



360 Accessibility Audit

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1. Introduction

Accessibility is not only about steps and ramps and getting into the building. These things are important, but there is far more to making your church a place and experience where disabled people are able to fully belong and participate in the life and worship of the church. This means changing not just the physical building but thinking about the environment people experience, the attitudes they encounter, the language you use, the theology you expound, the spirituality you model, the liturgy you share, the worship you invite people into, and how disabled people can change the nature of church for all those who attend. Too often inclusion is only skin deep. It is approached as a matter of making space for disabled people to be present in the building but not really creating opportunities to belong to the community. You belong to a community when you find and can share friendship. You belong to a community when you are missed when you are not there. And you belong to a community when your presence, your personality, your embodiment, your spirituality make a difference to the whole community, and you are able to fully participate and be appreciated in all aspects of community life.

A 360 accessibility audit is a process of deep reflection about your church and how diversity is recognised and appreciated. It is not a 30 minute task, achieved with a quick walk around the building. It is an ongoing process that you will never complete, but within which you will always get better.

Jesus told the parable of 'The Great Feast' (Luke 14:16-24) in which the poor, the blind, the lame and many other disabled and marginalised people are invited into the kingdom banquet. Not to be cured or changed, but to bring their unique experiences, gifts and perspectives into the kingdom and to find healing in their liberation and inclusion. Your 360 accessibility audit is a step on the journey towards that banquet for you and all those that it will bring through your doors.

A note about language

In this audit tool the words 'disability' and 'disabled' are used to denote people whose embodiment means they experience barriers to full belonging and participation in society. This can be due to physical or sensory impairment, learning disabilities, mental health challenges, chronic medical conditions, neurodivergence and more. In line with the Social Model of disability, they are disabled by the physical and social environments they encounter and the attitudes and prejudices of others. Although many people would not think of themselves as disabled, the barriers, misunderstanding and prejudice they encounter restrict their ability to use their gifts, talents and abilities and fully function in society, thus 'disabling' them. In this way, 'disability' is not centred within a person's body or mind but is an experience a person has as they attempt to live and operate within a society that favours those who fit a narrow set of physical and mental criteria and disadvantages those who do not. The way to mitigate and reduce the experience of disability is for society and communities to change both physical environment and social attitudes and regard and treat all people as of equal value no matter how they are embodied.

2. Advice and guidance

See the resources section for sources of advice and guidance that will help you through this process and visit the Diocese of London Disability Ministry webpage for a directory of links to a wide range of information and advice. Before you go any further, visit the Church of England, Advice and guidance for church buildings, accessibility page, where you can download the guide 'Equal Access to Church buildings.'

<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/accessibility>.

This will introduce you to the basic principles of accessibility and lay the foundations needed to help you understand the breadth of what this means in practice.

In London the Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler is available to support you through the process. Other dioceses may have a Disability Adviser or Inclusion Officer who can help. Your Diocesan Advisory Committee will also offer useful advice.

3. Website accessibility statement

All churches should have some information about accessibility on their website. This should include pictures and descriptions of:

- How to find your building – where it is, accessible public transport etc
- Parking and any reserved disabled/priority parking bays
- Physical access to the building
- Accessibility once inside
- Facilities, including toilets
- Seating
- Wheelchair accommodation
- Space for assistance dogs
- Sensory – hearing loop, large print.

There should also be pictures of the worship space and a description of what happens before, during and after a service for those who need to process these before attending.

Your building will not be perfect, neither will the welcome and belonging you offer to disabled people. Your accessibility statement needs to be honest though. If physical access is challenging, it is far better that people know this and make an informed decision as to whether to try to attend your church or not.

4. The law

The Equality Act 2010 places a legal duty on all to make provision for disabled people to access buildings, activities and services and to be able to play a full part in wider society. Churches are deemed to be voluntary sector organisations and providers of ‘services.’ Some churches will also be employers and the act has many provisions that employers must comply with.

The key things you need to know are:

4.1 The definition of disability.

This is much wider than you might imagine and includes not just physical and sensory disabilities, but mental health issues and learning disabilities, as well as hidden disabilities such as epilepsy, diabetes, arthritis, autism and other neurodivergence, and various conditions which may cause chronic pain.

Disability is:

“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.”

So, you will already have disabled people amongst your congregation and those who access your building, whether you are aware of them or not.

