds, mobility equipment, chairs or bathroom adaptations – so that their conversations with staff in the shop took over 15 minutes. Many mystery shoppers were already knowledgeable about the specific products for which they enquired. However, they were asked specifically to pose ‘as an uninformed consumer’ to see if shop staff volunteered relevant information or advice. A small number of shops (26) were inspected a second time in the final year of the research project.

In total over the three years, 217 inspections of 105 retailers by the mystery shopping panel were completed.

Key Findings

The key findings related to the aspects inspected are presented below:

Access and retail environment

- A third of shops couldn't be reached by public transport.
- Where shops were in main shopping areas four fifths were served by bus routes.
- For many disabled people the only practical way of reaching a shop was to use a car.
- Parking was not practical at one in five of the shops visited.
- Half of the shops were in main shopping areas
- Of the larger shops, just under four fifths were located away from main shopping areas.

The shops often didn't present themselves well:

- In a fifth of cases it was not obvious from the outside what the shop sold.
- Two fifths of the shops were considered by inspectors unattractive and uninviting.

Since these shops are catering for disabled customers they should be suitably accessible but:

- For 18% of shoppers there was no way of attracting attention for assistance to get into the shop.
- Interior access was rated as difficult in around a third of shops commonly because of the amount of stock in a small shop.
- Nearly half the shops visited did not have seats that could be used by a customer – standing for any period of time can be a significant problem for many customers.
- Only a third of shops had an accessible toilet and there were many comments about poor toilets where there was one.
- The provision of sound amplification systems for the hard of hearing appeared to be very poor.

Greeting and sales staff

AT shops can be intimidating because they are unfamiliar and because the profusion of stock can be overwhelming. Customers may be hesitant because they know little about the equipment. It was reassuring to discover that over four fifths of shops were described by the inspectors as welcoming. Some went further - by offering refreshments, for example.

Sales staff were almost universally polite and helpful. However, in the survey one-in-ten were considered to have poor product knowledge which would not be expected in a specialist shop. This translated into a similar rate of dissatisfaction regarding the overall quality of information the shopper received in their visit. It appeared that some retailers needed to carry out more training and development of staff in this area and the results from the revisits would suggest that this is happening. In these only 1 in 20 people considered staff to have poor product knowledge and the ratings for politeness and helpfulness also improved.

Product range and display

It is obviously important, both to the retailer and customer, that there is a good range of stock available. It is also important that the customer can easily see and access the stock there is.

- Nearly two thirds of the shops visited were considered to have a good range of stock.

- Nearly three fifths were considered to have good stock displays.

Information provided about products

Whilst a majority of shops were considered to have provided good information, unfortunately a minority fell short.

- A third of shops did not ask enough questions to be able to advise their customers properly.
- In nearly a third of cases inspectors judged that inadequate information would have been provided to anyone who did not know enough to ask the right questions.
- In nearly a third the sales person spoken to by the inspector did not know enough about the product – and a third of these ‘just muddled through’ rather than seeking the advice of a colleague or looking up information.

This is obviously of concern given the nature of products sold in AT shops. There were however some positive outcomes:

- The vast majority (95%) of our inspectors were not put under any pressure to buy.
- Similarly there were very few cases (8%) of unrealistic claims being made with regard to products.
- Where products were recommended, our inspectors judged that in four fifths of cases they were suitable for them.
- 71% (improving to 78% on revisits) considered that the information given to them was good or excellent.

Scenarios involving asking for unsuitable products or being very vague were used to further test some shops. Generally the retailers acted responsibly, however there were exceptions. A fifth of retailers tested in this way, would have sold equipment that was unsuitable if the customer asked for it. A quarter failed to provide necessary information when customers appeared to be vague or uncertain. Significantly, half of shops failed to mention assessments when faced with a situation when one would have been advisable.

