

Heritage Access

2022



 **VOCAL EYES** >> StageTEXT



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Foreword

On behalf of the National Lottery Heritage Fund, I am delighted to introduce this important report, created as a result of the work of the *Heritage Access 2022* project led by VocalEyes.

This project is one of 17 trailblazing Digital Volunteering awards made as part of our Digital Skills for Heritage initiative. All these projects provide new opportunities for volunteers to contribute and develop their digital skills - expanding volunteering opportunities across heritage organisations and establishing new ways of valuing, caring for and promoting heritage. *Heritage Access 2022* shows the significant value that digital volunteers bring to both the quality of heritage organisations' work and to society as a whole. The report is also a powerful call to action from disabled people to heritage organisations to remove barriers to access and provides practical support to help organisations meet their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion and their legal duties. I believe this report provides the sector with a new benchmark that helps us all address inequalities and make heritage accessible for everyone.

My thanks to VocalEyes, and the report partners, Autism in Museums, Centre for Accessible Environments and Stagetext, and to the many organisations that supported the project, and particularly to the 61 digital volunteers who carried out this important work.

At the National Lottery Heritage Fund we are committed to heritage that is inclusive and accessible for everyone, and this important report helps us all to achieve that.

Eilish McGuinness
Chief Executive
National Lottery Heritage Fund

Foreword

I am honoured to be introducing and championing *Heritage Access 2022*.

Widening audiences and pursuing inclusivity should not be seen as an option for the heritage sector, rather it is our moral and legal responsibility. The right to access and enjoy cultural heritage is a human right. It is easy to understand why. Heritage bridges the gaps between generations and people. By making it easier to access and understand arts and heritage, we are enabling more people to learn, connect and share ideas. This supports individuals to build a sense of belonging in our changing and challenging world, enabling our communities to strengthen and thrive.

The unprecedented challenges of this decade have shown us the importance and value of people connecting and uniting. Over the last two years, the heritage and arts sector has worked hard to get people back through the doors of our sites, museums and galleries. Our sector has proven it can be flexible and responsive to meet government guidance and audiences' needs and expectations. So, let's not stop here!

I look forward to learning from the 61 volunteer researchers, many with lived experience of access barriers, who kindly volunteered their time over four months to review the access information provided online by over 3,000 museums and heritage organisations. I hope you join me in using this valuable resource to champion best practice and influence change so that more people can explore heritage in ways that meet their needs and exceed their expectations.

Kim Klug-Miller

Disability and Access Ambassador for Heritage

The Cabinet Office Disability Unit

1. The Project

Made possible by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, *Heritage Access 2022* brings together a partnership of sector support organisations, sector leaders in access and inclusion, and a team of 61 volunteer researchers, to explore the state of access at UK museums and cultural heritage sites through a survey of the online access information that they provide.

This report presents the findings of this research, identifies best practice and, for those working at museums and heritage sites, helps you identify, detail and create online information about access barriers, aids, facilities, resources, and events at your venue ([Section 4](#)). It also outlines how to do this in an accessible way ([Section 5](#)).

The report also provides advice from access specialists and the volunteer researchers, examples and links to museums and heritage sites across the UK, and statistics from our research and from *State of Museum Access 2018* where relevant.¹

Digital volunteers

The volunteer researchers, their lived experience of access barriers, and skills development are central to the project. To recruit the team (who all worked remotely), VocalEyes posted details of the role online with over 125 local volunteering organisations across the UK, and from the expressions of interest selected 61 people, with representation from Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and every English region. Over three-quarters of those shortlisted identified as either disabled, D/deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, blind or visually impaired, neurodivergent or an intersection of these.²

The volunteers' preparation for the research included focus groups and training sessions devised and led by industry leaders in access, heritage and inclusive education. The sessions were designed to grow digital skills and confidence and gave the project team the opportunity to learn from the volunteers' experiences of access barriers to heritage and websites. A key aim of the project is to create a scalable and re-usable framework for digital

1. The Project

volunteer recruitment, training and collaboration in support of future digital volunteering projects. We will be publishing additional resources later in 2022 and early 2023.

During the 15-week research period, the volunteer team reviewed the websites of over 3,150 heritage sites using a checklist co-designed by them with the project team. They were supported throughout by the Project and Volunteer Engagement Manager through weekly virtual office hours, fortnightly bulletins, support sessions with speakers from the project team and advisory panel, an online collaborative workspace and a buddy system.

Volunteer testimonials

“I enjoyed contributing to the research, which has been a positive experience overall. The learnings from working alongside others during sessions and completing the individual set tasks have deepened my understanding of digital accessibility and how I assess an organisation’s digital offerings and accessibility.”

“As a D/deaf person, I know how important access information is and so it was a privilege to be a part of this study. What was interesting was that very few of the sites I surveyed provided information about British Sign Language support which is an important access provision for some D/deaf visitors to enable them to access information onsite.

It was surprising how few heritage sites and museums provided in-depth access information for various disabilities. None of the sites I surveyed had excellent access information which was disappointing. The sites I surveyed highlighted that access information needs to be improved, not just the information, but also the presentation of the information on the website.”

“I found my experience surveying different sites to be a mostly engaging yet challenging one. What I found most surprising was that the ability to locate sufficient access information online was so varied across different sites, ranging from non-existent to extremely easy.”

1. The Project

Heritage scope

Reflecting the remits of VocalEyes and the partner organisations, we limited our research to museums and galleries, historic buildings, and industrial, maritime and transport heritage: thus cultural heritage in the form of buildings that are open to the public and with staff present onsite. Venues also had to be open to the public at the time of the research.

Active places of worship, libraries and archives, intangible heritage and natural heritage, such as wildlife centres and zoos were not in scope. Gardens were only included if connected to a historic building.

2. Why is access information important for heritage sites?

In this report we use the word disabled to refer to anyone, including D/deaf and neurodivergent people, who experiences access barriers, alongside those who may not identify as any of these, but experiences temporary or situational disability at the time of their encounter with the heritage organisation. While different impairments and conditions result in different barriers, we advocate and follow the social model of disability, with the onus on heritage organisations to remove and reduce the disabling barriers for their visitors.³

There is strong evidence that a high proportion of disabled people (92% in the *Euan's Guide Access Survey 2021*) seek access information before their visit, and mostly from a venue's website. If people do not find information that reassures them that their access needs will be met, they will often change their plans, and not visit.⁴ Thus what museums and heritage sites need to provide to visitors with access requirements are:

- Information about access barriers, aids, facilities, resources and events;
- A means of contact to make further enquiries about access;
- A feeling of welcome and consideration as a person;
- Reassurance that access barriers have been addressed and, where possible, removed.

Why is this important? Over 14.6 million people, around 22% of the UK population, are disabled, and the number of people impacted by lack of accessibility grows when taking into consideration friends and family who might be accompanying them, and visitors from abroad.⁵ It thus makes good business sense: having an accessible venue will lead to an increase in visitors, revenue and reputation.

Furthermore, museums and heritage sites are required by law (the *Equality Act 2010*) to protect people from discrimination in relation to access to services, facilities, employment and education.⁶ The Act makes clear that

2. Why is access information important for heritage sites?

a standard of access for disabled people should be achieved that is equal to that enjoyed by everyone: that is, all (not just some) access, and all (not just some) of the time.

There are no design standards within the *Equality Act*, so buildings themselves cannot ‘comply’, but organisations have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to avoid disadvantage caused either by the way something is done or by a physical feature, and to provide auxiliary aids or services.

Accompanied by increased representation of disabled people among the workforce, volunteers, and Board, making your organisation’s online access information fit for purpose should be a core part of its commitment to equality, inclusion and anti-ableism.

Your organisation will also be providing what Rachel Coldicutt calls “systemic digital care” that aims to reduce harm and grief, remove barriers and create ease.⁷ This will involve the organisation’s leadership and staff being prepared, anticipating and learning. It will also involve inviting and responding to feedback from D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in the local community.

Coldicutt reminds us that care is an anticipatory act. Not having to worry or plan – not living in a constantly anticipatory space or state – is a form of privilege. Museums and heritage sites and those working in them can help to ease this anticipatory burden by communicating, removing or reducing the disabling barriers that heritage can present.

3. Executive summary

We can draw three main conclusions about the provision of museum and heritage access information from a comparison of the figures from *Heritage Access 2022* with those from *State of Museum Access 2018*.⁸

1. There was no change in the overall proportion of museums and heritage sites that have, or do not have access information on their website.

81% of museums and heritage sites in 2022 (1834/2258) and 81% of accredited museums (1301/1606) in 2018 had some form of access information. Thus, the proportion of museums and heritage sites with no access information remained at nearly 1 in 5 (19%). A table with proportions by UK nations and regions can be found in [Appendix 1](#). There remains a significant task to engage with these 400+ cultural heritage venues and convince them of the importance of providing access information for their visitors.

2. The amount of information about access provision at museum and heritage sites has increased significantly since 2018.

While this does not necessarily reflect that onsite accessibility has improved, we can conclude that those venues with access information are providing much more of this in 2022 than they did in 2018. This is a very positive development with significant benefits for disabled visitors.

