

# Access on a Shoestring



Use Guide **8** for advice on ways to create better access for a wide range of people, without large-scale expenditure. The guide suggests practical routes to low-cost improvements, including planning and behaviour changes that have no cost implication.

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The Portfolio is published as a result of collaboration with a working party, which includes specialist consultants, and aims to support the elimination of discrimination in service provision. The views expressed in these guides are not necessarily those of Resource.

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*Front cover:*

A magnifying glass extends access to archival records.

Photo: Jonathan Goldberg

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There are objects in museums, archives and library collections which will not be harmed by touch. Photo: Maggie Murray Photofusion



# Introduction

If your first thought at the mention of the words 'access improvements' is of expense, then this guide is for you. During the years in which today's disability legislation was being drafted, government departments, businesses, service providers and campaigners worked hard to define the cost of implementing improvements which would benefit disabled people. The broad conclusion of those involved in the work was: it's not as expensive as everybody thinks it will be.

Creating access can be cheaper than you expect for a variety of reasons:

- **Access doesn't have to be about buildings.** For organisations in difficult buildings, the perceived need to build access, or demolish barriers, leads to a belief that every access initiative is costly and time-consuming. In fact, for many disabled people, access comes through small changes of behaviour or imaginative use of everyday items.
- **Planning ahead is free.** Planning ahead and anticipating needs are key requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA, see Guide 5). Planning and information gathering are virtually cost-free and help make the best use of existing knowledge.
- **Only 5 per cent of disabled people use a wheelchair.** For many people, access can be achieved simply by clear communication, being able to sit down and rest, getting personal help or using simple aids.
- **Anyone can do it.** Communicative, helpful people who take responsibility for delivering their service well create most of the access that disabled people need. Your best resource for access is your staff team.

- **People are always inventing solutions.** Museums, archives, libraries, suppliers, companies and individuals are continually solving access needs for the growing consumer market of disabled and elderly people. If you look in the right places, you will find there are many small, low cost answers to common problems.

This doesn't mean that you should never budget for major improvements – these may still have to be considered within a medium term plan. But in this guide, we have outlined some of the ways in which you can create access today, without setting aside huge budgets or battling with priorities. The suggestions we give here aim to inspire you, to help you spot opportunities and to think laterally.

The key skills you need to develop low cost access are:

- **A positive attitude** – believing that problems can be solved.
- **Resourcefulness and creativity** – to see everything as a possible tool for access, and every barrier as surmountable.
- **Organisational commitment** – making access a strategic aim.
- **Willingness to try** – to see if new ideas work, to change things for the better and to consult with the people who can tell you most: disabled people themselves.

# 1 Planning ahead

Some of the most expensive access solutions in large public buildings across Britain become necessary through lack of planning – because access barriers became apparent when the buildings were put to use.

Planned changes always cost less than reactive or emergency measures, especially when they are built on a knowledge of who your users are. Thinking ahead doesn't cost money and can bring sizeable savings, whether you are writing a strategic plan or buying office supplies.

To make your organisation genuinely inclusive you need to be aware of the range of people's needs. Consultation with disabled people (Guide 11, Consulting Disabled People) is one way to identify what these might be. Another is by active research – through reading or internet browsing, for example.

- Build access for disabled people into your longer-term plan.
- Celebrate what you have already achieved and identify room for improvement – perhaps by using Resource's Disability Toolkit.
- Consider every element of your longer-term planning: recruitment, premises, staff training, acquisitions policy and budget.

The benefit of strategic thinking will show up in the budget. Access solutions will be built in, not implemented out of step with existing programmes of work. But remember to be strategic about your budget, too. Access will need to be created, increased and maintained in the long term.

## Some building programme examples

Take advice on colour and tone contrast next time you decorate. Contrasting tones on walls, skirting boards, floors and doorways can help visually-impaired people to orientate themselves with maximum independence. Some colours are also easier for visual communication. Cost: nil. Same paint, same flooring, different colours.

Avoid patterned wall lines caused by blinds and other visual distractions in areas where talks are given or enquiries made. This helps people who are lip reading or following interpreters to have a clear view .

Think about the acoustics in your building and use sound absorbent materials on walls and floors to help reduce background noise.