Demonstrations

It can be very important that the customer has the opportunity to have a demonstration of a product - to see if it suits them. Where this was applicable:

- Two fifths of shops could not or would not demonstrate the product
- Where a demonstration was given the majority (four fifths) were considered good or excellent.

Delivery and installation

Products would either be delivered by the retailer or by the manufacturer where necessary. In 6/10 of cases, delivery was said to be free. Retailers offered to fit products that needed to be installed mostly at no charge.

Returning products

Only about half of the retailers visited explained the circumstances in which products could be returned and half of the inspectors felt they would be treated sympathetically if they returned a product. It is important that retailers give details of the circumstances in which this is possible, particularly if the product turns out to be less suitable than expected. A handful of retailers gave the inspectors the distinct impression that it would be difficult to exchange or get a refund on a product once it had been supplied.

Prices and finance

Price information was often not clear and in a number of cases inspectors were just given the price verbally. It was often not clear what the price included – for example whether it covered delivery and fitting or whether VAT was payable. Prices need to be displayed clearly on all products and retailers need to be more open in explaining what is included in the amount quoted.

Advice on funding

Advice on sources of funding or help with equipment was rarely volunteered. When asked directly, most retailers provided information that was vague and cursory. The most frequent responses were mentions of DLCs (we assume for information); otherwise local authorities, state benefits and local and national charities were variously referred to as were credit arrangements available from the retailer. This was a disappointing response to an important question.

Guarantees

Information provided relating to guarantees on products was poor:

- Just under half of retailers did not give any information about guarantees.
- Half of those that did talked about coverage for parts and labour and slightly less said how long the coverage was for.
- A fifth of shops mentioned extended guarantees or maintenance contracts.

Conclusions

Over the three years, it is pleasing to report that feedback has consistently shown that the service provided by AT retailers is generally good. In general customers can expect:

- a warm and friendly welcome
- friendly, polite staff who are reasonably knowledgeable
- to be treated with respect and as an individual.

However, in most shops providing information was an area of concern because:

- Getting enough information to make an informed choice is often a matter of customers being persistent with questions.
- Staff as a whole do not volunteer enough information and generally overestimate the level of knowledge the average customer has.
- The onus usually rests on the customer to ask sufficient questions, something they can only do if they already have an understanding of the subject.

The retail environment often falls short of high street standards.

- 2 fifths of shops appear shabby, run down and unappealing to the visitor
- Shops can be difficult to get to by public transport and some lack the basic accessibility features expected of an industry that caters for disabled people.
- Shops can be cluttered and it can be difficult to move around in them or see the stock clearly.
- Accessible toilets are rare and often in poor condition.
- There was little evidence of high pressure sales tactics – a few instances of poor or indifferent service – but no retailers putting people under pressure to buy.
- The Office of Fair Trading has already highlighted pressure selling from doorstep salespeople in its [Doorstep Selling Campaign](#)

The high-level aims of the project proved to be over ambitious when confronted with the practical real-life challenges of recruiting, managing and training disabled inspectors to carry out mystery shopping inspections. Specifically, we have been unable to complete the following aims:

- A best buy guide with national retail standards. This is a sizeable undertaking requiring extensive (online) user feedback reviews, further extensive promotion at all levels – from consumers, retailers, trade bodies, occupational therapists, local DLCs, health trusts and other healthcare bodies – now clearly beyond the scope of the Fit to Equip project.
- Annual publication of standards. This would give an overall picture of national retailer standards to provide a benchmark for the industry and an indication of

how standards changed but again proved over ambitious. In reality, an inspection visit to a retailer once or twice could provide only a 'snapshot' – not enough to provide objective annual benchmarking or rating.

- Detailed work with and training of individual retailers to improve local standards also proved unfeasible due to lack of resources at the local DLCs.