3. There were significant increases in the proportion of sites that mentioned aspects relevant to all or a large proportion of visitors with access requirements, while the increases are less marked for information for groups who have historically been under-recognised as requiring accessibility measures.

All those access aids, facilities, resources or events included in our checklists in both 2018 and 2022 have shown an increase in mentions. While this is very positive, with a few exceptions, those which show larger

3. Executive summary

increases are aspects which started with a higher baseline and were mainly connected with people who face mobility barriers. Information relevant to blind and visually impaired people, D/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people, and neurodivergent people do show increased mentions, but from a lower baseline, and in the majority of cases not as large.

Tables showing the proportion of venues each year that mentioned specific access provisions in *State of Museum Access 2018* and *Heritage Access 2022*.

| | 2018 | 2022 |
|-------------------------------|------|------|
| Contact information | 39% | 56% |
| Disability awareness training | 10% | 21% |
| 'Getting there' information | 19% | 32% |
| Accessible/Blue Badge parking | 48% | 64% |
| Lifts | 35% | 49% |
| Accessible toilets | 54% | 68% |
| Changing Places toilets | 4% | 8% |

| Blind and visually impaired people | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|------|------|
| Assistance/guide dogs | 40% | 64% |
| Recorded audio-described guides | 3% | 6% |
| Live audio description tours | 5% | 7% |
| Braille resources | 10% | 10% |
| Handling/tactile objects | 11% | 11% |
| Large Print resources | 20% | 33% |
| Magnifying glasses | 4% | 5% |

3. Executive summary

| D/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people | 2018 | 2022 |
|--|-------------|-------------|
| Captioning on AV material | 3% | 7% |
| Induction loops | 18% | 29% |
| Transcripts of AV material | 4% | 5% |
| BSL signed tours | 3% | 4% |
| <hr/> | | |
| Ear defenders | 1% | 4% |
| Sensory kits/backpacks | 1% | 3.5% |
| Autism-friendly events | 1% | 4% |
| Visual story | 2% | 9% |

Note that for the tables above, 1% of the total venues surveyed equates to around 13 venues (2018) or 18 venues (2022).

The aspects listed above are those where we have 2018 and 2022 data for direct comparison. These are only a selection of access aids relevant for these groups and we do imply that these are the only appropriate or useful ways of developing access and inclusion.

4. Heritage accessibility

This section explores accessibility onsite at your museum and heritage site, in sections covering different stages of the visitor journey, aids and resources available onsite, and resources that can be offered online for use onsite.

%



Just over 4 out of 5 (81%) of the 2,258 heritage websites in the project scope had some form of access information to support disabled visitors.

This is the same proportion as in *State of Museum Access 2018* (81% of accredited museums), but higher than in *State of Museum Access 2016* (73% of accredited museums).

4.1 Digital media types

Visitors to your website may have a wide range of access requirements and/or preferences, and it is best practice to offer them the choice of receiving content in the way that suits them best.

We recommend basing your access information on text, but where possible, supplementing this with other types of digital media, such as images, video and audio. In this section, we discuss some of the uses for these different media types in your access information. Each type is also covered in [Section 5: Online accessibility](#).

Audio

Access information can be presented as recorded spoken word, using audio files that can be streamed (using an audio player from a platform such as SoundCloud) or downloaded. Resources aimed at blind and visually impaired people benefit from being in audio format, such as **descriptive directions** ([Section 4.4 Getting there/venue information](#)).

4. Heritage accessibility

Blind and visually impaired people who use a screen reader to access websites will already be experiencing your website as audio through a computer-generated voice that reads the navigation links and page text. Hearing a human voice for important information is always welcome, and demonstrates to the listener that they are considered and included by your venue.

For information on audio accessibility, visit [Section 4.8 Audio](#).

- **1.75% of heritage websites with access information had audio content, in every case either for audio description, an audio-described venue introduction or descriptive directions designed for blind and visually impaired visitors.**

Downloadable documents

Instead of simply presenting access information on the webpage, many museums and heritage sites put all or some of the access information within a downloadable document. While downloadable documents can be useful, we recommend putting all the access information you have on the webpage, for accessibility reasons. If you do have a downloadable document, then ensure this has exactly the same information.

When it would be useful to have copies of a resource that can be used by an individual or group during a visit, these benefit from being in document format for download and printing beforehand.

Downloadable documents may come in different formats, and include resources such as Easy Read guides, sensory maps, or visual stories ([Section 4.7 Online resources for use onsite](#)).

For information about document accessibility go to [Section 5.9 Downloadable documents](#).

4. Heritage accessibility

% Of the heritage websites with access information, 33% (1 in 3) had one or more documents available for download from the access information page.

- 16% of these put all the access information within the document
- 84% of these had access information both on the webpage and in the document

In the main, this was named an Access Guide (56%), where detailed access information was provided, or sometimes an Access Policy (21%) or Access Statement (9%). The different terminology here can be confusing or misleading: policies are useful internal documents but lack the practical usefulness and welcoming tone of a guide.

Maps

Links to interactive map/travel planning websites (such as Google Maps, Traveline and Transport for London) should be accompanied by a low-tech alternative, such as a simple, large print and high contrast map showing how to get to and from the heritage site via foot, bicycle, car and public transport. Also provide a clear, large print and high contrast version of the floor plan of the public areas of the museum or heritage site.

Photography and video

Photographs and video can enhance your access information by showing:

- **Key aspects of a venue**, such as the exterior and entrance(s), interior views such as the entrance hall, information desk, key galleries, shop, café and other parts. These allow people to familiarise themselves with your venue before their visit. Images should be a good size or have a large version: this means that visually impaired people can access them as well.
- **Specific access facilities**, such as an accessible toilet, or a lift
- **Potential access barriers**, such as a steep path, set of steps, narrow doorway etc.

4. Heritage accessibility

- **Visitors with visible disabilities.** Many museums and heritage venues include images of people, which sends a message about who is being welcomed and included. If this is the case for you, include among them people with visible disabilities, and consider also diversity and intersectionality: disabled people are young and old, and have a range of other characteristics. They may have a support worker or companion or be visiting alone and independently. Note, such images should not be restricted to your access pages; use them throughout your website.

Video is often used by museums and heritage sites to engage with audiences and it is an excellent tool to encourage and support visitors, including those with access requirements. A welcome video with a walkthrough of the main parts of a venue can help people familiarise themselves with your site. This could take in the entrance, information desk, meeting a visitor host or other front-of-house staff member.

To ensure all the information on the access page is understood it should also be presented in a BSL video, as BSL is the best and most accessible form of communication for those who use it.

For information on image and video accessibility, go to [Section 5.6 Images](#) and [Section 5.7 Video](#).

% 45% of heritage websites used images in their access information, illustrating:

- **Features of the site (56%)**
- **Visitors with visible disabilities (7%)**

5% of heritage websites with access information include video.

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4.2 Contact information

Provide visitors with information so that they can contact the venue about access. They may have additional questions not covered on your website or wish to request personal assistance on the day of their visit. In *Euan's Guide Access Survey 2021*, 35% of respondents said that they would contact a venue directly to find out information before a visit.⁹

- **Give options.** People have communication preferences and access requirements. For example, D/deaf people are likely to prefer using email, while some blind people prefer the phone.
- **Avoid online forms**, particularly those that use CAPTCHA (a system intended to distinguish human from machine input to combat spam and automated extraction of data from websites). These are often inaccessible for screen reader users, even when an audio alternative is provided. Provide an email address instead.
- **Give a dedicated access contact**, which reassures people that those managing the enquiry have suitable knowledge and training about access and disability.
- **Respond to emails promptly.** A visitor may be enquiring about a potential visit the same or next day.
- **Train staff** so they are aware of and understand the access barriers, aids and resources available.

% 56% of heritage sites with access information provided contact details for access enquiries (2018: 39%). Of these:

- 86% included a phone number
- 83% included an email address, 12% of these for a named individual or access specific
- 72% provided both a phone number and email address
- 8% included an online form

4. Heritage accessibility

We only found one heritage site, Hever Castle in Kent, which provided a live chat service. Being able to reach a real person via online chat has revolutionised the world of customer service enquiries, cutting down waiting times and frustrations. Live chat features are popular and, if done well, can be accessible.

An important consideration is that contact should never be offered instead of online access information. We have found a few heritage websites that give little or no access information, but instead request or suggest that people contact the venue to discuss their access needs in advance of a visit. While this may be well-intentioned, an individual may experience communication barriers. And for everyone it removes:

- **Equality of treatment:** everyone should be able to find the information they need online and make a visit without the need to contact the venue in advance.
- **Privacy and choice:** a person may prefer not to submit themselves to scrutiny and answer questions about their impairments or chronic health condition. They should have the same options as other visitors – to plan their visit online, in their own time.
- **Spontaneity:** a person may wish to visit the same or the following day, which might not be possible with this additional hurdle.

