

A Welcome for All: Access to Inclusion

How can we help people with disabilities to access our churches?

A Newcastle Diocesan Task Group discussion paper

1. Introduction

Accessible churches are churches that can be enjoyed by everyone – regular worshippers, people attending events and visitors of all kinds - including those with disabilities or other access needs. About a fifth of the population have access needs, including people with hearing and visual impairments, wheelchair users, older and less mobile people, young families with pushchairs, etc. Quite apart from the need to take note of Disability Discrimination legislation, this is too large a community for churches to overlook!

“A church that is better for disabled people is better for everybody”

(Tony Phelps-Jones, Making Church Accessible to All)

Newcastle Diocese’s Disability Task Group and Tourism Task Group are therefore collaborating to explore *“Access to Inclusion”* and the scope for further action to support local churches seeking to address these issues. This might include providing practical advice, training, and a simple assessment model for providing practical information on accessibility. This paper sets out some insights and possible areas for action. We are using this as a basis for discussion with other Diocesan Task Groups and interested parties.

2. Scope of “Access to Inclusion”

There are three important aspects to consider:

- The first is that people within the church who are welcoming and looking after people have some training in how to offer to help people with disabilities. Attitude and confidence is everything, and a well-informed and helpful response can help to overcome physical barriers.
- The second is the built environment, getting in and getting around the church. Minor changes may be possible to overcome some issues, whilst more substantial measures (e.g. ramps, lighting, heating) are more costly and complicated to achieve, especially in a historic church building.
- Thirdly, making good information available is of great practical value. This will inform people with a range of access needs about our churches’ existing facilities.

By seeking to understand the needs of people with accessibility issues, making some adjustments to facilities (where feasible), and providing information on accessibility our churches can become more welcoming and inclusive. Each church would be better equipped to appeal to, and cater for, a wider range of people – including regular worshippers, people

attending special services, events and community activities, and those wishing to visit for historical interest, family reasons or quiet contemplation.

3. Newcastle Disability Task Group perspective

The current priorities of the Disability Task Group include:

- Give information about disability issues
- To attend Supporting Ministers Conference and regular meetings.
- Regular communication through the Link or eBulletin
- Encourage the inclusion of disabled people and a willingness to listen to their needs in all aspects of church life.
- Encourage parishes who have not yet done so to formulate a disability strategy and plan
- Make available simple and basic assessment forms
- Find the means to provide advice, information and support when and where it is requested
- Consider information about specific areas of disability and how to be more inclusive towards such people.

4. Tourism perspective

The charity Tourism for All UK has been bridging the gaps for a number of years between disabled people and their champions, the public sector, both national and local authorities, and the hospitality industry. Their view of priorities is simple and direct:

- To provide information for all visitors which meets their access needs
- To offer customer service that is disability-confident
- To identify destinations (places) that have thought through the needs of all visitors

'Visit England' provides a number of tools and resources to help tourism operators accommodate people with access needs, such as the National Accessible Scheme and Access Statement Tool. Website: www.visitengland.org/busdev/bussupport/access. Some best practice examples are given, but these are not very relevant for churches.

The new 'Spirit in Stone' guide to churches in the North East includes accessibility information, and the website www.spiritinstone.info allows searching on accessibility.

5. Access Statements

An Access Statement is a description of a venue's facilities and services. -Access Statements allow for a written, descriptive approach to provide a wide range of information on accessibility. All areas of the premises are described, from car parking, to entrances, meeting spaces and toilets.

An Access Statement can be useful as it can do a number of things:

- Increase accessibility awareness by walking around the church and thinking about and noting access issues.
- Identify what is in place and what might be modified if and when funds become available.
- Demonstrate that consideration has been given towards fulfilling legal disability and access obligations. The church can show that they have looked carefully at the building, facilities and service they offer and have made 'reasonable' changes.
- Allow PCC and church members to become familiar with
 - a) the access policy
 - b) the details of what the public is being told about the building and
 - c) their understanding of where there are potential barriers and what solutions are in place. This could help support some informal training.
- The Access Statement should ideally show the church in pictorial form with good photographs; this also has advantages for anyone for whom English is not their first language.

Visit England offers an Access Statement Tool which is free to use, but rather long. It can help guide you through the process, and will enable you to create a simple document that you can offer visitors via your website or by other means. The Access Statement tool can be found here: www.access.tourismtools.co.uk. The Diocese of London offers a form designed for churches, but this too is quite long. It can be downloaded directly via this link: <http://www.london.anglican.org/assets/downloads/resourcelibrary/Disabled-Access-Audit-2013.docx>

6. A possible Agenda for Action

It may not be easy to make major changes to our historic church buildings, but in many cases relatively modest adjustments can make a huge difference for people with a range of disabilities. These adjustments combined with good practical information such as an Access Statement, may help many more people enjoy visiting or attending our churches.

It seems that there is scope for useful action in the following three areas:

- a. Offering easy-to-use tools for assessing current access, to create better information in the form of Access Statements, and ensure this is made easily available to users. Re-examine 'The Open Door' questionnaire and some other existing access models. Use them as a basis for producing and piloting a simpler, easy to use self-assessment model with a group of interested churches.
- b. Providing some training and/or awareness-raising for all those involved in welcoming people to church events, services and open days. A practical event could be designed and piloted with volunteers from churches in a Deanery or other suitable 'cluster', then offered out more widely.

- c. Practical advice on defining the need and scope for physical improvements. An advice sheet could be produced and made available online and via a church advice 'toolkit' that is being piloted as part of the Spirit in Stone project during 2014.

We would not wish any of these suggestions to be seen as adding a burden for parishes. The aim is to find relatively simple ways of helping them to take a look at their facilities to make them more 'welcoming for all'.

These actions will need to be developed in further detail. Costs and sources of funding need to be identified. It might be possible to deliver a modest pilot exercise on these lines for around £1,000 to £1,500, depending upon how much specialist advice is required.

The authors would welcome comments and suggestions regarding the above, or any other pertinent thoughts on the subject.

Would it be worth doing some pilot work along these lines?

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Footnotes: Useful Resources

In the meantime, there are some useful sources of ideas and guidance available in the following websites, including some useful advice sheets to download free of charge:

- Church Care Guidance - www.churchcare.co.uk/images/access_and_disabled_people.pdf
- Some General info - www.london.anglican.org/kb/provision-for-people-with-disabilities
- Life to the full (Leaflet) - www.livability.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Life-to-the-Full-Church-resource-booklet1.pdf
- General Information - www.churchsafety.org.uk/information/other/disability.htm
- Churches for All - <http://churchesforall.org.uk>
- Tourism for All UK - www.tourismforall.org.uk

Further reading:

- Widening the eye of the needle (book) - www.chpublishing.co.uk/books/9780715140611/widening-the-eye-of-the-needle
- Making Church Accessible to All (book) - <http://www.brfoonline.org.uk/9780857461575/>