



Access and Providing for Disabilities in Churches

This guide is aimed at helping you to make your church more welcoming and accessible to people with disabilities. The term 'disability' covers a wide range of physical and mental impairments. Providing for people with disabilities is not about treating them specially: it is about enabling them to join in with the activities of the rest of the church community *without* having to be treated in a special way.

The Equality Act 2010

The Equality Act came into effect in 2010, replacing the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). Its aim is to ban unfair treatment and discrimination based on age, race, sexuality, gender, disability etc. in the workplace, in the provision of goods, services and facilities and in the management of premises.

It stipulates that all service providers should make 'reasonable adjustments' to their buildings and services so that disabled people can use them. It is a civil law, so fines cannot be levied for non-compliance however legal action can be taken by anyone – including bodies such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission – if discrimination is evident. It is therefore very important that churches engage with the Equality Act and rethink how their buildings are used by others

What is a disability?

In the Act, disability is defined as *"a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities"*. The Act protects anyone who has or has had a disability, or who is associated with a disabled person, or who is mistakenly perceived as being disabled. It includes those with physical mobility or co-ordination difficulties, those with poor strength or dexterity, those with impairments of their memory, learning disabilities, impaired speech, vision or hearing, autism, and those with illness which give rise to a disability or a temporary disability, and those with more hidden disabilities such as epilepsy, diabetes, arthritis or mental health issues, for example. In addition to those directly included in the legislation, churches should be aware that a difficulty in accessing certain facilities or services may also be experienced by people such as heavily pregnant women; those particularly large or small in stature (including children); parents or others in charge of small children; or those emotionally distressed.

How does this affect our church?

Under the Equality Act churches are 'service providers' (in more ways than one!) and therefore all activities that take place in the church and church hall need to be considered in terms of the risk people face when interacting with that environment – either as visitors, members of the congregation or ministers and other leaders. However, we would all agree that regardless of the Equality Act, churches should be aiming to be as inclusive and as wider reaching as possible to those within their community and beyond.

Accessibility can often be improved simply with a few minor alterations e.g. the introduction of ramps inside and out (providing they comply with safety regulations), improving lighting and audio-visual systems, providing large print or braille books, or installing a loop system. Some facilities may be more challenging to adapt – widening doorways for example, or remodeling (or even building new) WCs – but considering such adaptations is very important.

If a person with disabilities finds that it is unreasonably difficult or impossible to use a service or facility, or escape from the building in an emergency, you have a duty to take reasonable steps to remove or alter the obstacle so that it no longer has that effect, or provide an alternative option to avoid it.



It is possible to make churches more accessible to more people through some very simple and inexpensive measures. These could include things like improving Orders of Service and Parish magazines etc (taking into account clear print guidelines – see *Welcome, Inclusion and Respect* produced by Oxford Diocese for further details <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Welcome-Inclusion-Respect-June-2011.pdf> page 14). Providing large print copies of some materials or marking steps/levels in buildings with contrasting paint or tape to improve the visibility of them are other inexpensive and simple examples. Small improvements can make a great deal of difference.

Undertaking Access Audits

Access audits are the best way to assess how people interact with your church building, and what changes may be necessary to improve the service provision. There are professionals out there who can undertake access audits for you; however you may feel that this is something you can undertake together as a PCC to save money, particularly if there are people involved who have relevant experience or knowledge. An Access Audit is simply an appraisal of the building and its surroundings, which aims to help you engage with your building from the perspective of people with disabilities, in order to help you to identify areas which you may be able to improve on.

The outcomes of the audit process should be to develop a long term strategy for responding to these difficulties, and establish a procedure for carrying out any modifications or alterations. This *Access Plan* should be developed in consultation with your church architect; so that he/she can help you draw up a range of options for any necessary improvements, considering the impact on any architecturally significant features at the same time. It is definitely useful to repeat this process every few years, as any changes made to the church may impact either positively or negatively on its use by those with disabilities.

It is also worth including in the Access Plan what is *not* reasonably possible to achieve in the foreseeable future (e.g. for churches with limited funds or difficulties with steps and levels, achieving level access throughout for wheelchair use may be difficult), and possibly identify reasonable alternatives (e.g. clear signage directing people to the nearest church with wheelchair access, for example).

Sample access audits can be found at:

- <http://www.london.anglican.org/kb/provision-for-people-with-disabilities/>
- *Widening the Eye of the Needle: Access to Church Buildings for People with Disabilities*, £16.99 from Church House Publishing (www.chpublishing.co.uk) – this is probably the most comprehensive access audit proforma but please note that it makes no reference to website directions, clear print guidelines, or the inclusion of people with learning disabilities, mental health needs or autism.

It is important to note that these access audits aim to cover many of the areas of your church which may represent a barrier to people's participation in church life, but it is not exhaustive, and also there may be areas mentioned which do not apply to your church. Each church is very different and has a unique blend of challenges. It may be useful to ask church members, particularly those with disabilities, for their views on the provision in the church, and also people in the wider community too (e.g a local nursing home or local groups for people with learning or physical disabilities). Disability is very much about mission and outreach, not just about complying with legislation. The key point to remember is that all facilities, where possible, should be able to be used by all – those with and those without disabilities. The aim is for **independent** access to the building and services it provides.

