

**Chief Executive
Ian Thomas**



Kingston Town Centre Retailers

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Sent via email

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Dear Valued Retailer,

We trust you are well and are beginning to see increased footfall and spending within Kingston town centre.

On Sunday 5th September 2021 we held our first ever Disability Awareness Day in the Market Square. To remain Covid-19 safe it was deliberately arranged as a relatively small, low key event organised by those with disabilities, supported by the groups that they attend.

We are writing to you, recognising the special position you have, being in the centre of Kingston. Would you be interested in participating in similar exercises to the ones listed below? We would be able to tailor to reflect the experience in the immediate neighbourhood of your shop. At the end of the exercise we would ask KCIL (Kingston Centre for Independent Living) to debrief you and to give any practical advice you might wish to acquire. If interested, please contact Cllr Christine Stuart at christine.stuart@kingston.gov.uk

Some examples are listed below;

In preparation for the Disability Awareness Day our CEO, Ian Thomas, went around the town centre using a manually self - propelled wheelchair and he was able to experience, first hand, the town centre from the viewpoint of a wheelchair user. These are some of his thoughts following that experience.....

“an invaluable experiential learning opportunity. I was heartened by the courtesy extended to me by the good people of Kingston but dismayed by the inaccessibility for wheelchair users and urge all traders to review their entrances and exits so that all places are welcome to all.”

Councillor Tim Cobbett, deputy leader of the council, wore glasses which distorted vision so that he could begin to appreciate the perspective from someone with a visual impairment. He was accompanied by Councillor Mark Beynon who is a trustee for Kingston Association for the Blind. These are some of Tim's thoughts....

“It was striking how objects that I usually wouldn't think of at all could become a hazard, such as the seating outside of pubs and cafes or signs advertising premises placed outside. Clearly there

are benefits to outdoor hospitality being available and of clear signage, but it needs to be designed with the needs of people with disabilities in mind.”

“I could see how when even short walks could be a considerable effort for people with a visual impairment, the importance of disabled parking bays near key locations so that our vibrant town centre is accessible to all was clear too.”

On the day itself Councillors Andreas Kirsch and Mark Beynon took up the offer of doing an exercise using the wheelchair. These are their thoughts.....

“It was an eye-opening experience in the wheelchair, realising first hand the obstacles and challenges wheelchair users face every day. Getting in and out of shops is one of the most tricky issues, and unfortunately, some shops are not accessible for a wheelchair user on their own. And the arrangement of aisles, whilst for people walking the aisles is fine, sometimes does not allow a wheelchair user to look over them, restricting their vision and safe passage through a shop.”

“Being in a wheelchair I immediately felt vulnerable. Not only do you have to focus on the path ahead avoiding uneven surfaces and obstacles, you are much more aware of other people in a way that you are not when walking. I was trying to see if people were aware of my presence as it is much harder to make sudden adjustments to your direction of travel in response to people changing direction unexpectedly. I hope that I will be more conscious of wheelchair users in future and behave accordingly to help everyone navigate our public spaces more easily. “

We hope that together we can all make Kingston a stronger and more attractive place for all people to come to, thereby increasing the footfall within our shopping and leisure area.

Your sincerely



Ian Thomas CBE
Chief Executive
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames



Cllr Caroline Kerr
Leader of the Council
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames

Christine Stuart

Cllr Christine Stuart
Disability Champion
Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames