

# Case studies

**Profit through Access**

**Sonja Gregory**

Owner

**The Hytte, Bingfield, Northumberland**

Silver winner of the Tourism for All Award at the  
2007 North East England Tourism Awards





Sonja Gregory and her husband Simon, opened The Hytte, (pronounced hut) in April 2006. The four-bedroom, self-catering accommodation is built in the style of a traditional timber Norwegian mountain lodge with a grass roof.

**The Hytte's target market includes family groups, walkers and cyclists, holidaymakers with eco concerns and in particular elderly visitors and families or groups with members who have disabilities or are wheelchair users.**

Sonja and Simon have made sure that The Hytte's 5-star self-catering accommodation and its grounds are all fully accessible. As a result they have been awarded Access Exceptional under the National Accessible Scheme. They are also graded Level 1 for visually impaired guests and for guests with hearing impairment.

**Why did you decide to make The Hytte fully accessible?**

We were aware of the pending obligation under the DDA to be more accessible. Also, when I researched the market, I was amazed that I couldn't find any accessible

accommodation listed in the North East brochures I looked at. It was the same when I asked at my local Tourist Information Centre. We were therefore determined to make sure The Hytte was accessible and we felt if we were going to do it, then we wanted to do it properly. Accessibility was a key part of our planning from the start.

**Where did you go for advice on being accessible?**

Initially I contacted the regional tourist board and One NorthEast for advice. I then attended a Welcome Host course, which I found to be a really good introduction. I joined the National Accessible Scheme (NAS), which I saw as a recognised tool to pass on information on accessibility to guests.

## **Would you advise others to join the NAS. Is it expensive?**

Yes I would certainly advise everyone to join. You are given the book containing all the criteria and although this can appear rather daunting at first, there is advice available from VisitBritain who run the Scheme. You can then look through and decide which level is practical for your business. Just as you would for the Quality Scheme.

We found the NAS criteria particularly useful when planning The Hytte. If you're building somewhere from scratch then making it accessible should be no more expensive. For example, we put standard shower fittings in the shower and wet room. The only extra expense was £10 for an extended rod for the shower so it can be higher or lower. We also put in a standard kitchen and just lowered one of the units so it was accessible for a wheelchair user. When an existing business comes to replace an old kitchen, they can easily take accessibility into account when planning the new one and it should cost them no more.

## **What has being accessible meant for you as a business?**

Our occupancy levels for this year have been 92.5%. Last year they were 85%. I would say that 65-75% of the groups who have stayed with us have had someone with a disability. One group stayed with us recently with four wheelchair users. I do believe that being accessible

is a key reason for us achieving an increased, high occupancy level in such a short time.

## **What do you think makes The Hytte so special?**

I think it's because it is suitable for everyone, with that bit extra. Quality plays an important part in the experience we try to offer our visitors. We have a 5-star rating. There is no need to lose quality to be accessible. There's no conflict. For example, I only have small rugs in one of the bedrooms so that wheelchair users can push them under the beds out of the way. When I explained this to the assessor, he agreed that shouldn't stop me achieving a high quality grading.

## **How do you reach your potential markets and make sure your information is accessible to all?**

We advertise on specialist websites such as Good Access Guide, Disabled Child etc. We have our own website, which is now fully accessible. The web is very important for this market and I would say the majority of our bookings come from the internet.

All our brochures are in large print. Several elderly visitors, who are very much part of our market, have said that they particularly liked our leaflet because they didn't need to put their glasses on to read it! I think the larger print encourages everybody to pick up the brochure and read about us.

We don't provide a Braille version of our brochure as it wouldn't be cost effective for a business of our size, especially as our website is fully accessible. Potential visitors with any visual impairment are able to listen to the web content.

Word of mouth has also been very good for us. And we do get repeat bookings. Three lots of guests have each stayed twice in the last seventeen months and one set have stayed three times.

### **What key information on accessibility do you think guests need when making a decision?**

We provide full information about our accessibility and all our facilities. The access page on our website has a full floor plan. Our Access Statement provides complete information with descriptions of all the rooms plus door widths, height of beds, turning space, outdoor access, etc.

We promote the fact that we are in the NAS and have Level 3 Access Exceptional. One guest making a booking said she thought the place sounded fantastic just from the information given on the website.

### **How do you know you are getting things right for your guests?**

We have feedback forms. Our occupancy levels have increased and several guests have immediately talked about rebooking for next year. One lady, looking after a party of children with physical and learning disabilities, was moved to tears when

I recently showed her round. She said it was so nice compared to some of the places they had been forced to stay in before.

We also listen to guests' feedback and requests and are still learning from experience. For example, one lady asked about a commode, which we didn't have. We've now bought one because if one guest would find it useful then others will. Another guest mentioned that he found the shower seat hard when using it. I now provide an inflatable cushion.

### **What advice would you give to businesses wanting to be more accessible?**

Join the NAS. Attend a Welcome Host course and generally become more aware and interested in how accessible other places are (or aren't).

