

The Conservation office

Improving Access to Historic Places of Worship

Access for everyone to chapels and churches is both desirable and increasingly required by law. The Equality Act 2010 protects anyone who has a protected characteristic, which includes age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage, civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. The Act also protects people from being discriminated against and harassed because of a characteristic they do not personally have. For example, it protects people who are mistakenly perceived to be disabled. It also protects a person from being treated less favourably because they are linked or associated with a disabled person.

The Act makes it illegal to discriminate against disabled people in respect of goods, facilities, services and premises. However, it also recognises historic buildings as a special case where a measure of compromise may be necessary to preserve historic value and significance. Historic buildings include listed buildings, buildings in a conservation area, buildings of architectural merit referred to as a material consideration in a Local Plan, buildings of architectural merit within national parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, World Heritage Sites or vernacular buildings of traditional construction.

If treated as part of an integrated review of access arrangements for all visitors or users and a flexible and pragmatic approach is taken, it should normally be possible to plan suitable access for disabled people or others with a protected characteristics without compromising a building's special interest. Part M of the Building Regulations and Part T of the Building (Standards), Scotland give minimum dimensions for ramps, toilets and wheelchair spaces in theatres, concert halls 'and the like', required where buildings are extended or undergo changed uses. Here, too, it may be necessary to seek waivers of the regulations to maintain the historic character of listed chapels.

The Equality Act does not override other legislation such as listed building or planning legislation, and the need to consider necessary consents applies to changes proposed to improve access. Thus, under some circumstances listed building consent will be required for works. Planning permission or conservation area consent may also be required. Under the VAT Act, forming ramps and widening doors or passages to ease entry for disabled persons to churches is zero rated. For further advice on all of above, please contact the Connexional Conservation Officer.

Each church must consider whether it puts disabled people or others with a protected characteristic at a substantial disadvantage compared with people who do not have that characteristic. This could be by:

1. Any physical feature at its premises;
2. the way it does things; and/or
3. the absence of an auxiliary aid or service

Anything that is more than minor or trivial is a substantial disadvantage. If a substantial disadvantage does exist, then the duty to make reasonable adjustments arises. However,

churches are only required to make adjustments that are reasonable for it to make. We have tried to illustrate this on the accompanying *Road Map to Accessibility*.

What is a Reasonable Adjustment?

In the case of a substantial disadvantage reasonable adjustments may need to be made to the way things are done (such as changing a policy), to the built environment (such as making changes to the structure of a building to improve access) and to provide auxiliary aids and services (such as providing information in an accessible format, an induction loop for customers with hearing aids, special computer software or additional staff support when using a service).

When deciding whether an adjustment is reasonable a service provider can consider amongst other things:

- how effective the change will be in assisting disabled people in general or a particular customer, client, service user or member;
- whether it can actually be done;
- the cost; and
- the organisation's resources and size.

The overall aim should be, as far as reasonably possible, to remove any disadvantage faced by disabled people. The easier an adjustment is, the more likely it is to be reasonable. However, if a church faces a difficult challenge in providing access for all, it does not mean that it cannot be reasonable. It does, however, need to be balanced against other factors. Of course, reasonable changes will depend on the challenge faced, including the cost of the adjustment, the resources you have, how practical it is or the potential benefit it might bring to users. For example, ramps can benefit small children or visitors with heavy luggage as well as those in mobility scooters etc.

There are many examples of reasonable adjustments including:

- giving the option to book tickets by email as well as by phone;
- installing floor and wall finishes as well as lighting improvements;
- installing an induction loop for visitors who are hearing impaired;
- providing disability awareness training for staff;
- wheelchair accessible toilets and means of accommodating wheelchairs in worship areas;
- providing larger, well-defined signage for those users with impaired vision; and
- putting in a ramp at the entrance to a building as well as steps.

The legislation requires that we think ahead and take steps to address barriers that impede disabled people. In doing this, it is a good idea to consider the range of disabilities that actual or potential service users might have. Trustees should not wait until a disabled person experiences difficulties using a service, as this may make it too late to make the necessary adjustment.

Access Audit

When trustees are considering possible improvements, the first step should always be an access audit of the whole chapel, ideally by a professional access consultant. Alternatively, a conservation accredited architect may be able to advise. Local users with a range of disabilities should be invited to participate and local authority access officers and disability organisations may also provide input. Some may additionally offer disability awareness training as an aid to appreciating the practical problems of disabled users.

Access for all

It should be remembered that improved access will benefit a much wider range than just disabled persons and will include elderly persons, families with young children and those who have perambulatory issues. The needs of partially sighted people and people with hearing difficulties will need to be considered. The needs of employees as well as visitors with disabilities should also be included.

For many historic chapels the entrance steps and lack of wheelchair accessible toilets may seem to be the only problems, but circulation within the building and escape from it should be considered, as well as signs, lighting and sound systems. Even decorations should be included as many people with visual impairments can be helped by colour schemes with contrasting tones. There may be other features that should be identified from the start to ensure that effort is not wasted on what is obvious, only to find that wheelchairs cannot, for example, gain access to the dais or kitchen. A holistic approach to the whole suite of buildings is therefore an important consideration when developing a plan to improve accessibility.