4.3 Awards and awareness training

Awards

Give details of awards that your venue has won, or schemes that you are part of. The information will be very reassuring for visitors with access needs.

A total of 24 heritage sites covered by our research gave information about awards in recognition for access or inclusion.

These ranged from local or regional schemes, such as the Beautiful South Tourism Awards (Access and Inclusivity category) and Visit York Award for Accessible and Inclusive Tourism; to national schemes, such as the National

4. Heritage accessibility

Autistic Society (NAS) Autism Friendly Award, Kids in Museums Family Friendly Museum Award (Best Accessible Museum category) or Visit England's Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS).

Training

Reassure visitors by letting them know what disability awareness training front-of-house staff have attended.

For details on organisations who can provide training, go to [Appendix 4](#) for the *Heritage Access 2022* partner organisations, and [Appendix 5](#) for other access organisations and initiatives.

% 21% of heritage sites with access information mentioned that staff had attended one or more disability awareness training courses (2018: 10%).

These were:

- General disability awareness (11%)
- Dementia Friends (3%)
- British Sign Language (2.5%)
- Autism awareness (1.5%)
- Hidden disabilities sunflower lanyard recognition training (1.5%)
- Deaf awareness (1%)
- Visual awareness/guiding (15%)
- Makaton (<1%)
- Other training (<1%)

The actual number of museums and heritage sites where staff have received training may be higher, but we hope that the increase from 10% to 21% is indicative of an actual increase in training undertaken.

4.4 Getting there/venue information

The access information page should have 'getting there' information that is additional to and more detailed than in general visitor information. This should include descriptive information designed for blind and visually

4. Heritage accessibility

impaired visitors on how to get to the venue, covering walking surface, landmarks, distances etc. This may also be of benefit to someone who is neurodivergent or with a cognitive disability.

 32% of heritage sites with access information provided additional 'getting there' information (2018: 19%).

Resource

VocalEyes, Writing descriptive directions and venue information for blind and visually impaired visitors: [VocalEyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues)

Entrances and doorways

Both the entrance(s) to a venue and internal doors are common access barriers. Provide details on:

- Whether the door is manual or automatic, or held open during opening hours
 - If automatic, whether there is a push button to locate and press
 - If manual, whether it is heavy to open. Include the material (glass, solid oak, for example)
- Which direction a door opens
- For revolving doors and turnstiles, details on where the 'pass' door or gate is and how this can be opened
- The clear opening width of a door, or single door leaf
- For double-leaved doors: these cannot be opened on both sides by people using mobility aids and are thus not usually accessible
- Is the threshold level? If not, provide information on alternative access.

4. Heritage accessibility

% 32% of heritage sites with access information provided provided information on entrances/doorways (2018: not checked). The following characteristics were mentioned:

- **Width of doorways (13%)**
- **Automatic doors (11%)**
- **Heavy doors / manual use (9%)**
- **Two doors close together (1%)**
- **Revolving doors (0.4%)**
- **Turnstiles (0.1%)**

Access routes: step-free and level access

When considering the access route to a museum or heritage site from a car park or the boundary of the site, it is vital to give details of **step-free access**, which includes ramps, lifts, platform lifts, and slopes (i.e. any means of overcoming a level change without using steps) and **level access**, which means there is literally no level change. Sometimes these terms are confused or used to mean the same, but this is an important distinction.

British Standards recommend the widths of an access route and what the pedestrian surface should be, to suit all weather conditions, which is important to those who use a wheelchair, mobility scooter or other mobility aid.¹⁰

Describe the surface of routes to the entrance, particularly if there are changes and if any part is uneven, such as paving, cobblestones, gravel, bark, mud and grass, which may all be inaccessible to people who experience mobility barriers.

% 62% of heritage sites with access information mentioned step-free/level access (2018: not checked).

Of these, 31% mentioned both step-free and level access, while 31% mentioned only one (either step-free or level access).

4. Heritage accessibility

Guide/hearing/assistance dogs

It is a legal requirement for venues to welcome guide, hearing and assistance dogs. It is good practice to have information on what facilities are available, for example nearby exercise and spending areas, and the availability of water and a water bowl.

The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health has determined that guide, hearing and assistance dogs should not be prevented access to restaurants, cafes, and other food premises as their training means that they are unlikely to present a risk to hygiene.

Of the heritage sites with online access information:

- Guide/hearing/assistance dogs welcomed (64%) (2018: 40%)
- information on areas onsite where dogs not allowed (5%)
- information on relief/spending areas (4%)
- information on exercise areas for guide/assistance dogs (2%)
- information on water availability (1%)

Resource

Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Assistance dogs: a guide for all businesses*, [EqualityHumanRights.com/en/publication-download/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses](https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/assistance-dogs-guide-all-businesses)

Equality and Human Rights Commission, *Take the lead: a guide to welcoming customers with assistance dogs*, [EqualityHumanRights.com/en/publication-download/take-lead-guide-welcoming-customers-assistance-dogs](https://equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/take-lead-guide-welcoming-customers-assistance-dogs)

Assistance Dogs UK, AssistanceDogs.org.uk

Hearing Dogs for Deaf People, HearingDogs.org.uk

4. Heritage accessibility

Mobility aids

Mobility aids might include folding stools or manual wheelchairs to use inside and mobility scooters or golf buggies for large gardens. Make it clear if there are restrictions on mobility scooters or other motorised vehicles in all or part of a venue or site and offer alternatives. There should also be somewhere safe and covered for visitors to leave devices outside.

If your venue offers the loan or rental of mobility aids, detail the cost if relevant, information about how to book, and where to collect and return. Consider also providing contact details and linking to a local mobility hire service.

📊 48% of heritage sites with access information mentioned the loan/rental of mobility aids (2018: not checked).

Of these, sites told users that the following mobility aids were available:

- Wheelchair (31%)
- Mobility scooter (7%)
- Folding stools (3%)
- Golf buggy (2%)
- Rollators (wheeled walkers) (1%)

The following costing information was provided by sites:

- Free of charge (20%)
- For a fee (1%)
- Unclear regarding fee (27%)

Parking

Provide details on the following, where relevant:

- The number of accessible/Blue Badge holder parking bays available
- Parking charges, booking requirements and online booking system
- Accessible parking location, how to get to it, and the distance between car park and venue
- Shuttle bus or other transport available to get to the entrance (e.g. where to get on, how to get back)

4. Heritage accessibility

- Pedestrian route to the venue from the car park, including crossing points, dropped curbs, gradients, and ground surface
- Availability of nearby accessible parking if there is none onsite
- Clear and safe set-down point for visitors and/or mobility aids

% 64% of heritage sites with access information mentioned accessible/Blue Badge parking (2018: 48%). Of these, the types of information available included:

- Disabled parking available offsite/nearby (19%)
- Distance between car park and venue (30%)
- Dropped curbs (6%)
- Parking charges (12%)
- Lack of onsite accessible/Blue Badge holder parking (5%)
- Where/how to set down visitors and/or mobility aids (14%)

★ Example

New Lanark Visitor Centre provides good information about accessible parking via their accessibility guide

[NewLanark.org/your-visit/accessibility](https://www.newlanark.org/your-visit/accessibility)

Re-entry to the site

It is helpful to be clear in advance about the policy on re-entry to a venue (or exhibition within the venue) if visitors wish to exit and use toilets, or rest and recuperate. This provision can make a visit to a museum or heritage site more manageable for many people. Additionally, queue allowance for neurodivergent and/or disabled visitors will also often make a visit more manageable.

% Only 1.8% of heritage sites with access information mentioned their policy on re-entry (2018: not checked).

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4.5 Features onsite

In this section, we identify a range of potential access barriers within a heritage site or museum, and the many access facilities, aids and resources that can support visitors. We list the type of information that it is useful to detail in your access information page.

Captioning on AV/films in galleries and displays

Captions are text that reflect the audio of a video in a visual form. These are synced to the audio, allowing the viewer to engage with the video and understand the audio at the same time as anyone else watching. To be truly accessible, captions include audio elements beyond purely transcribing the speech, such as name labels for offscreen speakers, sound labels, and music labels.

Captions and subtitles benefit people who are D/deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing, people who speak English as an additional language, people who are neurodivergent, children, academics, and friends and family of people who rely on captions/subtitles. They can also be useful for many more, as they allow viewers to understand a video from further away, without having to have the volume loud or offer multiple sets of headphones. This is particularly useful in a space with multiple video screens.

% 7% of heritage sites with access information mentioned having captions in audio-visual materials onsite (2018: 3%).

Flooring

Provide details about uneven floor surfaces. Highly polished floors can look as though they are wet or very slippery, and dramatic changes to dark floor surfaces can be perceived as level changes or even voids. Both can cause hesitancy or stumbling as people attempt to avoid the perceived hazard, so warn in advance.

4. Heritage accessibility

% 51% of heritage sites with access information provided information on flooring/surfaces (2018: not checked).

Hospitality

Have the same consideration to detail for hospitality functions within the site, such as a café, restaurant, shop or outdoor play areas, as the heritage itself.

Aspects to note:

- Location
- Proximity and accessible route(s) from entrance, WCs, and lifts
- Wheelchair-accessible spaces, seating areas and play equipment
- Alternatives for viewing goods and making purchases if needed

Online information about menus and dietary options are also helpful, as is additional information on places where visitors can eat their own food, and if this is a quiet place.

% 35% of heritage sites with access information included information about access within on-site hospitality locations e.g. restaurants or shops (2018: not checked).

Induction loops

Also known as a T-Loop or hearing loop, an induction loop is a cable that is installed to run around a room and broadcasts an audio feed through an electromagnetic field. The audio feed can come from a microphone, or any other audio source. People with compatible hearing aids or cochlear implants can set their devices to the induction loop setting to pick up the signal. The benefit of this is that visitors can hear the audio feed direct from the source, without interference from background noise, or loss in volume due to distance from a speaker.

4. Heritage accessibility

% 29% of heritage sites with access information mentioned induction loops (2018: 18%).

Lifts

Where relevant, provide details of all passenger, platform or stair lifts, including:

- Location
- Size of interior/standing capacity
- If a lift is staff-operated, impact on available space
- Load-bearing capacity of a platform or wheelchair stair-lift
- If there is a need to reverse out, whether a mirror is provided and information about landing area
- Height of lift control panel or buttons
- Tactile buttons, braille, audio announcements
- If a platform lift requires constant pressure on a button in order to move
- Lighting levels

Venues should be transparent about any public areas that can not be accessed because there is no lift, and provide clear information as to why a lift is not installed. Provide information about alternative means of access, such as a tablet, desktop computer or booklet with images or a virtual tour (and accessible alternatives), for those unable to access public spaces in upper or lower floors.

% 49% of heritage sites with access information mentioned lifts (2018: 35%).

Of these:

- Presence of lift with no extra information (9%)
- Absence of lift (11%)
- Lift location (20%)
- Lift dimensions (11%)
- Type of lift, e.g. passenger, platform, stair etc. (13%)

4. Heritage accessibility

Seating

The availability of seating at a heritage venue, whether inside or outside, is important for many people, not just for rest, but also for recuperating, reflecting, or pausing and withdrawing from busy activities and spaces.

Information should be provided on the types and locations of seating. This seating should include whether the seating available is a bench, has a back rest, has arms or not (a variety of options is best) and locations should include not only busy places, but quiet (and when outdoors, shaded) places too.

21% of heritage sites with access information mentioned seating (2018: not checked).

8% provided further information on the types and location of seating available.

Sensory environment

The sensory environment of your museum can present barriers to visitors but can also provide engagement opportunities. Providing sensory access information is beneficial for large numbers of visitors.

Visual stories and sensory maps ([Section 4.7 Online resources for onsite use](#)) are useful tools that can explain what your sensory environment is like and allow visitors to decide what will work for them. Some people may want to avoid loud noises and crowds, bright lights and smells while others enjoy smells or sounds which help bring exhibits to life.

As well as permanent displays, consider temporary exhibitions, which might provide a very different experience from a previous visit.

Below are some considerations when providing details about your sensory environment:

Crowds

- Times of the day or week when the museum is quieter
- An entrance/exit that can be quieter to access
- If school groups visit on particular days

4. Heritage accessibility

Lighting

- Very bright or very dark spaces
- Flashing lights
- Places where there is a transition from bright to dark spaces or vice versa, which can be disorientating and take time to get used to
- Exhibits with low lighting for conservation reasons

Noise and Sound

- Quieter areas of the museum or heritage site to visit
- Routes that avoid noisy areas
- Quiet places to sit down or for a visitor to eat their own food
- Places there are unexpected noises, such as a dinosaur roaring
- Places where sound is triggered on entry/passing
- Toilets with noisy hand driers
- Regular fire alarm tests

Smells

- Places people might encounter strong smells of food from the café or restaurant, particularly if they are near the entrance
- Displays that have smells built in

Temperature

- If certain areas of the museum or heritage site are particularly cold or warm, whether seasonally or generally

% 33% of heritage sites with access information mentioned at least one aspect of the onsite sensory environment (2018: not checked).

Among these the following aspects were mentioned:

- **Lighting levels (28%)**
- **Noisy, busy and/or quiet times and spaces to visit (12%)**
- **Loud/sudden noises (7%)**
- **Flashing lights (3%)**
- **Sudden change in lighting (2%)**

4. Heritage accessibility

Toilets: accessible toilets

Toilets are a major consideration for many visitors and information should be clearly and readily available. This should include location and details of men's, women's and gender-neutral toilets, as well as any enlarged or ambulant accessible facilities, that is, suitable for people with sensory loss, arthritis or who require the use of a walking frame, but not a wheelchair.

Provide information about wheelchair-accessible WCs:

- Number and location
- Size of facility
- Left or right-hand transfer
- Whether a radar key is needed (and where one is available from)

If there are no wheelchair-accessible toilets, information should be given about the location and opening hours of any nearby facilities.

The unisex wheelchair-accessible WC should not, if possible, be the only gender-neutral toilet available, nor should it be used for baby-change facilities as this takes the toilet facility away from those that may have no alternative. It also impacts the available space within the WC itself, needed for manoeuvring and transferring from a wheelchair.

% Of the heritage sites with access information:

- 68% stated that they have accessible toilets at the venue (2018: 54%)
- 10% gave information about the nearest accessible toilet

Toilets: Changing Places toilets

An estimated 250,000 people in the UK cannot use standard accessible toilets. This includes people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis and cerebral palsy. Changing

4. Heritage accessibility

Places toilets have extra features that standard accessible toilets do not have. This can include a height-adjustable changing bench, a hoist system and plenty of space.

Let visitors know in advance if there is a Changing Places toilet at your heritage venue and ensure it is registered on the Changing Places website. Provide the same information as with any accessible toilet – location, internal size, available fittings and devices and whether a Radar key is needed for access. Alternatively, provide information about the location and directions to the nearest one.

% 12% of heritage sites with access information mentioned Changing Places toilets (2018: 4%).

- Changing Places toilet onsite (8%)
- Gave information about the nearest Changing Places toilet (4%)
- Provided a link to the Changing Places website (0.4%)

Resource

Changing Places, changing-places.org

4.6 Access aids/resources onsite

Audio-described guide (for blind and visually impaired people)

Standard audioguides (mentioned by 9% of venues on their access page) are not sufficient alone as an access aid for a blind or visually impaired person.

Audio-descriptive or audio-described (AD) guides are written by expert, trained audio describers, who weave in detailed and structured description of objects and spaces with contextual information. If the guide covers a range of rooms, or objects in a gallery, it should include detailed directions, guiding the visitor from one tour stop to the next.

4. Heritage accessibility


Make the recorded AD available both:

Online as audio files that a visitor can stream or download on to their own device in advance or during their visit. Provide the tour as both a single mp3 file, and as a playlist of individual tracks. SoundCloud has an audio player that you can embed in your website.

In your venue:

- **Using a handheld device** with physical control buttons: keep several of these charged and ready for use at the information desk. Audioguide companies can sell or lease these, or you can purchase specialist devices from RNIB's online shop.
- **On an app for iOS and Android.** These must support the operating system's text-to-speech functionality (iOS: VoiceOver, Android: TalkBack). If you provide visitors with devices, remember that some blind or visually impaired visitors may have little or no experience of using touchscreen apps, so a simple, high contrast interface is recommended.

Publicise recorded AD guides and downloadable audio on your website access information page, within the venue and throughout your marketing offer. Blind and visually impaired people will either learn about the resource directly or via word-of-mouth from friends, family and companions. You should also actively promote the resource to visitors using a white cane or guide dog.

 6% of heritage venues with access information mentioned a recorded audio-described guide (2018: 3%).

Resource

Barnsley Museums have provided audio descriptions of items in their collection, [Barnsley-Museums.com/accessibility/audio-description](https://www.barnsley-museums.com/accessibility/audio-description)

4. Heritage accessibility

Braille resources

Around 20-30,000 people in the UK regularly use braille and many more occasionally use braille labelling and signage. It is an important element of many blind people's lives, and has adapted to digital technology in the form of e-braille readers. Braille has two levels:

- Grade 1 is a letter-by-letter translation. It can be understood by all braille readers, and should be used for single words, such as tactile instructive signs
- Grade 2 uses contractions for common words. It takes up less room and is quicker to read. It should be used for longer texts, such as gallery interpretation. The audience for this grade of braille will be smaller

Be prepared for some editorial changes. For example, the structure of a document might need to be clarified, a table of contents added or visual references described.

 10% of heritage sites with access information mentioned braille resources (2018: 3%).

Resource

RNIB's Sightline Directory (SightLineDirectory.org.uk) lists companies that transcribe and print braille booklets.

Ear defenders

Ear defenders help block out and reduce both unexpected and background noise, which can be distressing for people with sensory processing difficulties which includes people with ADHD, autism and dyspraxia. Families tend to bring their own ear defenders but having a few pairs available for loan from the front desk could make a big difference to a visit. Let visitors know you have them.

