

How can your museum better welcome families and young people who are blind or partially sighted?



Kids in Museums believes museums are for everyone. But many families and young people who are blind or partially sighted find visiting museums difficult.

Blindness is a complex range of visual impairments and everyone's experiences and requirements are different. An individual who was born blind may have different needs to someone who has lost their sight. According to [Vision UK](#), around half of children who have a visual impairment have additional needs, such as a hearing impairment, physical disability or learning difficulties.

Making a museum accessible to visitors who are blind or partially sighted isn't just about providing Braille labels or one-off events. Deeper cultural change and understanding of the range of visual impairments is needed to build staff confidence, break down barriers and create equal experiences for these visitors.

Here are some simple ideas to help overcome hurdles faced by families and young people who are blind or partially sighted.

First things first – make a plan

Decide on what first step you want to achieve and how you might build on this.

Here's how to get started:

1. Go out and experience what other venues have to offer.

- There are some examples from other heritage venues at the end of this document.

2. Involve families and young people who are blind or partially sighted and ask for their feedback.

- Create an Access Advisory Panel, bringing these families and young people together with other people with lived experience of disability. Or hold a focus group and offer incentives to be involved.
- Use existing networks to get in touch with people – ask a local Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) School, a Blind School or charities mentioned at the bottom of this resource.

3. Consider how to promote your offer to people who are blind or partially sighted both on site and online.

- Consider offering an audio introduction like [this one from the National Gallery](#).
- Ensure your website is accessible to screen readers and magnification tools. It should comply with WCAG 2.0 Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. For more information, see the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) [website](#).

4. Include all staff in your plans.

- Book visual awareness and audio description training for staff to make sure everyone has the confidence to participate. [VocalEyes](#) provides a range of training courses.

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Improve physical access to your museum

Start by working with people who are blind or partially sighted to understand what constitutes a physical barrier. Alternatively, you can commission an access auditor to provide an action plan.

Here are some key ways to improve physical access to your museum:

- Include detailed information about the journey to your museum and its layout on your website. VocalEyes's report, [State of Museum Access](#), has some useful tips.
- Provide a simple layout that is logical and memorable.
- Use contrasting colours to raise visibility and distinguish outlines, such as strips on the stairs to highlight steps.
- Provide different formats for wayfinding and signage, such as colour coded navigation or tactile walkways for visitors to follow with canes or their feet.
- Ensure signage is concise and embossed – and avoid putting it on glass.
- Provide adequate and evenly distributed lighting. Try to minimise glare and reflected light from display cases.
- Have well-designed and fully accessible toilets. Fittings, like taps, soap dispensers and mirrors should have markings to differentiate surfaces. For more information, see the [Changing Places campaign](#).
- Provide accessible car and bus parking for disabled visitors and staff. Consider offering help getting to and from nearby public transport.
- Offer accessible ticketing and assistance.
- Make sure that information such as menus or handouts are in large print or other accessible formats. Guidance about producing large print documents is available from the [UK Association for Accessible Formats website](#).
- Provide guided support. The type of assistance visitors require may vary, so always let them tell you what they need. For more advice on guiding, see the [RNIB website](#).

Introduce tailored resources

Combining different types of resources will have the most impact and means the visitor can choose what suits them.

Remember to speak to families after they have visited to get their feedback on what worked best for them.

Here are a few suggestions for tailored resources and programmes:

- **Audio description**
 - Provide either regular tours with trained guides or recorded audio description guides that visitors can borrow – or download ahead of their visit. Ensure that the range of people reading recorded audio description is representative, considering factors like age or gender.
 - Discovery pens, like the [RNIB PenFriend](#), enable you to record your own audio labels for objects.
- **Creative workshops**
 - Small adaptations to a workshop can make a big impact. In art workshops, involve embossing, textiles, clay, creating 3D work with pipe cleaners, wikki stix or mod rock bandages. It's also important to consider not only colour, but contrast.
 - The key to the success of workshops is to be ready to adapt and experiment throughout the session.
- **Tactile interpretation and tours**
 - Getting close to objects is important and creates an active experience for visitors. Think about how to employ tactile drawings, maps and touch installations, and train staff to support visitors with object handling.
 - Provide sensory backpacks with materials or objects related to the collection on display. 3D models are not just replicas, but also provide an alternative way of exploring objects. Raised touch tiles give a physical indication of the visual shapes and textures of the work.

