

# **London Diocesan Advisory Committee**



## **PROVISION FOR THE DISABLED IN OUR CHURCHES**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- (a) This paper has been prepared to help churches consider how they may make their premises more welcoming and accessible to the disabled.
- (b) The worship, fellowship and ministry of the church cannot be complete if anyone is prevented from participating in it. Everyone must be given access to the church's life.
- (c) The term "disability" covers a wide range of impairments, physical and mental in nature. Although a handicap usually occurs because of the disability, it is caused by the situation rather than by the disability itself. For instance, a person in an electric wheelchair is not "handicapped" in moving about if steps and doors are wide enough.

(d) Disability can be also seen in terms of “life stage” issues. There may need to be greater recognition of the needs of those with children, and the needs of the children themselves.

(e) The final chapter of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 has now come into force. The legislation was phased in over a number of years, to allow all service-providers to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to their buildings so that disabled people can make full use of them. This act is a civil not a criminal law, so fines cannot be levied for non-compliance. However, legal action can be taken if a disabled person can show that he or she has suffered discrimination and makes a claim for compensation.

(f) Parishes need to be able to show that they have carried out an access audit, and thought through the various issues. Decisions made, and the reasons for them, need to be recorded in writing, so it can be shown that the Disability Discrimination Act has been taken seriously. Please see further details in 3(a).

## **2. PRACTICAL QUESTIONS**

(a) For example, if there was a wedding in your church where the bride was a wheelchair user, the groom’s mother blind and a number of guests had severe hearing loss or learning difficulties, would the facilities available meet their needs?

(b) The following questions will guide you:

### **2.1. Entrance Area**

- Does your church have level/ramped access into worship and other areas including any halls?
- Is there an accessible reading/preaching area?
- Is there a separate wheelchair/disabled entrance, or a single entrance giving easy and dignified access for all?
- Are any glazed entrance doors clearly distinguishable from adjacent windows and do they incorporate permanent banding at eye level in another shade?
- Is there any transitional lighting between the bright outside and a dimmer interior? Sudden contrasts in lighting level can be disorientating.
- Is the entrance floor surface non-slip in all weathers?
- Is any entrance mat sunken in a well and close fitting?
- Is there a “parking space” for wheelchairs in main seating area?
- Is there a disabled driver space outside for dropping off and picking up?

- Is there a “ring for assistance” bell?
- Is there a telephone available for those who need to phone for a taxi or someone to collect them?
- Are staff (i.e. churchwardens and parishioners involved in the running of special events) given training relevant to any adjustments that need to be made?

## **2.2. Interior Areas**

- Is there a well defined system of signage and way-finding? Symbols can assist in drawing attention to special facilities and help those with learning difficulties. A building plan can be provided with braille and raised graphics.
- Are the means of escape suitable for independent use by disabled visitors?
- Is there milling around space at the top or bottom of any change in level?
- Are door handles easy to grasp?
- Do stable seat backs aid standing? Do some of the chairs have arms?
- Is the communion rail stable?
- Are sight lines such that the action is visible to everyone?
- Is there a wide access toilet? Every building should have at least one unisex wheelchair accessible toilet. Are paper, towel and soap dispenser within reach whilst not an obstruction?
- Are there handrails by steps and in toilet?
- Is there an induction loop system, fixed microphone, multiple/lapel microphone?
- Is there a minicom for the deaf, which signals from a keyboard to screen & vice versa via a telephone line? A hassicom for the blind, which employs braille but requires a third person to act as intermediary?
- Is the reading/preaching area well lit? Are the lights adequate for lip-reading?
- Are steps and hazards well lit?
- Is there flexible seating for meetings and small groups?
- Are there facilities for reproducing written minutes etc.?
- Are there large print hymn books, song sheets, service books and Bibles?
- Is there knowledge of where braille and moon copies can be obtained and facilities to enlarge printed material?
- Are there facilities to tape minutes of meetings/study notes?
- Is there ability to accept a dog (Guide dog, Hearing dog or Therapy dog)?
- Is there knowledge of who to contact should a visitor be profoundly deaf and requires a qualified sign language communicator, likewise if a deaf-blind visitor needs a qualified deaf-blind communicator?

- Is there adequate space for prams and buggies, and changing areas for babies?
- Is there an avoidance of clutter to fall over?