4. Heritage accessibility

% 4% of heritage sites with access information mentioned ear defenders (2018: 1%).

Fidget/fiddle products

Fidget/fiddle products help occupy anxious hands and can provide a distraction from anxiety. Neurodivergent people, including people who identify as autistic may benefit from fidget/fiddle products, and they can also be helpful for adults with dementia or memory loss. They provide a source of visual, sensory and tactile stimulation. They can easily be added to Sensory kits ([Section 4.6 Access aids/resources onsite](#)).

% 1.5% of heritage sites with access information mentioned fidget/fiddle products (2018: not checked).

Handling/tactile objects

Museums and heritage sites can make original or replica objects available for handling or touch, whether on open display, on request or for specific events. If objects on display or parts of the building fabric can be touched, you need to ensure that the rules are consistent, known by all staff and clearly conveyed to visitors.

Some blind and visually impaired people enjoy the experience of engaging with art through touch, while others may prefer not to. To ensure that they are used, touch opportunities should always be:

- **Meaningful:** consider what knowledge can be gained from the experience, and if in doubt, consult with a blind or visually impaired person or local group
- **Accompanied by description,** whether in braille, recorded, or delivered verbally by staff
- **Considered in relation to COVID-19 and general hygiene**

4. Heritage accessibility

 11% of heritage sites with access information mentioned handling/tactile objects (2018: 11%).


Large Print

Large Print versions of publications are used by many visually impaired people, and people with poor eyesight, learning disabilities or dyslexia. It costs little to produce Large Print versions of labels and panel texts, free guides or maps in-house.

Be consistent about where the documents are located (as near to the entrance as possible) so return visitors know where to find them. Think about ease of carrying – break the texts down into manageable booklets rather than having one heavy volume. Large Print also needs to be structured in an accessible way.

Provide a downloadable digital file of labels and panel text online which visitors can read before their visit, by changing the font size or reading with text-to-speech software.

For accessibility tips for downloadable documents, go to [Section 5.9 Downloadable documents](#).

 33% of heritage sites with access information mentioned Large Print labels, guides or maps (2018: 20%).

Example

Imperial War Museum IWM.org.uk/large-print-guides

Resource

UK Association for Accessible Formats (UKAAF.org) provides guidelines and minimum standards.

4. Heritage accessibility

Magnifying glasses

Magnifying glasses are useful to help people read labels and inspect details of artworks and artefacts on display. Loan these out from your information desk or embed them into displays.

% 5% of heritage sites with access information mentioned magnifying glasses (2018: 4%).

Sensory kits, backpacks and boxes

Having objects to touch, smell and listen offer an excellent way to engage with stories and exhibits and can benefit all visitors.

Sensory kits can help individuals and families with self-guided exploration of your museum space or temporary exhibition. These can be generic, including objects like ear defenders, torches, fidget cubes and magnifying glasses, or they can be tailored to your spaces including trails and photographs. They may use PECS (Picture Exchange Symbols) as an added layer of interpretation.

% 3.5% of heritage sites with access information mentioned sensory kits for visitors (2018: 1%).

★ Example

Maidstone Museum offers a sensory kit for visitors
museum.maidstone.gov.uk/visit-us/accessibility/send

Transcripts of audio-visual material

A transcript provides a written representation of audio content, whether an audio guide, audio exhibition content, or as part of a video. Usually provided as a printed document, these can be given to visitors to carry around a venue.

4. Heritage accessibility

They can also be displayed next to an exhibition entrance, to make it easier for visitors to access the correct transcript. Do not assume visitors can hear the video and find the correct part of the transcript to match. A transcript can be easier and cheaper to provide and implement for venues than subtitles but does not provide as good access. However, they are still useful and many visitors prefer to have transcripts.

% 5% of heritage sites with access information mentioned transcripts of audio-visual material (2018: 4%).

4.7 Online resources for use onsite

Communication cards

These were found on a handful of websites. For those on Tate's website, you are invited to print them at home or save as a PDF onto a phone or tablet. You can then use them as a means of visual, or nonverbal, communication, and show them to a member of staff to ask for directions to facilities in the gallery, including toilet, café, seating, shop, quiet room and exit. Two colour versions, with white or yellow background (favoured by many visually impaired people) are provided.

★ Example

Tate, [tate.org.uk/visit/accessibility](https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/accessibility)

Museum of East Dorset, [MuseumOfEastDorset.co.uk/accessibility/send](https://www.MuseumOfEastDorset.co.uk/accessibility/send)


Easy Read guides

Easy Read format presents complex or difficult information in a simpler and more accessible way. It is often used by people with a learning disability or other conditions that can make processing information difficult.

4. Heritage accessibility

To create a successful Easy Read guide, we recommend the following:

- Keep the end user in mind, and work with experts
- Simplify language and explain any necessary complicated words or terms
- Use short sentences for text
- Use an image to represent each sentence of text where possible
- Lay the page out in a grid with two columns: images on the left, and text to the right
- Text should be in a plain black font (no italics), minimum 14pt, with x 1.5 spacing
- Include page numbers
- Avoid fancy design elements

 4% of heritage sites with access information provided an Easy Read guide to their venue (2018: not checked).

Example

Penlee Museum and Art Gallery's Easy Read guide (PDF, 3.5 MB)

PenleeHouse.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Penlee-Easy-Read-guide2.pdf

Resource

North Yorkshire Partnerships guide on how to create an Easy Read guide NYPartnerships.org.uk/easyread

4. Heritage accessibility

Sensory map

A sensory map highlights areas of your museum which might present sensory barriers; it can also point out areas of sensory engagement such as hands-on exhibits. It is a quick and easy way to access information at a glance and helps with wayfinding on a visit.

📊 2.5% of heritage sites with access information mentioned sensory maps (2018: not checked).

★ Example

Science Museum's sensory map (PDF, 0.7Mb)

[ScienceMuseum.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Sensory-Map-Science-Museum-July-2022.pdf](https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-07/Sensory-Map-Science-Museum-July-2022.pdf)

Visual story

A visual story is a short description of your museum and what will happen on a visit. It should use plain language and lots of clear photographs. It can be created for specific events or for a general visit, and with a range of audience groups in mind.

For example, a visual story can help people prepare for their visit, such as those who identify as autistic, those with sensory processing difficulties such as ADHD and dyspraxia, and those with a learning disability, dementia/memory loss or anxiety.

A visual story is a living document and needs to be regularly updated to reflect the changing museum or heritage site's environment. It should include information on stairs, lifts, toilets and the café as well as the galleries. It is helpful to show the entrance to your venue, what staff uniforms look like and what will greet you on arrival at the museum.

4. Heritage accessibility

If possible, some information about the journey to the museum from the nearest transport hub can also be helpful.

 9% of heritage sites with access information had a visual story available for online visitors (2018: 2%).

Example

York Castle Museum visual story (PDF, 5.1 Mb)

[YorkCastleMuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/06/York-Castle-Museum-Visual-Story.pdf](https://www.yorkcastlemuseum.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/06/York-Castle-Museum-Visual-Story.pdf)

Tate Modern's web-based visual story created with Autism in Museums, [tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tate-modern-visual-story](https://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/tate-modern-visual-story)

4.8 Access events

Access events are those designed with disabled visitors in mind, such as BSL led tours, touch tours for blind and visually impaired visitors, or 'relaxed' or 'quiet' opening times for neurodivergent visitors. They should not preclude museums and heritage sites from designing events to be as inclusive as possible for everyone.

Any access-led events should be included in, or linked from, your access information, not just in the 'Events' or 'What's On' section. This creates an easier online visitor journey and increases the chance of reaching the target audience.

Activities for families

Consider offering activities for families with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent children, usually referred to as SEN (Special Education Needs) or SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) in England and Wales, and ASN (Additional Support Needs) in Scotland.

4. Heritage accessibility

Many families with SEND children find it difficult to take part in regular family activities because of the crowds, noise or type of activity. We recommend the following:

- Train staff
- Reduce the numbers of people who can take part
- Offer a quiet space
- Design activities that the whole family can get involved in
- Provide activities that can be adapted
- Engage children using the senses

Resource

SEND in Museums, SENDinMuseums.org

Audio-described tours

Live audio-described tours are a popular way for blind and visually impaired people to experience museums and heritage sites. They provide descriptions of the spaces, displays, objects or artworks, and may focus on a heritage site or a selection of highlights within a museum gallery or exhibition.

The verbal description can be supplemented by touch opportunities – handling objects or tactile diagrams – before or during the tour.

Live audio-described tours can be:

- **On demand:** allowing visitors to book a tour in advance and assigning this to a trained member of staff. If you have several staff or volunteers trained in running audio-described tours, you could even offer this service on demand without prior booking. However, be sure you can deliver on any commitment made.

4. Heritage accessibility

On-demand tours give blind and visually impaired visitors the same flexibility and opportunity for spontaneity to visit and gain access to the venue and collection as anyone else. They can request specific artworks, artefacts or areas of a heritage site, and levels of detail to suit their preferences.