However, the Fit to Equip project has been successful in providing:

- practical guidelines for retailers (online)
- a system of evaluation and quality assurance which has disabled consumers at its heart (Annex A: Consumer Retail Standards)
- a network of trained disabled inspectors (86 trained disabled mystery shoppers)
- a practical template that can be used by local authorities and others who need to accredit retailers who provide equipment by prescription (Annex C: Mystery Shopping Questionnaire)
- a snapshot of consumer feedback for the AT industry to act upon to continue to clarify and improve its standards (this document and Full Report)

Discussion

Assist UK and Ricability hope that Fit to Equip will add constructively to the on-going debate about retail standards in the AT sector and prompt an improvement in standards - particularly around the way in which information is provided to older and disabled customers.

The consumer

The consumer is not just buying an ordinary consumer product; these products are termed 'assistive technology' products for a reason. They require that the retailer takes responsibility for providing good information and ensuring that customers get the right product to meet their particular needs. Older and/or disabled consumers or carers are also spending a substantial amount of money on high cost AT products – the right choice is essential.

It is clear that some consumers are not being served well – and are not getting the right information to make an informed choice. For consumers who are unfamiliar with the products available, or don't know how they are used, it can be difficult to ask the right questions to get the good information or advice required to make a correct purchase.

'A lot of people come into these shops not knowing much about the product so the retailer really needs to explore how they are going to be used and check that it is fit for purpose and that it fits their living conditions. Ethical shops will refuse to sell something that is not fit for purpose.'

Occupational Therapist

Standards

Standards that exist in the AT sector include:

British Healthcare Trades Association (BHTA) Code of Practice

The BHTA has been granted full OFT approval under the Consumer Codes Approval Scheme (CCAS). Only BHTA retailers can display the two logos together. BHTA is the first trade body within the health industry to have an OFT approved code. The OFT only approves codes that have proved effective in safeguarding and promoting the interests of consumers beyond the basic requirements of the law and are monitored regularly. In addition, BHTA has launched an initiative for people working in the assistive technologies sector - the ATP Society which aims to recognise and raise standards giving members of the public by training AT staff to the level of a Registered Practitioner www.atpsociety.org

Community Equipment Dispenser (CED) Approval

Launched in 2008 as the first National Accreditation Scheme for the Retail sector, the BHTA and the National Association Equipment Providers (NAEP) established the Community Equipment Dispenser Accreditation Body (CEDAB). This Body is responsible for registering the premises of retailers who wish to dispense prescriptions and are in compliance of the registration criteria of CED for the supply on behalf of statutory authorities of community equipment under the Transforming Community Equipment Services (TCES) programme. Registered retailers are required to ensure that staff that dispense prescriptions are competent and accredited in compliance with the criteria of the CED Accreditation Scheme.

The CED Accreditation Scheme was initially developed in conjunction with the Department of Health to support the TCES Programme and to ensure that all Retailers and their staff were compliant to standards to ensure a level of best practice and competency as equipment 'Providers'. However, since the inception of the CED Accreditation Scheme, both NAEP and BHTA have always viewed this accreditation scheme as a national scheme open to all Retailers who wish to be recognised as providers of equipment who meet specific & defined standards to the assistive technology product sector. The CED Accreditation Scheme operated by a partnership between NAEP & the BHTA is a not for profit organisation.

Community Equipment Code of Practice Scheme (CECOPS)

CECOPS is a not-for-profit community interest company responsible for administering the recently written Code of Practice for Community Equipment.

The Code of Practice sets out standards, guidelines and best practice for each stage of the community equipment process and applies to all areas where community equipment is commissioned and provided by public, private and third sector

organisations. It comprehensively covers all commissioner, provider and clinical and professional responsibilities, including the legal framework in which services are provided. It is primarily aimed at services in England, but also applies to other parts of the UK, and beyond.

Under the Code of Practice Scheme, organisations register as working to the Code, and have access to approved training. They can also opt to become Accredited against the Code of Practice. Although CECOPS is a voluntary scheme, it is officially recognised and supported by the Care Quality Commission (CQC). CQC has stated that it will be looking for adherence to the Code of Practice to assist it in making its judgements about the compliance of service providers against its '*Essential Standards of quality and safety.*'

Staff training

Within any standard or code of practice, the role of staff in providing information advice is a vital component and training is therefore essential.

