



Making it work for everyone
Guidance for heritage sites welcoming
visitors with a learning disability

Produced by The Forum of the Heritage Project Merseyside

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Aims

The Access to Heritage Project had three clear aims:

- To assist and encourage people with a learning disability to access Merseyside's culture and heritage sites – as is their right.
- To enable heritage sites to learn from people with a learning disability about how to best make themselves accessible to people with a learning disability and therefore benefit everyone.
- To create intellectual access guidance that can be used in heritage sites everywhere.

The information contained in this document, is the first stage in meeting this final aim. It provides guidance for sites wishing to make their settings more accessible for people with learning disabilities and for those sites wishing to work more closely with these users.

How the Heritage Forum worked

The first official Heritage Forum meeting was at the community base at the World Museum, Liverpool, in January 2006. The Forum decided to meet once a month as a whole group to share findings and plan their activities. Between January 2006 and March 2007 the Forum met on 57 occasions, either for discussions, workshops or museum visits. Twelve Heritage sites have been assessed during these visits. Individual Forum members have also visited sites at other times that have suited them. The Forum now consists of 5 groups, Halewood Resource Centre, Parthenon House, L8, Old Swan Dovecot and the Royal School for the Blind. Although group sizes at each meeting do vary, there have been 25 people with learning disabilities involved in the project, most of whom are adults.

During the project the whole visitor experience has been under scrutiny:

- How do you find out about a venue, how do you get there?
- What happens when you get there?
- Do you feel welcome?
- How do you find your way around?
- Can you understand what it's all about?
- Is it aimed at you?
- Does it hold your interest?

For a detailed report on the The Access to Heritage Project please contact Ticky Lowe at ticky_lowe@hotmail.com.

Findings and recommendations of the Heritage Forum

MAKING SETTINGS ACCESSIBLE

General factors

- People with a learning disability do not usually have wide experience of heritage sites, and do not know what is available at venues to use them to their full potential.
- It often needs lots of shorter visits for people with a learning disability to get the most out of a venue.
- Information is best delivered when it is given lots of times in small chunks.
- There is often an overlap in approaches to access that means a solution designed for some is also solution for many others.

Strategies to attract people

- Heritage Sites need to tell people with a learning disability, and their supporters, about what specific services are available at their site, such as workshops.
- Sites need to proactively engage with this area of the community, encouraging involvement in mainstream activities.
- Pre-visit information would benefit these users.

Making people welcome

- On arrival people with a learning disability need to be made to feel welcome.
- Disability awareness training is needed for staff. This training should involve people with learning disabilities.
- There needs to be plenty of seating available throughout a site.

Strategies for effective signage

- There is a lack of symbols in use in interpretation and where there is use it is often of an inconsistent nature.
- Most sites have unclear way finding.
- There need to be clear, large, symbol-based signs.
- There need to be signs to make clear what can be done in different spaces (e.g. what can be touched and what can be sat on).
- The use of colour coding for directions is helpful. Contrasting colours on floors and walls help to define a space.
- Signs need to be clearly visible. The artefacts they relate to needs to be evident.
- Signs should not be crowded, and should use large strongly contrasted fonts.
- A simplified text identifying key information should be used with supporting symbols/pictures.

Providing additional opportunities for communication

- Sites are most effective when more senses are being used.
- There should be more use of sound, but it is important that the sound is not muffled and that there are not too many sounds going on at once.
- Audio text at the press of a button is well received.
- Videos and music create a sense of place and reduce a reliance upon reading text to access information.
- Interactive computer games are popular.
- Hands on exhibits create a very accessible space, but opportunities are currently limited.
- Exhibits need to have strong contrast in colour and texture to be accessible to all.

People as effective resources

- The most effective access facilitator is a tour guide who engages with people and builds on their current understanding.
- The use of costumes brings a space to life.
- Providing simplified materials for guides within rooms would help both staff and visitors in discussing a site and its artefacts.

WORKING WITH HERITAGE ACCESS CONSULTANTS

Venue attitudes and ethos

- A consultation process should be undertaken whenever new interpretation is designed and made for Heritage sites.
- Settings need to identify individuals responsible for initiating and responding to communication with this community of users.
- Contacting sites about issues of access should not be drawn out process.
- Staff in settings often promise that they will accompany a group or join them for a discussion but do not turn up. This seems like bad manners, suggests that the people with learning disabilities are not important, and is very demotivating. Arrangements should be kept to...or false promises not made.
- Sites should build up a range of staff with experience of working with these service users.
- When involving people with a learning disability in an access consultation, time scales need to be realistically planned. Most people with learning disabilities cannot be rushed.
- People enjoy having their work recognised and showcased.
- People with learning disabilities should be supported to produce work of a high quality.