Consider the positioning and height of your reception desks. Make sure they can be easily identified, and easily used by smaller people or wheelchair users.

If you are a library, consider how shelving arrangements, heights/depths of shelves and lighting might help or hinder access – especially for shelving audio tapes and Large Print books.

If your building has no lift, or has some inaccessible floors, think about creating a downstairs seating area separated by a partition, which could be used for private interviews or for bringing items downstairs for someone who can't use stairs.

## Cost-effective purchasing

Purchases made with access in mind can reduce long-term costs by removing the need to add on 'special' adaptations.

For example, if you are about to create new computer work-stations, look at desks and chairs which adjust easily to create a comfortable set-up for a range of body sizes. Locate them sensitively to avoid sound interference or difficulty getting at desks.

If you are getting new signs, look for high contrast and tactile signs to support visually-impaired people.

Variety can create access in itself – if you are equipping a seminar room, select furniture which offers choice. People with different needs might prefer chairs with or without arms, soft or harder seats, full backs, straight backs or lumbar supports. Buy a range of styles and observe how people will use the chair that looks like a comfortable solution for them.

## 2 A change of behaviour

Investment in staff training is a cost-saving in itself. Supportive, flexible and helpful staff encourage disabled people to use services more and, in time, lead to an increase in numbers of visitors and service users.

Trained staff who feel free to exercise their own imagination and flexibility will create a new level of access for disabled people. This kind of access provision is free, and will enrich your organisation and the opportunities you provide for disabled people. Good reception from staff creates the most positive effect on how disabled people perceive your organisation.

## Flexible rules

A positive response costs nothing. If the rules in an organisation tend to encourage inflexible responses to people's needs, look at the rules again. Staff should be encouraged to feel confident to interpret rules flexibly – and where necessary to change them.

### Examples

If a café has a counter service, staff behind the counter should be proactive about offering to carry food and drink to the table for anyone who asks for help, or who seems as if they may welcome it.

In a small building with no public lavatory facilities, make a staff-only toilet available to customers who ask, especially where it is obvious that the courtesy will not be abused.

Be flexible in library loan procedures; allow larger numbers of items to be borrowed and for longer periods where this may help with access. Accept good reasons for late returns without argument and make sure renewing and reserving books can also be done by methods other than telephone or face to face. Avoid having too many criteria for your outreach library services and be flexible; people sometimes have a temporary need for these services.

Offer to bring heavy reference books to a place where it is easier to read them, and to return books after they are finished with.

On a gallery tour, consider making the chairs provided for keepers or attendants available for anyone who needs to sit down. Make it clear that the offer is available.

No-eating-or-drinking rules should be varied when someone wishing to work or study for a long period has the need to eat or drink to manage their health. Notices could invite visitors to state that this is necessary.

There are some items in museum collections, library displays or archive storage that cannot be touched, but others will not be harmed by touch. Find a way to make it clear to visitors that some items can be touched – this will create a new level of access for many people.

## Supportive attitudes

Disabled people are customers. It's a comparatively new identity, both for disabled people themselves and for those who provide them with a service. In Guide 1 (Disability in Context) we explained why many people still expect disabled people to be grateful and passive in the way they accept service-provision.

If a disabled person feels unable to ask for something they need they may not use your service again. A negative or unhelpful response could make them less confident in asking for help, or unwilling to come back.

Encourage your team to look at their own attitude. The following principles always apply:

- **Think about a solution before you say no.** There could be excellent reasons to say no to a request, but what about the reasons to say yes?
- **Offer first.** Some people find it hard to ask for help.
- **Don't be offended at a rejection.** Some people find it just as hard if they feel guilty because of the way you react when they say 'No, thanks.'
- **Avoid asking why.** If someone asks for something (the toilet, a chair, or a magnifying glass) they know why. If they want to tell you, that's their choice.
- **Don't act like you are doing someone a favour.** If they ask for something unusual, avoid starting with "Well we don't usually allow this but..."

A positive attitude will contribute not only to the quality of visitor experiences, but to the long-term confidence and identity of disabled people as customers.

### 3 Information access

In many pieces of research around disabled people's experiences and perception of organisations, the need to obtain information about a place or service is high on the list of priorities.