All churches have access problems in some way, so do not be disheartened by the results of your audit. The aim is to identify how we can improve our welcome and experience for everyone, and it will no doubt be a marathon, rather than a sprint!

Access Audit Top Tips!

- Ask church members with disabilities for their views
- Liaise with groups that specialise in disabilities such as Mencap or the Royal National Institute for Blind People (RNIB) – and other groups such as those listed at the end of this document
- Do the small things first and assess their impact
- Re-take the access audit every few years to assess the success of any modifications made, and identify any gaps



Access and Heritage

Most church buildings are important not just as a place of worship, but as a heritage asset too, and may contain significant architectural features, methods of construction, fittings, art, or furniture. Sometimes changes made to the building can impact on these features, and in cases such as this, the conservation needs will be balanced with accessibility.

There may be cases where the great architectural significance of a church might make the Act difficult to comply with, or the cost of undertaking modifications in a sympathetic way is prohibitive, but as English Heritage surmise:



In most cases access can be improved without compromising the special interest of historic buildings. There are only rare occasions when nothing can be done to improve or facilitate access. By undertaking a careful process or research, brief-taking, consultation and creative exploration of alternatives, good quality solutions that add a new layer of history to our historic buildings are usually possible.

Easy Access to Historic Buildings, English Heritage, 2012

Faculties and other permissions

Most modifications to a church building that impact on the fabric will require **Faculty Consent**, and external works may also require **Planning Permission** too. The DAC are available to talk through the impact of any modifications you are considering with you, and will liaise with Historic England and other special interest groups (such as the Victorian Society and SPAB) on your behalf. Early discussions with the DAC are wholeheartedly encouraged, so that any potential issues can be identified and resolved at an early stage. The contact details for the DAC office can be found at the end of the Guidance Note.

Building Regulations apply to any new building, and to any alterations to existing buildings. Part M is particularly relevant to accessibility, and is complemented by detailed guidance on the kind of disabilities to provide for, and options for modifications. These can be downloaded from the National Planning Portal website at <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/buildingregulations/>

If your church is in a Conservation Area, any works to the exterior of the building or the churchyard may also require **Conservation Area Consent**.

Funding and Grants

There are some grants available that include provision for improved access as part of bigger development projects in churches (go to <http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/funding-and-grants/other-sources-funding> for further details). Even if funds aren't in place for all the desired adaptations, it is useful to have an access plan in place to direct works once funding does become available. This document would demonstrate the PCC's commitment to equal access for all, and shows that you are engaging with the Equality Act, and have a long term plan to improve access for all in your church.

Useful Resources

- *Widening the Eye of the Needle: Access to Church Buildings for People with Disabilities*, £16.99 from Church House Publishing www.chpublishing.co.uk
- *Guidance Note on Accessibility and Disabled People* produced by the Church Buildings Council can be downloaded from http://www.churchcare.co.uk/images/PDF/access_and_disabled_people.pdf
- *Improving your project for disabled people* produced by the Heritage Lottery Fund can be downloaded from http://www.hlf.org.uk/preApril2013/furtherresources/Documents/Thinking_about_Improving_your_project_for_disabled_people.pdf
- *Easy Access to Historic Buildings* produced by English Heritage can be downloaded from <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/easy-access-to-historic-buildings/>
- General advice on the Equality Act 2010 is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/creating-a-fairer-and-more-equal-society>
- General advice on disability issues can be found on the Government's information website at <https://www.gov.uk/browse/disabilities>
- *Church is for everyone!* – a useful Guidance note produced by Exeter Diocese can be downloaded from http://www.exeter.anglican.org/assets/downloads/yourchurch_downloads/Church%20is%20for%20everyone/Church%20is%20for%20everyone%20-%20guidance%20on%20disability.pdf
- *Welcome, Inclusion, Respect: A Commitment to a Church open to all* - a useful Guidance note produced by Oxford Diocese can be downloaded from <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Welcome-Inclusion-Respect-June-2011.pdf>
- *The 'Autism Guidelines'* – a document developed by Oxford Diocese and used nationally http://www.oxford.anglican.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/autism_guidelines.pdf (pages 5-8 in particular)

Useful Contacts

- Centre for Accessible Environments <http://www.cae.org.uk/>
- The Church Buildings Council www.churchcare.co.uk
- Disabled Living Foundation www.dlf.org.uk
- Equality and Human Rights Commission www.equalityhumanrights.com
- Mencap – the voice of learning disability www.mencap.org.uk
- MIND www.mind.org.uk
- RADAR (Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation) www.radar.org.uk
- RNIB (Royal National Institute for Blind People) www.rnib.org.uk
- Through the Roof www.throughtheroof.org
- Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID) <http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/>
- SCOPE www.scope.org.uk
- Prospects <http://www.prospects.org.uk> (a Christian organisation supporting people with learning disabilities)

- Livability <http://www.livability.org.uk> (the largest UK Christian disability charity)

The DAC /Church Buildings Office can be contacted on:

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