How should Heritage sites involve people

- It takes up to 10 visits for people to develop a Heritage site literacy.
- People with learning disabilities have found it best to work in short bursts across a longer period of time. An ongoing relationship of regular visits across a period of several months is appropriate.
- People with learning disabilities intending to carry out access audit projects need to be strong self-advocates and/or to have an independent individual to facilitate their advocacy.
- Priorities should be set by the people with learning disabilities.
- Advocates should not be seen as the 'access expert' who can speak on behalf of the people with a learning disability.
- Strong personal relationships need to be built between group members. Trust needs to be established across a period of time.
- If others are arranging finances for the project or advising in any other way, they should attend meetings with the people with learning disabilities.
- The enthusiasm of people with learning disabilities for new experiences, and the pace at which they work, means that supporters/staff can easily direct a process with their own ideas, ways of working and/or ambitions without being aware of it.
- Supporters/staff must always constantly reflect on whether the people with learning disabilities are directing the process or whether they are being required to follow.
- Having a social element to projects is beneficial for all involved.
- Heritage sites need to provide individuals with the opportunity to assess proposed changes before they are finally implemented.

Uncertainties about working with people with learning disabilities

- People in all walks of life find that their views of effective practice are transformed by their involvement with people with learning difficulties.
- When building a relationship with other organisations, such as funders, the involvement of people with learning difficulties breaks down barriers and motivates further engagement.
- Many people working in Heritage sites have no experience of people with learning disabilities and are therefore uncertain about what to expect and what to do. Only first hand experience can teach staff that they have to do very little that is different or difficult.
- Heritage site staff can be enthused about an upcoming visit by discussions with an advocate prior to the visit.

Involving supporters

- Having consistent supporter presence and engagement is a key factor in the continued involvement of people with learning disabilities.
- Supporters can easily dominate proceedings, despite having the best of intentions.
- Providing supporters with a questionnaire allows them to raise issues based on their experience as advocates, issues sometimes not initially identified by the person with a learning disability.
- By providing supporters with a voice it reduces the incentive to incorporate their views into the participants questionnaires/feedback.
- Supporter often wish/need to leave at set times (eg: straight after lunch) to fit in with other activities.

Effective visits

- All visit arrangements must be flexible to the individuals and/or their groups.
- It is appropriate to focus on one contained aspect of a Heritage site during each visit.
- Attention tends to be kept for a maximum of one hour.
- A break for food is important as a social and refocussing opportunity.
- Starting a visit before 11am can cause problems with transport.
- Transport issues will often cause problems for those attending.
- A good pattern for a site visit is:
 1. One hour visit/workshop
 2. Short recall activity
 3. Lunch (with discussion)
 4. Longer recall activity
- Discussions about a visit can take place within a site's Café and still be effective.
- At least one member of staff should attend the post visit recall meeting.

Information gathering

- People should be encouraged to explore different ways of communicating; through pictures, symbols, signing, speech, written word, recorded word, audio, video, hands-on experiences.
- Views of individuals should be gathered in a variety of ways: visual questionnaires, observation, discussion in the moment, discussion retrospectively, drawing pictures and writing labels, brainstorming activities, taking photographs, recording with video, using postcards of artifacts, bring artifacts to individuals, workshops, regular meetings, discussion/interviews/questionnaires with supporters.
- Digital cameras effectively allow for rapid recall and discussion. However, they present technical challenges, and raise issues of ownership.
- Accompanying (but not leading) people with learning disabilities as they visit a heritage site provides invaluable insights and opportunities to ask them about their perspective.
- It is valuable to involve a wide range of individuals with learning disabilities so as to get a fuller picture of access challenges and opportunities.

Contributors and Participants

The Access to Heritage Project was set up in 2004 by Alan Griffiths at MENCAP Liverpool in response to ideas from Lord Rix and Jonathan Rix at the charity Libertas. After Alan recruited local support and set up a Steering Group the project was developed between 2004-2005 with a range of stakeholders including The Liverpool Capital of Culture Company, Liverpool People First, The Mersey Partnership, Liverpool CC, Knowsley MBC, The NW Disability Arts Forum, Merseytravel, National Museums Liverpool, Royal MENCAP Society, MENCAP Liverpool and Libertas. A number of people with a learning disability from Merseyside attended steering groups meetings, and formed the Heritage Forum to help explore key issues with their peers. The initial work to set up the Forum was by Jimmy Cullen, an experienced local community worker, who was employed by the Steering Group for that purpose. The RTR Foundation, Liverpool LDDF, Knowsley LDDF and Royal MENCAP Society provided initial Funding for the project. The Heritage project co-ordinator, Ticky Lowe, was appointed in October 2005.

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