### **2.3. EXTERIOR AREAS**

- Have paths a firm surface and sufficient width for wheelchairs?
- Are obstacles such as path edges, trees and seats clearly defined?
- Do any trees and bushes overhang? There should be no branches lower than 2.5m.
- Is there contrasting colour on the edges of steps?
- Are the noticeboards well lit with service times in large print.
- Is there space outside which is under cover?

## **3. LEGAL REQUIREMENTS**

### **3.1. Disability Discrimination Act**

(a) Where a physical feature makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to make use of a service, and to be able to use an emergency escape, you have a duty to take reasonable steps to:-

- Remove the feature
- Alter it so that it no longer has that effect
- Provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature
- Provide a reasonable alternative way of making the service available to disabled people.

(b) A recommended approach is to compile an Access Plan, to identify the physical and communication barriers to access, and examine the needs of users. A strategy needs to be outlined, usually with the assistance of the church's Quinquennial Inspector, containing a range of options within a time frame, even although funds may not be available yet. It is a good idea to involve disability bodies in looking at the situation, and looking at any plans you have drawn up for any adaptations. A solution which will reconcile access and conservation needs should be aimed at. An access audit needs to take place at further intervals, to take into account any new ideas and changes in the building and its uses.

(c) English Heritage recommend that alterations to listed buildings should form part of a long-term strategy for use, and ought to be reversible wherever possible. Measures which avoid or minimise the need for alteration should be considered first.

### **3.2. National Building Regulations**

(a) These apply to any new building, and also when any alteration is made to an existing building. They are published by the Department of Culture, Media & Sport and may be obtained from The Stationery Office at 123 Kingsway, London WC1 (Tel: (020) 7242 6393). Part M particularly applies to access and facilities for disabled persons. The regulations cover the kind of disabilities to be provided for, and requirements for access and use, sanitary conveniences and audience or spectator seating. They are amplified by detailed guidance with diagrams and notes showing how the regulations may be translated into the design of your premises.

### **3.3. Local Authority Requirements**

(a) National planning guidance has established that access can be a material consideration in determining planning applications. Alterations which affect the exterior of a building may in any event require planning permission.

### **3.4. Value Added Tax**

(a) Certain work carried out on providing aids for disabled people (e.g. installation of loop system, toilet facilities, chair lifts) is zero rated for VAT.

### **3.5. DAC and Faculties**

(a) Before you make alterations to a church building, you will need to obtain a faculty. Before you formally apply, you should consult your Archdeacon and the DAC.

## **4. REORDERINGS**

(a) It is essential that any plans for reordering or other major changes to a church building take account of the points that have been made in this document. The introduction of even a simple handrail can help so many people. The DAC's procedures for dealing with all applications will include a specific assessment of a proposal in terms of its implications for the disabled. Each case should be taken on its merits, but it may not be possible to make a recommendation on any proposal which has not given attention to the matter. Sometimes a ramp is preferable to a lift, because visitors (such as mothers and toddlers) may arrive all together and cannot wait to be ferried. For this reason lifts are not suitable for access to an upper floor worship area. A worship area always needs to be accessible from ground floor level without a lift.

## **5. EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE**

### **5.1. St James Piccadilly: Disabled persons' entrance**

(a) A disabled ramp and entrance door were constructed in place of a window in the south porch. The result was harmonious and discreet.

### **5.2. Lincoln's Inn Chapel: Disabled persons' access**

(a) A wheelchair hoist was installed running from the undercroft to the Chapel. An opening was formed through the south wall close to the west end; a cupboard was altered, and cupboard doors and panelling. This enabled the new installation to be entirely concealed from the inside of the Chapel. A lean-to structure to accommodate the lift lies outside the curtilage of the Chapel but is almost invisible from ground level.

### **5.3. St Joseph the Worker, Northolt: Disabled persons' access**

(a) Existing paving was re-laid to eliminate a step in front of the doors. A pair of automatic doors were provided with sensors inside and out, and tubular barrier handrails. The new arrangement was compatible with existing materials and finishes. A very detailed knowledge of the building would be necessary to appreciate the change that had been made.

