

The Connexional Team – Support Services in Manchester

Disability Access Provision in Historic Chapels

Access for everyone to chapels and churches is both desirable and increasingly required by law.

Alterations including

- access ramps,
 - floor and wall finishes,
 - lighting, sound reinforcement and loop systems,
 - wheelchair accessible toilets and means of accommodating wheelchairs in worship areas.
- may need formal consent. Historic and listed chapels, and chapels in conservation areas will require special sensitivity in undertaking such alterations.

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.

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 and families with young children.

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 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.

The aim is to achieve independent access for an average 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.

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. A wheelchair accessible toilet may also offer an opportunity to provide baby changing facilities.

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. Some spaces should be provided at the front of the worship area where it is easiest to see and hear. If the removal of pews is required to accommodate wheelchair users or other disabled persons reference should be made to [Support Services in Manchester's](#) guidance note: Removal of Pews from Historic Chapels.

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/static/rm/removalpews.pdf>

[The Equalities Act 2010, chapter 2, section 15](#) makes it illegal to discriminate against disabled people in respect of goods, facilities, services and premises. However the Act also recognises historic buildings as a special case where a measure of compromise may be necessary to preserve historic value and significance. 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. In addition, 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.

This note is not a comprehensive guide to specification and each historic chapel will need separate consideration.

Further advice can be found in Easy Access to Historic Properties (English Heritage), <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/easy-access-to-historic-buildings/>

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

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Rev 01/15