Accessing information has exceptionally high value to disabled people, as this may allow them to plan a visit or request around what they know they need, or can put up with. But for many people, getting information is hampered by the limited range of formats in which it is available or by barriers to communication. Guide 6 (Inclusive Information) gives more detail about ways to give information. The guidelines overleaf emphasise how cheaply alternative formats can be provided.

Remember not only to provide alternative formats, but to say you can provide them. A large poster behind your reception desk, reinforced by frequent verbal offers, could encourage people to use a service they didn't know was available.

## Alternative formats – cheaply

Enlarge on a photocopier – either your own or at a copyshop. Make sure your staff know how to enlarge an A4 sheet to A3, thus magnifying the text.

Print off in large print in the size the user prefers. This starts at 14 point, but could be 16 or 18 point or even higher. A simple technique is to open your document, select all the text and enlarge it to the desired size, then print on A4. Headings should be in bold, and preferably larger. You can also change the colours of print and background to suit particular preferences. Ask your designer/graphics department to provide you with a word document containing all the text information of a leaflet and print this off in large print (16 point is a good average for users and visitors).

If you have a display board for community posters, display a request for all information provided to be in at least 18 point print. If this isn't possible, ask people to present information via the desk, and enlarge items which are not in large print.

Make your own audio tape – choose a staff member with a clear speaking style, and ask them to read the information into a domestic cassette machine, in a quiet room.

For a few copies, ask around to see whether a staff member has a cassette player with tape-to-tape recording. A handful of copies could be done in an evening – you could offer some time compensation for the staff member.

For larger numbers of copies, research local services such as local authority transcription services or commercial audio-visual services. Small numbers of duplicate tapes from your own master tape may be cheaper than you think to create (£13.50 for ten 30-minute tapes quoted in 2003).

Email is an efficient and very popular way for disabled people to get information. This can then be printed out by the recipient in the size and font style they prefer, or use their own text-to-speech software to read it out loud.

Have a look at computer magazines to see what free software they include. For a cover price of £3 to £5 you may be able to get a disk including screen-readers/text-to-speech software for use at your workstations, or other software which enhances accessibility.

## 4 Spending wisely

To create access, you may have to spend money, but spending small amounts in the right places could enhance access more widely than larger amounts on a single initiative.

By listening to your service users and observing their behaviour, you could find a variety of low-cost access aids suitable for the service you offer. If you see somebody using a piece of their own equipment and think it may be useful for others don't be shy about asking where they got it. Disabled people are resourceful at solving access issues, and likely to be happy to share their solutions.

The suppliers from whom you may need to obtain the right items could be those you already use – general office suppliers or more specialist supply companies. You should also think laterally when seeking a particular item – looking in charity catalogues and websites, specialist magazines, through medical and home aids suppliers, hobby and craft suppliers or by searching for a particular item on the web.

For an opportunity to browse what is out there, make time in your diary to attend Naidex, the annual national exhibition of aids, equipment and services for disabled people. Held usually in May at the NEC in Birmingham, this is a high-profile event full of ideas and information.

The items described opposite have been suggested by professionals from within the industry.

## Wise-spending ideas

### Magnifying glasses

A range of these can be found, allowing magnification of printed text, fine detail on collection items and archive materials. There may be a need for magnifiers with built-in light, or magnifiers on stands, as well as hand-held magnifying glasses.

- A hands-free magnifier with bi-focal lens and neck strap. Sourced through a wool and haberdashery supplier at £6.99 each.
- Large-sheet magnifiers at £7.90 for a pack of five, to enlarge areas of text. Nottingham Rehab Supplies.
- Wide variety of hands free, traditional, illuminated and stand glasses from £4.95 at Magnifico.

### Table clips

Clips attached to tables allow people to secure walking sticks and crutches without them falling to the floor. A small table or shelf by the reception desk, or where equipment is located, allows people to put down bags, parcels or books.

### Carrier bags

Providing carrier bags for library items helps when people have borrowed too many to carry easily.

### Bookstands

A bookstand to hold books, documents or pictures allows people to read or study for longer, more comfortably. Bookchair from £13. Book Butler £27.50 from Nottingham Rehab Supplies.