Trusted Assessor Training

This training provides training for staff in assessment skills, use and fitting of basic daily living equipment chairs, beds, rails, toilets, household items and bathing. The Assist UK programme includes product evaluation, demonstration skills and also explores person-centred practice. It is based on the *Trusted Assessor Competence Framework*.

The training aims to provide the customer with a professional service and ensure a good competent level of service. However, a trusted assessor needs to visit a person's home to carry out a full assessment, something not possible in a visit to a retail shop. Training programmes vary from 20 hours to 80 hours many of which are accredited by the Open College Network (OCN).

Trusted product advisors

Staff who have been trained in the safe use and fitting and demonstration of particular products and understand when to refer to others.

However, no amount of training will help if a product is not actually demonstrated and used in practice in the shop when staff talk to their customers. The real test is also whether the shop would refer to another retailer or the local disabled living centre (DLC), if they themselves were unable to supply the appropriate product for a customer.

Consumer Awareness

With the move towards individual budgets and the provision of equipment by prescriptions, AT retailers are becoming increasingly important as a source of information about products.

However, for the consumer, there is confusion about the different accreditation schemes that exist. The question remains as whether the retailers fulfil their role in adequately meeting the standards set by the accreditation and actually how well trained the staff are and actually how this works in practice when someone visits an AT retailer.

What next? Areas for future research:

- There is a need to continue to monitor overall AT shop performance. This project was limited to work in England. There is a need to include Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland in future mystery shop inspections.
- The AT retail environment is changing with an increasing number of chains involved, an increase in the number of chemists shops selling AT equipment and now retail partnerships work with DLCs. Questions arise as to what impact these changes are having on the service provided to consumers. Future monitoring should include chemists.
- Online information: with more consumers buying AT products online, there is an urgent need to evaluate online retail performance. The importance of getting advice, information and assessments, where necessary, and the opportunity to try products is as relevant to consumers as it is when shopping at a retail outlet, yet it is known to be limited. Further research work on the consequences of AT online retail for consumers should be a priority.

Further information

If you have any queries relating to the Fit to Equip research project or would like to find out more about the Mystery Shopping Panel contact either Chris Lofthouse at Ricability on 020 7427 2460 or Alan Norton, Assist UK on 0161 832 9757.

This Fit to Equip summary report is available at Assist UK/Ricability websites with the following additional documents:

Annex A: Consumer Retail Standards

Annex B: Development of Standards

Annex C: Mystery Shopping Questionnaire

Annex D: Mystery Shopping Locations

Annex E: Retailer Feedback: Sample Letter and Report

Assist UK www.assist-uk.org

Ricability www.ricability.org.uk

Useful Links

- Assistive Technology Practitioner Society: training AT staff to the level of a Registered Practitioner www.atpsociety.org
- BHTA Code of Practice www.bhta.net/bhta-code-of-practice.aspx
- Community Equipment Dispenser (CED) Approval www.cedonline.org.uk
- Community Equipment Code of Practice Scheme (CECOPS) www.cecops.org.uk
- National Association Equipment Providers (NAEP) www.naep.org.uk
- Office of Fair Trading Doorstep Selling Campaign
www.offt.gov.uk/OFTwork/consumer-protection/campaign11-12/doorstep/
- Office of Fair Trading Mobility Aids Market study: on wheelchairs, scooters, stair lifts, bath aids, hoists, adjustable beds and specialist seating
www.offt.gov.uk/OFTwork/markets-work/mobility-aids/
- Trusted Assessor Training:
www.assist-uk.org
www.dlf.org.uk/content/trusted-assessor-training
www.disabledliving.co.uk/Training/Events---Courses/Trusted-Assessor