4.2 Involvement

The legislation emphasises the need to involve disabled people in consultation about adaptations and improvements to buildings and services. This should include people from the wider community as well as your congregation. The disabled people in your midst are the experts that you need to listen to.

4.3 Reasonable adjustments

The law requires you to do ‘all things reasonable’ to remove barriers by adapting the physical environment and/or providing services in different and accessible ways. ‘Reasonable’ is not defined in the act but it is acknowledged that in different circumstances different churches will be able to do more or less depending on the challenges of historically significant buildings and the resourcing available. However, it is incumbent on the PCC to do all that is possible to create equal access and heritage should not be used as an excuse for neglecting this.

Accessibility must be at the heart of any proposed building or modernisation/refurbishment. You should not be planning to spend significant sums on a new sound and projection system while you do not have step free access or an accessible toilet. And if you are installing a new sound system, include a hearing loop or other hearing support system from the start, not as an afterthought.

4.4 Think and plan ahead

The legislation also requires us to think ahead about future needs and the needs of those who might not yet attend services or events. Don’t just think of your current congregation, but plan for the full variety of disabilities to be represented in the future.

4.5 Independence

The principle that underpins the act is that of independence. Disabled people should be able to access and participate independently wherever possible even when there

are people who are willing to offer assistance. This can be a particular challenge for a church where there are people not just willing but keen to help, seeing this as part of their Christian vocation and ministry. You will need to train your welcome team to respect independence but offer appropriate assistance.

5. Theology

In Genesis 1 God says: 'Let us make humankind in our image.' The image of God, or the Imago Dei' is deeply rooted at the core of what it means to be human. This means that all people, regardless of their embodiment or cognitive shape, reflect something of that image and reveal more of the breadth and depth of what God is.

Welcome, inclusion and belonging are kingdom imperatives. Jesus commanded us to 'love our neighbour as ourselves' (Matthew 22:39) and 'our neighbour' includes disabled people. St Paul teaches that the church is a body in which the 'less honoured' parts should be given special honour (1 Corinthians 12:22-25). (Or in other words, those who are dishonoured and marginalised by society should be welcomed and valued as essential and vital to the church community. Jesus also told the parable of 'The great feast' (Luke 14:16-24) in which the disabled and poor of the land are invited into the kingdom banquet as they are, not cured or changed, but with their disabilities. Jesus in his ministry walked the margins of society and brought many disabled people from the margins to the centre of the kingdom. All of these passages, and many others, place upon the church a calling to be open to disabled people and to allow their perspectives, experiences and stories to change what the church is. Jesus rose from death still bearing the wounds and scars of crucifixion (John 20:27). In order for the church to be a fuller representation of the Body of Christ, we need the wounded bodies of disabled people to be amongst us as equal partners at the kingdom feast. On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon 'all flesh' (Acts 2) which included (and still includes) the bodies and minds of people living with all forms of disability. Disabled people are not marginal to the kingdom but in the centre. It is only when disabled people are at the centre of the church that God's kingdom comes amongst us.

6. Getting started

6.1 Lay the foundations

As a church leader and in your leadership or ministry team, you will need to begin by taking time to read and reflect on disability issues. There are many books that would be useful, but these will help lay the groundwork for the 360 Accessibility Audit experience.

Shorter books that are a good introduction to disability theology:

John Hull et al, Disability - The Inclusive Church Resource, Darton, Longman and Todd 2013.

Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, Making a world of difference, Christian reflections on disability, SPCK 2002.

My body is not a prayer request: Disability justice and the church, Amy Kenny Brazos Press 2022

At the gates: Disability, justice and the churches, Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson, Darton, Longman and Todd 2022

Longer books:

Thomas Reynolds, Vulnerable Communion - A theology of disability and hospitality, Brazos Press 2008,

John Swinton, Becoming Friends of Time - Disability, Timefullness, and Gentle Discipleship, SCM Press 2017

There are many other books and online articles you could read. Visit the Diocese of London Disability Ministry webpage for a longer list of resources and links to many organisations that can give specialist advice and support.

6.2 Make it a theological issue.

Preach about disability and inclusion or ask someone to visit your church to do this. John Beauchamp, the Diocesan Disability Ministry Enabler, is available to do this in London. (john.beauchamp@london.anglican.org) Maybe there is a disabled or neurodivergent person in your congregation who could speak from their personal experience.