### **5.4. Church House, Westminster: Internal changes to overcome diversity in level**

(a) The main ceremonial entrance opens onto a large enclosed courtyard to the South of Westminster Abbey known as Dean's Yard. There is a neo-classical portico with enclosed sides sitting on an elevated plinth. The steepness in the rise of the porch limited the opportunity to exploit it. The entrance off Great Smith Street was more convenient for access from bus or taxi so it was decided to create a new integrated public entrance which would be accessible to wheelchair users and those who could not negotiate steps. The interior alterations have combined with the entrance works to form an accessible route from Great Smith Street to the main function areas, toilets and the existing lifts.

## **6. FURTHER READING**

Further information and guidance on how to provide access for the disabled to your buildings may be obtained from the following publications:

British Standard, 2001, *Design of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of Disabled people: Code of Practice*, TSO (Tel: (020) 7242 6393)

Church Action on Disability, *Access Audit for Churches* (Tel: 07765 397993) Foster, Lisa *Access to the Historic Environment*, Donhead Publishing Ltd (Tel: 01747 828422)

Corporation of London, 2003 edition, *Designing an Accessible City & Access for Disabled People in City of London* (Tel: 020 7332 1995 & [www.cityoflondon.gov.uk](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk))

English Heritage, *Easy Access to Historic Properties*, English Heritage (Tel: 020) 7973 3434)

Penton, John *Widening the Eye of the Needle: Access to Church Buildings for People with Disabilities*, Church House Publishing (Tel: 020 7898 1304)

Roofbreaker Guides, *Through the Roof*, (Tel: 01372-749955 & [www.throughtheroof.org](http://www.throughtheroof.org))

Royal National Institute for the Blind, *Visually Impaired People in Church: Information for clergy & churchworkers* (Tel: 020 7388 1266)

The Cathedrals Fabric Commission for England and The Council for the Care of Churches, July 2003, *Advisory Note 5 The Disability Discrimination Act 1995; Taking Account of its Implications for the Fabric Of Churches and Cathedrals*, CCC (Tel: 020 7898 1866)

## **7. ADDRESSES**

The following addresses may be of help to you:-

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) Tel:(020) 7250 3222  
12 City Forum [www.radar.org.uk](http://www.radar.org.uk)  
250 City Road  
London EC1V 8AF

Council for the Care of Churches Tel: (020) 7898 1866  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Church House, Gt Smith St Fax:(020) 7898 1881  
London SW1P 3NZ

Church Action on Disability (CHAD) Tel: 0870 2430678  
PO Box 10918  
Birmingham B29 6WF

Centre for Accessible Environments  
Nutmeg House  
60 Gainsford St  
London SE1 2NY

Tel: (020) 7357 8182  
Fax:(020) 7357 8183  
[www.cae.org.uk](http://www.cae.org.uk)

Disability Rights Commission Helpline  
Freepost  
MID 02164  
Stratford upon Avon CV37 9BR

Tel: (08457) 622633  
Fax: (08457) 778878  
[www.drc-gb.org](http://www.drc-gb.org)

Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB)  
105 Judd Street  
London WC1H 9NE

Tel:(020) 7388 1266  
Fax:(020) 7388 2034  
[www.rnib.org.uk](http://www.rnib.org.uk)

Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID)  
19 – 23 Featherstone St  
London EC1Y 8SL

Tel: 0808 808 0123  
Fax: 0808 808 9000  
[www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

Mencap National Centre  
123 Golden Lane  
London EC1Y 0RT

Tel: (020) 7454 0454  
Fax:(020) 7608 3254  
[www.mencap.org.uk](http://www.mencap.org.uk)

Disabled Living Foundation (DLF)  
380 – 384 Harrow Road  
London W9 2HU

Tel: 0845 130 9177  
Fax:(020) 7266 2922  
[www.dlf.org.uk](http://www.dlf.org.uk)

(provides information of aids and equipment, and has a database of products that can be used by disabled people in public buildings).

## **8. FURTHER INFORMATION**

(a) Please feel free to contact your Archdeacon or the office of the London Diocesan Advisory Committee on (020) 7932 1230 if you have any queries resulting from your reading of this document.

(b) Making adequate provision for the disabled may call for a lot of work and effort - but this is no more than many disabled people have come to expect just in getting past the obstacles they meet every day of their lives. If we take the trouble this will have been worthwhile in enhancing the lives of others, and making an essential part of life available to some who might have been excluded.

(c) Positive design for access outside can have the additional benefit of showing the outside world that the church is in use, and aware of people's needs.

**London Diocesan Advisory Committee  
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