

COUNTRYSIDE MOBILITY SOUTH WEST—WHEELYBOAT PROJECT

Introduction

The project is a joint venture between **Living Options Devon** and **The Wheelyboat Trust**. Its aim is to supply and equip three wheelchair accessible Mk III Wheelyboats for disabled people to use at three locations in the South West as part of the **Countryside Mobility South West** project. The venues will be: **Maunsel Lock Canal Centre** on the Bridgewater & Taunton Canal; **Wareham Boat Hire** on the River Frome; **Haven Banks Outdoor Education Centre** in Exeter.

Living Options Devon is a registered charity and user-led organisation set up 25 years ago to ensure that people with physical and sensory disabilities can make an active and equal contribution to society. It is the lead body for **Countryside Mobility South West**, a project set up to improve access to the countryside for disabled people living in or visiting the south west.

The Wheelyboat Trust is a registered charity dedicated to providing disabled people, young and old, with the opportunity and freedom to participate in waterborne activities all over the UK. Our main role is to help and encourage public waters, groups and organisations acquire wheelchair accessible Wheelyboats of various designs for the benefit of their disabled visitors, users and beneficiaries.

We have so far supplied 146 Wheelyboats all over the UK. We are the only charity that can help venues acquire wheelchair-accessible day boats suitable for their needs which is why Living Options Devon has come to us for assistance with this important project.

Countryside Mobility South West

CMSW is part of Natural England's 'Access to Nature' scheme funded by the Big Lottery Fund: it places and helps fund off-road Trampler mobility scooters and wheelchair accessible Wheelyboats at a wide range of visitor attractions in the region. CMSW provides independence and freedom for people with limited mobility and allows them access to new areas of the countryside on their own, in organised groups or with friends and family. The first of the project's planned four Wheelyboats in phase 1 (years 1 & 2 from inception) was launched at Tamar Lakes near Bude in April.

Need for Wheelyboats and their benefits

Whether it's for the scenery or wildlife, sport or recreation, education or rehabilitation, millions of people across the UK are drawn to open water in all its forms. Yet without the provision of accessible boats, disabled people are mainly denied these experiences.

Wheelyboats remove all the barriers to access thus enabling disabled people to participate in waterborne activities alongside and on equal terms with their able-bodied counterparts. For Wheelyboat users, it is an important factor in the quality of life they are able to lead.

Of the four models of Wheelyboat we supply, the Mk III suits the needs of the three venues perfectly. It is a 5.3m long aluminium boat with drop-down bow door for roll-on, roll-off wheelchair access. The deck is level and open throughout. As well as being wheelchair accessible, the Mk III is specially designed and equipped to be 'wheelchair operable' so disabled people can helm the boat themselves. This opens up a whole new area of experience, even for those with the most severe disabilities. The Mk III accommodates up to eight people so will enable groups and families to enjoy trips together in safety and comfort.

Beneficiaries of the project

The principal beneficiaries will be disabled people of all ages, their families, friends and carers living in or visiting Devon, Somerset and Dorset. It will benefit disabled people across the spectrum of mobility impairment: those who are fit, active and independent will love the thrill and excitement of helming the boat, while those who are more dependent will benefit from the large open deck and stable performance. People with

learning difficulties will enjoy expanding their horizons on the water in a boat that provides a safe and comfortable environment for them and their carers.

The venues:

Maunsel Lock Canal Centre is at the heart of the 14½ mile navigation of the Bridgewater & Taunton Canal. Boat trips are currently available on the centre's trip boat 'Maunsel Lady' but there is no disability access on board. The centre comprises booking office and tea shop which are accessible and there is dedicated disabled parking and accessible loos. There is step free access to the tow path and the centre has joined the project for both off road Trampler and Wheelyboat so that disabled people can take full advantage of the canal on or off the water. British Waterways fully support this project and will be working with the venue to ensure access is provided from the tow path on to the Wheelyboat. The Wheelyboat will have a dual role: it will provide organised boat trips as well as being available for self-operated hire. There are several locks on the canal which the Wheelyboat will negotiate perfectly safely. However, a trailer will be used to transport the Wheelyboat more quickly to sections of the canal further afield. (www.maunsellock.co.uk)

Wareham Boat Hire at Abbots Quay on the River Frome in Wareham operates a variety of small hire craft, including rowing boats and kayaks, as well as a larger trip boat. They have operated a Mk I Wheelyboat for the last five years. The Mk I is the original Wheelyboat model and is a considerably less sophisticated craft than the Mk III with a capacity of only four adults. Their boat, however, is well used and demonstrates how important to their visitors an accessible craft is. The Mk III will provide a far better service and will enable larger groups and disabled people who are more dependent on carers to enjoy trips up and down the river. (www.warehamboathire.co.uk)

Haven Banks Outdoor Education Centre is part of Devon Youth Service but is a self-funded educational establishment based on the Quay in Exeter. They operate a wide range of activities and courses for children and adults from windsurfing to power-boating, kayaking to rock climbing, at venues across Devon. The centre currently has no dedicated facilities for disabled people to take part in activities on the water. They are therefore very excited about the Wheelyboat and the big difference it will make. They expect to cater mainly for disabled groups, of children and young people in particular, offering them the thrill, adventure and challenge of boating in the Exeter Canal and the River Exe estuary. (www.haven-banks.co.uk)

Time frame

The aim is to have all three Wheelyboats on the water and operational by spring 2012.

Summary

Living Options Devon, through CMSW, is determined to provide disabled people with the same access to the countryside and to waterborne activities that able-bodied people take for granted. In doing so it has created the support, interest, infrastructure and momentum that is necessary for a successful outcome. The project benefits from a 'critical mass' of Wheelyboats funded and supplied by The Wheelyboat Trust in the region, where they are now located on all of the large inland lakes (where waterborne activities are carried out). This project extends the region's fleet to canal and river venues thus providing their disabled users with a wider variety of opportunities, activities and interest. These three new Wheelyboats will expand the horizons of disabled people across the region providing them with much adventure, enjoyment and independence for many years to come.