Visit the Disability Ministry page of the diocesan website to find ideas for sermons and notes to help you.

You can get your home groups or any other small groups you have to look at disability issues. Visit the London Diocese Disability Ministry webpage for a short series of sessions you could use called 'Strength made perfect'

6.3 Put it on your PCC agenda.

Having raised disability and the need to be a place of belonging and participation for all as a theological and missional issue, encourage your PCC to engage with these issues. Talk about this pathway towards auditing and planning for the future. Encourage your PCC to commit to following this.

6.4 Do a congregational survey.

This will help you find out what barriers and difficulties people are experiencing, both in worship and your social and community life. Some will want to do this anonymously, others will be happy to tell you who they are. It will need to be both online and in paper form. There is a template survey as part of this pack.

6.5 Gather people together to talk.

Arrange a lunch after a service and invite anyone who would like to come and share their stories and experiences of disability or neurodivergence. This can be people experiencing this for themselves and those who care for or support others. Make space for their stories to be told and listened to.

6.6 Form a Disability Working Group.

This should be a group of people with a variety of lived experience of disability and those who are close to disabled people as partners, carers or supporters. Your disability working group will be the driving force behind any moves to improve accessibility, inclusion and belonging for disabled people. They are your source of wisdom and advice and their voices must be heard throughout any process or planning to increase accessibility. Listen to their stories and be humble in the face of the rejection and marginalisation they will tell you about.

6.7 Appoint a 'disability or Access champion'

Work with the Disability Working Group and your PCC to identify a 'disability or access champion' for your church. This is someone who will focus on accessibility and inclusion and hold the brief to support the working group, raise disability issues at PCC and be the named person that the congregation can talk to about accessibility and inclusion. See the Diocesan Disability Ministry webpage for a model role description.

6.8 Prepare and adopt a 'disability statement'

This should outline your commitment to improving accessibility, inclusion and belonging for disabled people and should be shared with the wider church. This should be led by the disability champion and drafted by the disability working group and PCC together. See the Diocesan Disability Ministry webpage for a Model disability statement.

6.9 Consult those who use your building.

Talk to your hirers and those who attend their events. If you can, invite one or two disabled users/clients onto your disability working group. Find others in the local

community with a range of disabilities who can advise from their lived experience. The person who knows best if an accessible toilet is really wheelchair accessible or if your entrance and access around the building is really 'step free' is a person who uses a wheelchair. Those who know if your books, leaflets and projections are easy to see or if your lighting is adequate are those who are visually impaired.

Those who know if your hearing loop works or if lip reading is possible in your building are people who use hearing aids and have hearing impairment. Those who know if the environment you invite people into for worship offers suitable welcome to people who are neurodivergent are those who are neurodivergent themselves. Those who know if you are offering welcome, involvement and belonging to disabled people are the disabled people who sit in your congregation but whose voices you do not usually hear.

6.10 Reach out into your community.

Go out into your community and find the disability groups and services that are close to you. Is there a special school or community college in the parish or nearby? Are there disability support organisations and services working across the parish? Is there a day care centre or group home? Many disability support groups and charities are rich in enthusiasm, fairly well supported by volunteers but lack funding and premises or space. See what partnerships you can develop. Can the church become a hub for disabled support groups and services. Are there people in the church who might volunteer. How can you become a church that is making a positive contribution to the lives and support of disabled people in the parish.

6.11 'Your kingdom come.'

As you lay the foundations for a 360 accessibility audit, many aspects of the life of your church that are not accessible or welcoming will start to become apparent. It is at that moment that you need to begin to audit your buildings, worship and activities. When you and your community are fully aware of the kingdom imperative of inclusion of all of God's children in an experience of mutual fellowship, respect and value, then your eyes will be opened to all that needs to change to bring the kingdom banquet to life amongst you.

6.12 Begin your audit.

The 360 Accessibility Audit tool is an extensive look at accessibility, inclusion and belonging across all areas of your church and its worship and ministry. Your Disability Working Group and PCC will need to consider how best to use the tool and who is best placed to look at the different sections. It is important to remember that this will be a process not a one off event. Take your time to do this properly, but at the same time set some goals and targets for reporting the findings to the PCC and church. Don't let this be squeezed out by other priorities of which there will always

be many. The action plan that emerges from the audit will be multi-layered with some targets you can achieve quickly and easily, others that will be medium term goals and still others that will be aspirations for some future date. The audit should result in positive action, but it should also result in access becoming a constant consideration in all that you do. Your disability working group should continue to exist beyond the audit and should be given a brief to work with your Disability Champion and continue to highlight disability issues into the future.