- **Scheduled:** This could be delivered by venue staff trained in delivering audio-described tours, or a professional audio describer, both possibly co-delivering with a curator or other member of staff who knows the venue or collections well.

Scheduled tours offer a social experience for visitors with opportunities to engage with other visitors on the tour, have a dialogue with the tour leader, request descriptive detail and offer their own interpretations.

Things for consideration in your access information are:

- Whether pre-booking is necessary, or if it is drop-in
- Group capacity, including sighted companions and guide dogs
- Length of the event and whether breaks or refreshments are included
- Availability of staff with sighted guiding and visual awareness training to greet and guide visitors

**% 7% of heritage sites with access information offered audio-described/
touch tours (2018: 5%).**

5% offered on demand AD/touch tours

2% offered scheduled AD/touch tours

Four venues (0.2%) offered both

4. Heritage accessibility

Autism-friendly events

Autism-friendly events and openings usually have a restricted number of participants to keep noise and crowds to a minimum.

We advise considering how such events are named and promoted as they can benefit people of all ages and neurodivergent people more generally, including people with specific neurodivergent profiles such as ADHD and dyspraxia, or multiple coexisting profiles.

Staff have usually had autism awareness training and the museum or heritage site will often provide a visual story or sensory map to support visitors. Other accommodations include **sensory kits**, quiet spaces and increased signage. Lights may be turned up in dark areas and sounds down in noisy galleries.

Provide clear information on the website about what to expect. Naming a point of contact so visitors can ask about specific requirements is very important.

Some museums and heritage sites offer autism-friendly events connected to paid exhibitions free of charge, giving autistic visitors the opportunity to increase confidence with short visits to begin with, building up to longer visits.

Autism-friendly events are often held before or after regular hours, when it is easier to control visitor numbers. However, it is important to offer choice as travelling to a venue for an 8am start is not easy for everyone.

 **4% of heritage sites with access information offered autism-friendly events (2018: 1%).**

BSL signed tours

Many Deaf people use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language. BSL is a separate language from English, not a direct representation. As such, people who use BSL often prefer to communicate and receive information in

4. Heritage accessibility

BSL. BSL signed tours can be led either by a Deaf BSL user, or an interpreter who will repeat what the tour guide says in BSL, enabling BSL users to enjoy the tour in their preferred language.

% 4% of heritage sites with access information mentioned BSL signed tours (2018: 3%).

Relaxed events

Similar to autism-friendly events, relaxed events are open to a wide range of visitors who would prefer a visit with reduced crowds and noise. Relaxed events benefit many different types of visitors including those with Tourette Syndrome, dementia/memory loss or learning disabilities.

The main hallmark of relaxed events is flexibility, so visitors can come and go as they wish. The sensory environment is taken into consideration so loud noises and bright lights are adjusted. Staff training, visual stories, sensory toys and a chill-out space all help to make a relaxed event accessible.

Some museums and heritage sites use a regular public closing days to offer a whole 'relaxed day' giving visitors the choice of what time of day to visit.

% Around 3% of heritage sites with access information offered relaxed events (2018: 1%).

★ Example

Post Early at the Postal Museum

[PostalMuseum.org/event/post-early-relaxed-events](https://www.postalmuseum.org/event/post-early-relaxed-events)

5. Online accessibility

Integral to communicating about access with your visitors is making the information accessible. Those seeking this information will have a range of access requirements, and much like at your venue, good online accessibility benefits everyone.

This section sets out some of the key accessibility factors for digital content. Digital content accessibility is the editorial responsibility of those creating or commissioning digital content. Only a few of the items detailed here require a developer or significant technical support.

There are no comparison statistics, as we did not check online accessibility for *State of Museum Access 2018*.

5.1 Location and structure

Location

Depending on the size of the venue and its website, the access information should be on the Visit/Visiting page, or on a dedicated page within that section. For small venues/websites, it is common to find it with other visitor information on the home page, though in these cases, it is often brief and inadequate.

People expect to find access information in the same place as they have found it on similar websites, so avoid doing something different (e.g. in About us, or a footer link, where web accessibility page is often featured.).

% In heritage sites with access information, the information was located:

- On a dedicated page within the Visit section (37%)
- As part of the visit / visiting page (33%)
- On the home page (21%)
- Somewhere else (9%)

5. Online accessibility

Keyboard navigation

Some blind and visually impaired people and some people who experience mobility barriers are unable or find it difficult to use a mouse on a desktop computer or use a touchscreen. It is therefore important to ensure that your website can be navigated by use of the keyboard alone (using tab/shift-tab keys).

To support this navigation mode, website developers should ensure that there is a visual indicator on screen (called the 'keyboard focus') in the form of a box or underline on the current menu item, button or link.

% In 20% (1 in 5) of the heritage websites with access information, it was not possible to navigate to the access information page using the keyboard only.

Length and structure

It is commonly accepted that website information should be short, because of online reading habits and attention spans. Access information should be treated differently; resist the temptation or encouragement to edit and remove 'less important' elements. It needs to cover a wide range of access barriers, facilities and resources, and on occasion should go into detail. An individual reader is unlikely to find all the content important to them, but each detail will be important to someone. The more elements and the more detail included, the more useful it will be to more people.

To avoid readers' fatigue, give the page structure using sub-headings, so that they can skim or browse to find the information important to them. Sub-headings could follow the stages of a typical visitor journey (such as getting here, accessible parking, entrance hall, information desk, staff assistance, in the venue/galleries, café, restaurant and shop) or focus on different audience groups, or a combination of both.

5. Online accessibility

People do not always like to be defined by labels, and many access aids, resources or facilities may be useful to those in multiple categories, and those who are in none. There's no straightforward solution – you may need to repeat information in different sections.

% 39% of heritage sites with access information used one or more subheadings grouping information for people with different impairments/identities.

25% of sites used two or more headings. 18% used three or more.

Variations of the following subheadings were used:

- **Physical access/mobility impairment/wheelchair users (34%)**
- **D/deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing (21%)**
- **Blind, partially sighted/visually impaired people (20%)**
- **Neurodivergent/autism (7%)**
- **Learning disabled (7%)**
- **Dementia (2%)**
- **Special Educational Needs (SEN) (2%)**

Headings and subheadings (H1, H2, H3)

Headings provide structure to a webpage, breaking it up into sections visually, but if done properly, they provide a structure that gives a quick and simple way of navigating through the content via keyboard controls, integral to screen reader technology.

It is not enough to simply increase text size or make a word bold using the Content Management System (CMS). You need to use the headings options (H1 (heading level 1), H2 (heading level 2) etc. The website style sheet will automatically apply the appropriate design to make the heading stand out visually. Screen reader users can then browse headings marked with H1, H2, H3 etc. and quickly find information relevant to them.

5. Online accessibility

Having a long page of text without structure is frustrating for keyboard users who can see the page, as well as those who can not see the page, and who are forced to listen to the whole webpage to get to the information they need or discover it does not exist.

Headings should be nested in a hierarchy, i.e. there should only be one H1 on each webpage (usually the same as the page title) and below this, one or more H2 subheadings, and under each of these if needed, one or more H3 subheadings and so on up to H6 if necessary. Heading levels should be applied consistently, and without skipping levels.

% 87% of heritage sites with access information used structured headings and subheadings (H1, H2, H3 etc), though only 55% of them used them properly and consistently.

13% of heritage sites did not use structured headings at all.

5.2 Links

Links should be descriptive and provide a clear indication of where the link will take you. The text of the link should make sense out of context of the surrounding text. A commonly used feature of a screen reader software is the command to read out a list of all the links on a page, so the user can select a link quickly without needing to read the whole page. Links that read 'click here' or 'read more' for example, do not make sense in isolation or differentiate. The screen reader user will hear "Link, click here. Link, read more."

Here are some examples of accessible descriptive links:

[More information about Blue Badge parking in our local town](#)

[Download our Visual Story \(Word, 1Mb\)](#)

Visual readers benefit from descriptive links for much the same reason; they will know where a link is going to take them without having to read associated text so can get to what they need quickly.

5. Online accessibility

- 📊 56% of heritage websites with access information included links on the page. Of these:
 - All links were descriptive (80%)
 - Some links were descriptive, and some not (13%)
 - No links were descriptive (7%)

New tab or window

It is good practice for links to open the new page in the same tab/browser window. Opening a webpage in a new tab or window can be confusing if you are unable to see that this has happened. Attempting to navigate using the back button, for example, will not work.

Some websites always open external links in new tabs or windows. If this is the case, make it clear by adding text that reads 'link opens in a new window'. The addition of a symbol of a square box with an arrow exiting the top-right corner is common practice; ensure there is alt text for this graphic if you are not also providing the written information.

- 📊 54% of heritage sites with access information included one or more links. Of these:
 - All links opened in the same window/tab (30%)
 - All links opened in new windows/tabs (20%)
 - A mixture of both (1.5%)

3% of sites that opened linked in a new window or tab told the reader that this would happen.