For more guidance, see the [RNIB website](#) page on touch installations.

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- **Multi-sensory experiences**

- Music and smell can both reflect historical context. You could create a sound track inspired by the collection, or smell boxes to accompany an exhibition.

- **Existing technology**

- Look at including existing apps to see if these could be incorporated in your space. These may require the freedom to use cameras or phones and reliable WiFi.
- *Seeing AI* is a free app that narrates the world around you by describing photos on your phone.
- *TapTapSee* is also free. The user double-taps the device's screen to photograph any two or three-dimensional object and have it accurately analysed and identified within seconds. The device's voiceover then speaks the identification audibly to the user.
- iBeacon technology sends an alert when visitors are near a key object or point of interest.

And finally...

Is there anything a visitor who is blind or partially sighted sees or does in your museum that reflects themselves? Museums are about telling stories – do any of your stories reflect these visitors?

Some top tips!

- Don't reinvent the wheel – seek advice and use existing resources.
- Adapt to your heritage focus and work with local partners, staff, volunteers and audiences.
- Access and inclusion need to be supported with adequate money and staffing – to support training or improve physical access.
- Improving access for people who are blind or partially sighted also improves access for other audiences and enhances the overall visitor experience.
- Embed your learning and plan for legacy.
- Just try out your ideas – they don't have to be perfect, but you will have started something.

Some of the things museums and heritage sites offer:

- [Making SENse Family Packs at the Museum of Childhood, London](#)
Created with families with children on the autism spectrum, these packs include maps, toys to touch and activity suggestions.
- [Lewes Castle resources for visitors with additional needs](#)
These resources include an audio guide, discovery pens and Castle 'Explorer Bags'.
- [Museum of London SEND programme for schools](#)
The interactive sessions include multi-sensory activities and early morning access.
- [Science Museum – VIscovery Days](#)
VIscovery days enable families with members who are visually impaired, partially sighted or blind to enjoy events around the Museum that are specially designed for them.
- [Tactile exhibits at Cutty Sark](#)
Tactile exhibits at Cutty Sark have braille and embossed labels, and braille and large print guides are available from the admissions desk.
- [Beany House Museum – Health and Wellbeing](#)
Free monthly creative workshops using textile and mixed-media for blind or partially sighted visitors.
- [Horniman Museum Access Advisory Panel](#)
The group meets four times per year and is made up of volunteers who have lived experience of disability.
- [SonicPaintings](#)
SonicPaintings is a new way of experiencing visual artworks – it creates immersive soundscapes that bring to life stories contained in paintings.
- [The Whitworth's Audio Support](#)
Anne Hornsby, Director of MindsEye, has written audio descriptions for the Whitworth gallery, building and spaces, which can be listened to or downloaded via Soundcloud.

Organisations that can provide more information and advice:

- [Royal National Institute of Blind People \(RNIB\)](#)
The UK's leading charity supporting blind and partially sighted people.
- [VocalEyes](#)
This charity support museums, galleries and heritage sites to increase access to, and enjoyment of, their venues, collections and programmes, for blind and partially sighted people.
- [VICTA](#)
VICTA supports children and young people who are blind or partially sighted and their families.
- [Look UK](#)
Look UK is a national federation of families with visually-impaired children and provides vision impairment awareness training.
- [Guide Dogs Children and Young People's services](#)
Guide Dogs provides a range of services for children and young people, from education support to family events.
- [Sightline Directory](#)
A searchable directory of local services and organisations for blind and visually impaired people.

Resources:

- [Sensory Stories by Jo Grace](#)
Information about using and creating sensory stories.
- [Sensing Culture](#)
This is a National Lottery funded project led by the RNIB. Four museums explored ideas and approaches to improving accessibility for those experiencing sight loss.
- [Disability Cooperative Network \(DCN\)](#)
DCN works to promote and embed inclusive practice in the heritage and cultural sector.
- [Ways of Seeing Art](#)
This booklet from Shape Arts explores the links between art and audio description.