## White-boards

A wipeclean A4 board and pens helps communication by notes or diagrams where necessary.

## Stepstools

Stepstools or kickstools help children and smaller people reach displays and books on higher shelves. Check that the stool you supply is safe for the people who will use it.

- Kick-step or Kickstool from library suppliers such as Demco.
- Children's step stool £2 from Ikea.

## Recycled computers

Initiatives including one funded by Microsoft take unwanted computers, strip them down and reinstall an operating system, making the computer available to educational institutions that have included museums, archives and libraries. Talk to your local school or community college to see if they have any links.

## Seat-boosters

Booster cushions, seat wedges and lumbar support rolls will give many people a better chance of remaining comfortable through a lecture, course or day's study. Many different kinds are available – start with a few and advertise them widely. You will soon observe which are most useful and worth ordering more of.

## 5 Using what you have

To make the best possible use of your resources, look at what you already have for possible access solutions. This includes not only your collections, but office furniture, stationery, computers and human resources. Here are a few ideas:

- Spare chairs can be used – place them in entrance areas, near natural meeting places or places where queues form so that people can sit while waiting.
- Corridors and hallways are meant for circulation – keep them free from clutter and possible barriers to movement or safety.
- Paper, pens, rulers – use for communicating with people, perhaps by diagrams, quick maps to help people find where they are going, or written messages.
- Office furniture – move it around to ensure space for people to get in and a better layout for communication (without glare or bright sunlight getting in the way of visual contact).
- Allow extra floorspace in the childrens' area so children can lay books flat on the floor for easier reading.
- Your time for theirs – offer an outreach session or talk to a local visually-impaired or Deaf group in return for an awareness/training session with your staff.
- Cardboard boxes – use them to collect items for handling, reminiscence work or other types of activity around collections.
- Check your computer software – software packages like Microsoft Word and Internet Explorer have accessibility functions which you may be unaware of. Play with them, see what they can do and then make it available.

# Conclusion

By following the suggestions in this guide, you will start on the path to making access easier for everyone who uses your building or service. Real, practical ideas have been offered to you, which you could use straight away with minimum expenditure.

The rest of the journey, however, is up to you. Small expenditure, based on careful observation, research and imagination could make a big difference.

An organisation which is willing to learn will soon find itself being offered ideas and advice by service users. In time, you should find that many of the things your own users are likely to need are in place, and can be brought out on request.

# Further information

## Equipment suppliers

### **Demco Interiors**

Library supplies.

Tel: 01933 445300

Fax: 01933 442764

Email: [enquiries@demcointeriors.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@demcointeriors.co.uk)

[www.demcointeriors.co.uk](http://www.demcointeriors.co.uk)

Bookchair reading stand from [www.bookchair.com](http://www.bookchair.com)

Magnifying glasses from [www.magnifyingglasses.co.uk](http://www.magnifyingglasses.co.uk)

### **Naidex**

National Exhibition of aids and equipment for disabled people

(usually May each year):

[www.naidex.co.uk](http://www.naidex.co.uk)

### **Nottingham Rehab Supplies (NRS)**

A range of leisure, hobby and everyday living equipment for disabled people.

Tel: 01530 418650

Fax: 01530 419155

[www.nrs-uk.co.uk](http://www.nrs-uk.co.uk)

### **Online shops – aids and equipment**

Everyday living aids, including hearing and visual impairment aids:

[www.helptheaged.org.uk/acatalog](http://www.helptheaged.org.uk/acatalog)

Visual impairment aids, leisure, hobbies:

[www.onlineshop.rnib.org.uk](http://www.onlineshop.rnib.org.uk)

Hearing impairment and aids for Deaf people:

[www.shopnid.org.uk/catalogbody.html](http://www.shopnid.org.uk/catalogbody.html)

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The **Disability Portfolio** is a collection of 12 guides on how best to meet the needs of disabled people as users and staff in museums, archives and libraries. It gives invaluable advice, information and guidance to help overcome barriers and follow good practice.

The Portfolio is available in 12 point clear print or 15 point large print formats, braille, audio cassette and on the website. Please contact 020 7273 1458 or [info@resource.gov.uk](mailto:info@resource.gov.uk)

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