5. Online accessibility


5.3 Zoomable text

For some visually impaired people, being able to zoom in on a page helps to read it. Enlarging text should be possible within the browser (using 'Ctrl' and '+'). It is important that when you do, the text is not pushed off the side of the screen. This is so people who use magnification only have to scroll down the page to read the content, not sideways as well.

 94% of heritage sites with access information had zoomable text.

5.4 Text/background contrast

The contrast between the text and the webpage's background colour needs to be high enough so that the words are easy to read. Technically this should be at least 4.5:1, and ideally 7:1. The background for text should always be solid white or contrasting colour, and never patterned or image-based.

 85% of heritage sites with access information had sufficient contrast.
15% of the sites with access information did not. For example, they used pale grey on cream background, grey on white, grey on pale blue, light blue on black.

Resource

Web Accessibility in Mind colour contrast checker

[WebAIM.org/resources/contrastchecker](https://webaim.org/resources/contrastchecker)

You will need the hexadecimal code from your website, e.g. #0693e3.

5. Online accessibility

5.5 Style switchers

Style switchers allow users to change the appearance of a website, usually to some pre-set options:

- Font and background colour, for high and low contrast versions, e.g. yellow text on black
- Font size and style (serif, sans serif)
- Images off
- Single column (e.g. equivalent to a mobile view)

Style switchers can mean that individuals can choose how a website looks without changing it for anyone else. However, style switchers will only work consistently if a website has been made with well-formed and accessible code to start with.

 3% of heritage websites with access information offered a style switcher.

Example

Abingdon County Hall Museum, Abingdon.gov.uk/abingdon-county-hall-museum

Carew Castle, PembrokeshireCoast.wales/carew-castle

Glasgow Museums, GlasgowLife.org.uk/museums

5.6 Images

Images are useful to help convey information about access within a heritage site or museum.

Alt attributes, or alt text

When screen reader software, used by many blind and visually impaired people, encounters an image, it uses a piece of text called the 'alt [for alternative] attribute' to stand in for and describe the visual content of the image. This is commonly known as the 'alt text'.

5. Online accessibility

For example, the alt attribute of an image of a balloon might be written as “balloon”. A screen reader user will hear the words “image of balloon” when the software passes that image. If the alt text is not supplied, the screen reader will identify that there is an image but is not able to tell the reader what it shows.

Providing alt text for of museum images is an editorial responsibility, not a technical one. You should not need to write code as there will be a field in the web content management system (CMS), e.g. WordPress, for you to enter alt texts when uploading images or when adding images from the media library into a page. If you usually send images to a web manager, team or agency for upload, then send alt texts with captions and credits at the same time and request them to be used.

Keep it short and concise

Good alt text is brief: perhaps a phrase or two. It should describe the visual information of the image but not go into unnecessary detail. The exact level of detail might depend on the context (see below) and take into consideration how many other images are on the page, and what the purpose and importance of the image is.

If the image includes any text, then include that text within the alt text. If the image is a photographed scene, you do not need to start your description with ‘photograph of...’ or ‘image of...’. If the image is a reproduction of a 2D artwork, identify the medium, for example ‘engraving of a nude male figure’.

Context is everything

Exactly what the alt text should include depends to an extent on the other text on the page. If the image has a caption or is discussed in the accompanying text, the screen reader user will also hear that information. There is no need to repeat information within the caption (and definitely do not copy the caption word for word). In summary, make sure that you provide enough information to convey what the image contains between the alt text, caption and any other text on the webpage.

5. Online accessibility

Images on access information pages featuring access barriers or facilities should be as descriptive as necessary to help convey the desired information contained within the picture. For example, ‘View to the rear of the cottage, showing a set of 5 rough stone steps (50 centimetres wide) cut into a steep bank, which provides the only route to the garden studio.’

% 37% of heritage sites with access information used one or more images on the page.

Of these, only 30% provided alt text for all these images, and 9% for just some of them.

In 34% (just over 1 in 3) of cases, the alt text field was used wrongly, either giving a photography credit, or repeating the caption or image filename.

Only 63% of the websites that provided alt text for images gave a useful description of the image.

In summary, if a screen reader user visited the access information page of one of the heritage websites that included images at random, the chance of all the images on the page having descriptive alt text would be 19%, just under 1 in 5.

5.7 Video

Introduction

While video can present access barriers, they are easy to work around, and video is very engaging for blind, visually impaired, D/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people.

Purpose of the video

Videos should have an introductory section explaining what the video is about. Do not assume that a viewer is able to get context from the text surrounding the video.

5. Online accessibility

For people who rely on subtitles, it is best practice to use **open captions** (which are always on). If your video has **closed captions** (which can be toggled on or off), include a starting section with no speech, to give caption users a chance to turn subtitles on before the speech starts. The start should then explain what the video is, such as ‘Hello my name is X and I’m here to talk through the Y exhibition’, so that viewers can get the full purpose of the video from the video itself.

Auto-play

Many video hosting platforms automatically play an embedded video as soon as the webpage appears. This can cause issues if the website visitor is using a screen reader, as any audio from the film will clash with the screen reader audio. The user has to find and pause the video, while the soundtrack has started, making navigation difficult.

For people who are D/deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing, if the video auto-plays without subtitles, then they will need to pause, turn on the subtitles and restart the video: contrary to any benefit that auto-play may have offered in the first place.

We recommend switching auto-play off, to enable visitors to have more control over what information that are receiving.

 10% of the videos viewed by our researchers auto-played.

Video accessibility

Audio description

Depending on the content and how it has been designed, a film can be more or less accessible to blind and visually impaired people. In many cases, a film will need audio description in the form of a secondary soundtrack. Despite some trials, YouTube, the most widely used video hosting platform, does not yet have the facility to add a secondary audio description track that can be switched on and off, like closed captions.

5. Online accessibility

There are thus two options for accessibility:

- Minimise the need for audio description. Ensure that all text on screen (speaker names, locations, dates etc) are included in the voice track. This might involve asking all speakers to identify themselves by name (and job title if relevant) at the start of the interview. Other important visual information should also be described within the voice track.
- Create a version with open audio description, that is, mixed with the main soundtrack and available to all who watch the video. This should be written, recorded and edited by a professional audio describer, using proper recording equipment and specialist software. The AD should cover description of people, locations and any other visual information and action, and be placed so that it does not clash with speech on the main soundtrack. In some cases, where the visual elements of the film are very important and there is not time within the film, the audio describer will add an audio introduction at the start of the film to 'set the scene'.

BSL interpreter

Many Deaf people use BSL as their first language and may not have fluency in English. To make videos accessible to these viewers, a BSL interpreter will watch the video, prepare and record a signed translation. This video will then be added onto the original video, usually in the bottom right corner, allowing BSL users to watch the video and BSL at the same time as other viewers are receiving the audio or subtitles.

 23% of videos viewed by our researchers had a BSL interpreter.

Example

Manchester Art Gallery, BSL tour video, delivered by Jennifer Little
[ManchesterArtGallery.org/access](https://www.ManchesterArtGallery.org/access)

5. Online accessibility

Closed captions

Most people who are D/deaf, deafened, or hard of hearing do not use BSL, and are not fluent in it. For these viewers, the best form of access is captions or subtitles. This enables them to visually understand the audio without relying on hearing or lipreading. ‘Closed’ captions refer to captions which can be toggled on and off by the viewer. They are superimposed over the video. A person has the choice to use them or not, but it’s also down to the individual to be aware that they exist and activate them. Thus, when video is used in public spaces, such as exhibitions, staff must remember to turn them on.

% 35% of videos viewed by our researchers had closed captions.

Open captions

Rather than being switched on and off by the individual viewer, ‘open’ captions are embedded into the video and are thus ‘always on’. This is good for viewers who may not realise they can benefit from subtitles, and those who do not know how to turn them on. It also means that if the video is played in a public space, the subtitles are included in the video, and no further steps are required.

**% 12% of videos viewed by our researchers had open captions.
53% of videos viewed by our researchers had no captions.**

Option to move captions

Captioners take great care to ensure that they do not cover any pertinent information on the screen, and filmmakers are advised to limit important action happening in the ‘subtitle safe zone’ – the area where captions/subtitles usually appear at the bottom of the screen. However, sometimes

5. Online accessibility

something important does take place in the subtitle area, and the option to move subtitles allows viewers to respond. Some visually impaired viewers may also find the default location difficult to access.

% 6% of videos viewed by our researchers had the option to move captions.

Option to alter the speed of the video

Some video hosting platforms offer viewers the ability to speed up or slow down the video. This can be useful for viewers who are neurodivergent, or those who speak English as an additional language, as they can slow the video down to give them more time to take in the information.

% 29% of videos viewed by our researchers had the option to alter the speed of the video.

5.8 Audio

Including audio on a page is a great way to provide information in a format that many people may find easier or more convenient to use. You need to make sure that if audio is used, it is not the only way that this information can be accessed, so you do not exclude anyone who is not able to hear it.