7. The 360 Accessibility Audit

The 360 accessibility audit helps you think through aspects of your building, services, language, theology, spirituality, environment, ethos, activities, communications and leadership from the perspective of accessibility, belonging and participation for a wide range of disabled people. These include physical disabilities, sensory impairments, cognitive and intellectual disabilities, neurodivergence and all conditions because of which people experience barriers that in some way inhibit their full participation in the life and worship of the people of God.

The 360 accessibility audit will help you think through the experience a disabled person has when they come to your church to attend worship and take part in the social gathering that is part of being a faith community. The audit is designed to help you enter into the experience and perspective of a wide range of disabled people, from the moment they attempt to find and enter your building, through the physical, sensory, social and spiritual environments that they will encounter. However, the only way you can really know what disabled people experience is to talk to those who attend already, or to invite a range of disabled people to come to your church and allow them to tell you how you might improve what you do.

Before you start this audit process, you should form a Disability Working Group (or you might call it an 'Accessibility and inclusion Group' or in fact whatever you like). This is the group that will enable this process to be disability led, which is the only way that it will really be effective. The disability rights strap line is: 'Nothing about us without us,' and this is as relevant and important in your church as it is in wider society.

The audit has 19 sections. Different people in your church will be best placed to complete different sections, but don't just turn the sections about buildings to your buildings team or the sections about language and worship to your worship team. The audit needs to be as 'experiential' as it is practical, so get people from your disability working group, your buildings team and your worship team and others to work together to complete the audit.

The sections are:

Section 1 – General

Have you laid the foundations for the 360 Accessibility Audit?

Section 2 – Getting in the building

Looking at your external approach routes and entrance doors.

Section 3 - Once inside

Thinking about the initial environment disabled people experience and how welcoming and inclusive this is.

Section 4 - Toilets

Looking at your toilet facilities and any accessible provision you have.

Section 5 - Emergency exit routes.

Are your emergency exit routes and arrangements sufficient for disabled people?

Section 6 - Settling in your worship space

Looking at the welcome and environment that disabled people find in your Church.

Section 7 - Before the service

How settling or unsettling is the 15 minutes before a service begins?

Section 8 - During the service

How are you inviting and enabling disabled people to participate in worship?

Section 9 - After the service

How do disabled people join in the social gathering after a service?

Section 10 - Use of language

What is your use of language in liturgy, hymns/songs, sermons and communications saying to disabled people?

Section 11 – Leadership and participation

Are disabled and neurodivergent people in leadership in your church and are they participating in worship and service?

Section 12 – Theology and Spirituality

How inclusive and empowering is your theology and spirituality?

Section 13 - Books leaflets and screens

How accessible are your communications and video displays?

Section 14- Dementia

This is something that needs particular thought as some of your older members begin to experience dementia. How do you keep them included and valued?

Section 15 - Children and young people with additional needs.

Children with additional needs and their families need to be welcomed and valued within your church. How can you make sure this happens?

Section 16 – The parish community

What do you know of disability in your parish or community? Can you support any disability support projects and services and can your church become a valued partner in supporting disabled people in the community?

Section 17 - Outside noticeboards

What do your noticeboards say to disabled people who might be wanting to know if they would be welcome in your church?

Section 18 - Your website

Is your website accessible and does it have useful information for disabled people?

Section 19 - Live streaming

Many disabled people have found the new trend for live streaming very valuable as getting out to church can be a struggle. Can you make your live streams more accessible and useful for disabled people?

The questions are designed to invite you to think, reflect and listen to what others say. They do not tell you what to do but hopefully will guide you to solutions and action appropriate to your situation. Your 360 Accessibility Audit should result in an action plan. (Read the 'making an action plan' guidance). See the 'quick wins' sheet for ideas of things you might be able to do immediately with little or no cost. Your disability working group and disability champion should be given responsibility for regularly reviewing the action plan and the progress made towards achieving its goals and this should be a regular feature on your PCC agenda.