

AINA CASE STUDY

FAIRER STRONGER AND MORE ACTIVE COMMUNITIES

Gloucestershire Disabled Afloat Riverboats Trust: “Better than the QE2”



Week long cruises manned by volunteers are popular with disabled people and their carers

The Gloucestershire Disabled Afloat Riverboats Trust has pioneered a new approach to make inland waterways accessible to people with disabilities. The Trust, established as a charity in 1990, spent its first two years building a wide beam riverboat with full facilities for wheelchair access. This was mainly used by groups for residential holiday and educational trips, with two weeks reserved for annual trips which allowed people to book as individuals.

Twelve years later, dry rot was discovered in the boat's interior woodwork, and because a refit would have been expensive the trustees looked at alternative ways of delivering and expanding their services. A decision was taken to sell the hull in order to concentrate on trips for individuals using craft hired from other community boat organisations. Their offer is now aimed at all sectors of the community, and their only formal rule is that each trip or holiday must include at least one disabled person.

The subsequent scheme exceeded expectations. Passenger numbers have grown substantially from around 200 to more than 600, and as many as 98% of available places were taken. Growth has been achieved by marketing to registered homes and domiciliary care agencies, introducing novel risk assessment procedures and forming partnerships with organisations working with carers. An 'access fund' allows the trustees to further reduce barriers to use, e.g., supporting work with young carers and work experience students from a further education college for disabled students in Cheltenham.

The transfer from boat operator to service provider has enabled the Trust to become less dependent upon fund raising, and work is now more focussed on the needs of people with disabilities and carers. Great efforts are being made to identify needs, such as short breaks for carers, and a marketing strategy helps promote further growth.

Volunteers typically donate several days of their time each year to help aboard, including crewing and catering work, and raise funds to defray running costs. Boat trips are now arranged around the country, with residential 3, 4 and 7 day cruises on the Kennet and Avon, Llangollen and Grand Union Canals. “Better than the QE2” was an unsolicited testimonial received from a participant in 2009!