

Information Provided by English Heritage on ‘Establishing an Access Strategy’

Any organisation, be it a high street retailer, a museum or a restaurant, that is required to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010 needs first to establish an ‘Access Strategy’. This requires a strategic commitment at a high level in the organisation to making the service more inclusive either through design or management measures, or more often a combination of the two.

A timescale and budget need to be considered, and someone should assume responsibility for overseeing, evaluating and reviewing the implementation of any measures that are subsequently identified in the access planning process which needs to be well documented and transparent.

To help identify what in practice is likely to be ‘reasonable’. the Code of Practice: *Services, Public Functions and Associations* (2011) produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission states:

“What is a reasonable step for a particular service provider to have to take depends on all the circumstances of the case. It will vary according to:

- *the type of service being provided*
- *the nature of the service provider and its size and resources*
- *the effect of the disability on the individual disabled person”*

It is important that organisations and professionals do not undertake works involving access improvements without a good understanding of the needs of people with disabilities and the options available to meet those needs.

The Access Planning Process

Preparing an Access Plan, and working through the issues it raises is fundamental to the process of determining the need for changes to a historic building. The process should consider the options available (including the provision of the service by other means) the priorities for implementation and the likely impact of each proposal on the building’s significance. In reconciling access and conservation, the access plan can seek to embody best practice in access design and building conservation.

The first step in planning access improvements is to undertake an ‘Access Audit’. This will assess and document the barriers to access which exist within a building and its surroundings.

The complementary part of the process will be to review or prepare a 'Conservation Assessment' that will establish the relative significance of a building or site in terms of its special architectural, historic or archaeological interest. Local authority conservation staff can provide advice on compiling these, as can your English Heritage regional office.

An access plan:

- Should consider the requirements of wheelchair users and those with restricted mobility, sensory impairments, and learning difficulties
- Should take into account the needs of families with young children
- Needs to take account of intellectual access which is as important as physical access for some disabled people
- Should be central to any organisation's strategic commitment to improving access
- Needs to be reviewed regularly so that the current provisions can be kept up to date and take account of changes in regulations and in available solutions
- Proposals should be tested before they are incorporated into the access plan by focus groups made up of people with disabilities or drawn from a local access groups
- The plan can also inform any access statement required under *Approved Document Part M* of the Building Regulations.

English Heritage believes that dignified access should be provided wherever practicable and celebrated with high-quality design that is also sensitive to the special interest of historic buildings.

Local authorities who own or manage historic buildings are encouraged to adopt access plans that are consistent with the special architectural, historic or archaeological interest of the property or landscape concerned.