The aim is to achieve independent access for a disabled person, without assistance. An access audit should identify where the premises fall short of this aim, and exactly why. After an access audit has been carried out decisions need to be taken either to remove obstructions, to alter them, avoid them, or provide reasonable alternative provisions. Special care is needed to ensure that the valuable features of historic chapels are not spoiled and an assessment of historic value may be required to identify and define these before proceeding with the access planning.

Where such alterations are being contemplated it is usually necessary to employ an architect with experience of historic buildings to assess the impact of possible approaches and advise on detailed design. It is important that solutions do not marginalise or overstate disabled persons' needs. Wherever possible, access and facilities should be as close as possible to those provided for everyone else, so that the independence and dignity of disabled persons is enhanced. For example, the main entrance should be adapted in preference to a side or rear entrance.

What are the important points to consider when thinking about reasonable adjustments?

Spaces for wheelchair users or mobility scooters in the Worship Space

Space in the worship area should be set aside for wheelchair users and this, too, may be of benefit to others, such as families with young children in pushchairs. Think carefully about where these spaces should be. Ideally we would wish for such spaces to be dignified and inclusive, so perhaps consider pew truncation within a central block or a side aisle within the fixed seating area. This would be preferable to a designated space at the front or rear, where the user may feel conspicuous.

Trustees will need to consider pew platforms, raked floors and permit sufficient turning spaces for ease of access and egress. Pew truncation has the added benefit of providing auxiliary spaces for helpers, who can sit in the same pew and provide assistance. A good joiner should be employed to carry out the truncation, and the character of the interior of each church should be carefully considered before you explore this option, i.e. how symmetrical is the fixed seating layout, and how will this be affected by the alteration.

Of course, such alteration is likely to require listed building approval, thus reference should be made to Methodist Conservation Office's guidance note: *Removal of Pews from Historic Chapels*. Please also contact the Connexional Conservation Officer for a pre-application

discussion.

Ramps

Ramps can slope 1:12 for up to 5m, but 1:15 is preferred. Moveable ramps may be a temporary expedient but are unlikely to be a satisfactory long term solution. Where possible, ramps to main entrances should respect the symmetry of the existing elevations and not leave it with a lop-sided appearance. Steps should always be provided as well, since they can be easier for some ambulant disabled people and those with a visual impairment. Curved ramps can sometimes appear more 'natural' and less obtrusive and they should take advantage of existing slopes and planting to help them blend in. New walls should be constructed with materials which harmonise with the existing walls and the work should be carried out to a high standard.

Surfaces

The opportunity should be taken to ensure that new ramps and steps include suitable surface finishes and lighting provisions, such as marked nosings and wider treads. Ground surface treatments are of great importance for accessibility. Slip resistant hard surfaces such as brick or stone strip paving are more suitable than gravel, chippings, setts and cobbles. Rubber doormats are more suitable than coir, while shallow dense pile carpets, polished floorboards, wood blocks or tiles are easier for wheelchair users to negotiate than deep pile carpets.

Handrails

Handrails may be required especially where ramps are steeper than 1:15 or steps rise 600mm or more. They should where possible be designed to replicate or harmonise with any existing examples. If adequate records survive, it may even be possible to restore removed original railing designs. The handrail itself should not be greater than 50mm wide and here again, it may be possible to employ traditional sections.

If the design of the front of a historic chapel cannot be reconciled with ramps or handrails, it may be possible to form a ramp inside the entrance lobby or use a side or rear entrance. However, it is important that the access point is available to all, not exclusive to disabled users.

Parking

The proximity of disabled drivers' parking bays and setting down points should be carefully considered and clear signposting provided to the alternative entrance.

Lifts

If ramps cannot be provided without great disruption or cost, stair or platform lifts may occasionally be considered. Because they are often quite bulky and require fixing equipment to masonry, these are unlikely to be acceptable on the front of a historic chapel, but may be useful internally. The requirement for suitable emergency escape provisions for wheelchair users should however be borne in mind and the Fire Officer and Building Control consulted.

Toilets

New toilets adapted for disabled people should, if possible, be sited in proximity to existing standard toilets. Practical reasons of sound insulation and drainage will probably also discourage the location of new toilets in the worship areas of historic chapels, but do not disregard this option, as it can be viable. A wheelchair accessible toilet may also offer an opportunity to provide baby changing facilities.

Further advice can be found in Easy Access to Historic Properties (Historic England), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/easy-access-to-historic-buildings/>

And

Easy Access to Historic Landscapes (Historic England), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/easy-access-historic-landscapes/>

Or

Access to the Built Heritage (Historic Scotland) <http://conservation.historic-scotland.gov.uk/publication-detail.htm?pubid=8538> and Access to the Historic Environment: Meeting the Needs of Disabled People (Donhead, 1997).

A number of disability organisations provide information on improving facilities and further details can be obtained from your District Disability Officer