Developing a European Road Map for Accessible Tourism Policy

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Introduction

The focus of this chapter is the development of a “Road Map” for accessible tourism policy, which has been described in a larger study of tourism policies in Europe, conducted in 2006-2007 by the founding partners of the European Network for Accessible Tourism, ENAT1. That study, published in 2008 has been supplemented with some more recent information and analysis for the present paper.

Here, the author argues that there is a pressing need for policy makers in the European Union to adopt and implement a comprehensive “Road Map for accessible tourism”, as tourism services and facilities across the Member States are generally neither adequate nor consistent in terms of their accessibility. The variation in access provisions between countries can be a source of considerable annoyance and inconvenience to many disabled travellers in particular. It can also cause uncertainty and even over-pricing. Inconsistent access provisions or lack of access for some groups of visitors creates distortion in the single European market and it leaves EU citizens and visitors to Europe without suitable protection or guaranteed levels of service.

After years of various initiatives with some degree of progress in this area, a concerted and substantial effort is now needed to improve tourism accessibility. This is more urgent than ever, due to three emerging factors:

Firstly, tourism destinations in Europe are facing increasing global competition in terms of price and quality. Tourism enterprises and organisations, with the support of the public sector, must seek ways to adapt to new market conditions, so as to renew their competitive advantage and gain market share. Improving accessibility can be a way to enhance the overall quality of tourism. Better accessibility can broaden the customer base, opening up destinations and attractions to more visitors; it can contribute to long-term sustainability and enhance the quality of visitors’ experiences. Some tourism providers have already realised the economic benefits of improved access but most have yet to reap the rewards.

Secondly, the demographic ageing of western industrial countries demands appropriate changes in the tourism sector. The European tourism market is changing now and, especially,