High-quality, clear audio is one of the most important considerations for media accessibility. Clear audio means that voices are clear, background sounds or music do not overwhelm the speaker and the audio is at a volume that avoids distortion. Clear audio is also vital for speech-to-text translation (which is used to generate captions and transcripts); the clearer the audio, the more accurate the transcription.

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Transcripts

Audio resources should be accompanied by a transcript, unless they are already a version of an existing webpage or other resource. A transcript provides a visual alternative for anyone who cannot hear the audio, or anyone who might prefer to read information. Transcripts can also be printed, as some people prefer to read from a physical copy.

Transcripts do not have to be restricted to the spoken word. If you have produced something with significant background sounds, you can also describe these too. If you are describing sounds, use square brackets. For example:

“The portcullis was raised and lowered from the gatehouse.”
[chains clanking, heavy machinery rumbling].”

% 2% of heritage sites with access information used audio.

- Transcript downloadable from the same page (13%)
- Transcript available if the user contacts the site’s team (19%)
- No transcript available (67%)

5.9 Downloadable documents

Having downloadable documents on a website provides people with choice. It gives them options to access information in the way that best suits them. For many people this may be something as straightforward as allowing them to print off information to read or make notes on, rather than using a screen. They can also bring the printed document to the venue.

A well-designed website can also make it easy to print pages from a website. Ask your web team or agency to add a ‘print page’ button, and ensure the style sheet for the print page produces a clear, well-laid out and accessible document.

5. Online accessibility

Drawbacks

Downloadable documents are not generally easy to view on mobile phones: the text does not resize to suit the reader. People travelling to or around a venue will likely be using a mobile phone to access web content, and for many people a mobile phone is the only way that they access web content at any time. For these reasons, and those discussed in the section above, we recommend that all access information is provided on the webpage as HTML, and that downloadable documents are restricted to specific resources/alternative versions.

Formats

Some document formats are more accessible than others. Original documents (Word, plain text files, PowerPoint) are more accessible as the text they contain is editable and so can be easily accessed by assistive technologies like text-to-speech software (screen readers).

PDFs can present problems as assistive technology can't always 'read' the information they contain. Consider using them alongside more open documents.

As with webpages, documents benefit from having structured headings, breaking it up visually, but more importantly, providing a structure that gives a quick and simple way of navigating through the content. Headings are referred to as 'styles' within Microsoft Word. For information on accessible headings, go to [Section 5.1 Location and Structure](#).

% 33% of heritage sites with access information provided one or more downloadable documents as part of this. These were:

- PDF (87%)
- Microsoft Word (17%)
- Microsoft PowerPoint (1%)

5. Online accessibility

5.10 Language

In the early days of museum and heritage websites in the 1990s, access was covered not by communication with disabled visitors, but communication about them through ‘access policies’ and ‘access statements’. There is still some language from this time that persists. In the same way that we do not communicate with visitors about the latest exhibition or event using policy statements or legalese, we should not do this with visitors who have access requirements.

| Use | Avoid |
|--|---|
| Visitor-centred language, wherever possible addressing sentences to an imaginary reader, using the 2nd person (‘You’ or ‘Your’) For example: “If you would be unable to attend [the heritage site] without the support of a companion or personal assistant, they will be admitted free of charge. You will be asked to pay the £10 admission charge.” | Organisation-centred language, such as ‘The Museum’, ‘We’/‘Our visitors’. |
| Everyday, plain language | Policy, legal or PR language |
| Inclusive language | Overly medical language |

5. Online accessibility

| Be | Don't be |
|---|---|
| Honest “Visitors should be aware of an unavoidable flight of 18 steps on the only access route to the centre.” | Selective/concealing |
| Detailed | Sweeping “Accessible throughout” |
| Descriptive | Defensive “We want to make the museum as accessible as possible, but it is a 16th century Grade 1 listed building, and because of this we cannot modify it to better accommodate disabled members of the public” |

Resource

Gov.UK, *Content design: planning, writing and managing content: Plain English*, [gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk#plain-english](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/content-design/writing-for-gov-uk#plain-english)

Gov.UK, *How to produce communications that include, accurately portray, and are accessible to disabled people*, [gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-communication)

Scottish Government, *Principles of Inclusive Communication: An information and self-assessment tool for public authorities*, [gov.scot/publications/principles-inclusive-communication-information-self-assessment-tool-public-authorities/pages/1](https://www.gov.scot/publications/principles-inclusive-communication-information-self-assessment-tool-public-authorities/pages/1)

6. Conclusion and next steps

When compared with 2018, the data this year clearly shows improvement within the sector's access information. Our volunteer researchers unearthed many strong examples that leave us hopeful for the future of the museum and heritage sector, and we have been excited to see what changes technology and awareness have empowered organisations to make. While it may feel intimidating to enact change, this report aims to be a point of departure for new, inclusive ideas about your online access information.

In the following sections, we have provided ideas on next steps you and your organisation could take to create a more inclusive environment for disabled visitors online.

10 ways to improve your access information

1. Consult D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. Ask a range of local people who know your venue well about their experiences and thoughts about barriers to access at your venue. Consult people experienced in providing this information too.
2. Think about the whole journey, from marketing and pre-visit information, getting to your venue, entrances and welcome, and then through the venue, café, shop and even how people can leave feedback afterwards.
3. Provide lots of detail in your access information, such as the number of steps, the width of a doorway. Every piece of detail will be important information for someone. Don't edit out details. This is not marketing information.
4. Be honest about what you have and what you don't have. People know that old buildings can be difficult to adapt. Currently no lift to the upper floors? Tell people before they arrive. But also think of other creative ways you can provide access to the space.

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5. Address your reader directly, using the second person “you”. Don’t distance or other them as “disabled visitors.” Online access information should be inclusive, useful and warm in tone. It’s not a legal statement or internal policy document.
6. Enable and encourage people to contact you with questions about access. Offer email and phone number and avoid inaccessible forms. Make sure the mailbox is managed by knowledgeable staff who respond quickly. Visitors may want to come the same or next day.
7. Cover all the senses in your access information: A dark basement room? A noisy café or loud gallery audiovisual? A strong smell from a nearby shop or factory? Cobble stones underfoot? A wobbly bridge? Tell us all.
8. Use different formats. Images and videos on your access page help visitors know in advance what to expect. Video is a great way to provide a BSL introduction, and audio for descriptive directions and introduction. Make sure you use captions, alt text and description too.
9. Show D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people experiencing and enjoying your heritage site, and not just on your access information page. Include as wide a range of people as possible.
10. Review and refresh your access information regularly. It should reflect seasonal or temporary changes at your venue and locally. Are walkways slippery because of ice or rain? Do major roadworks mean that Blue Badge parking is relocated for a period?

How to improve your access information

Collaborate on this with a team of people. Whether you are a small, volunteer-run heritage site or a large national museum, working on your access information is best done by a group of people with different skills, experiences and responsibilities. This is not in place of a formal audit that considers your organisation’s legislative responsibility. Having an up-to-date access audit report should be a point of departure for the process of writing or updating your access information.

6. Conclusion and next steps

A review group, ideally made up of a diverse group of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent visitors, is an invaluable part of the process. They may be your museum or heritage site's regular access panel/disability advisory group, or one set up specifically for this purpose.

Resources

Consider approaching local groups

RNIB's Sightline Directory lists local sight loss groups across the UK
[SightLineDirectory.org.uk](https://www.sightlinedirectory.org.uk)

National Autistic Society has a directory of local branches
[autism.org.uk/what-we-do/branches](https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/branches)

Consider the full visitor journey, from the journey to the venue, the entrance, front desk, heritage site/museum galleries, outdoor spaces, shop and cafe.

1. Get your team together to draft a set of headings, and items to cover.
2. Share out the sections across team members.
3. Encourage them to walk the route while making notes.
4. Give a deadline for the first draft.
5. Collate the drafts, share back with everyone, and ask for constructive comments.
6. When you are all happy with the draft, share with your review group, and ask for their comments on what you have written and what additional aspects are needed.
7. Make the changes and update the website.

6. Conclusion and next steps

Resource

Tincture of Museum, *Setting up an Access Advisory Panel*

TinctureOfMuseum.wordpress.com/2018/06/29/setting-up-an-access-advisory-panel-things-to-consider-experiences-from-the-horniman-museum-2018

Setting Up a Disability Advisory Group: Horniman Museum and Gardens
museDCN.org.uk/2018/08/02/setting-up-a-disability-advisory-group-horniman-museum-and-gardens

We encourage that you follow inclusive design principles:

1. Place people at the heart of the design process: involve D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, and value their experience.
2. Acknowledge human diversity and difference.
3. Offer dignity, autonomy, choice and spontaneity.

6. Conclusion and next steps

Heritage accessibility checklist

Below we have also included a suggestion of access aids, facilities, resources and events to include in your access information if relevant to your venue. It can be printed out and filled out by hand.

| Section | Key areas to cover in your access information | Our organisation |
|---------|--|------------------|
| 4.2 | Contact information | |
| 4.3 | Awards Awareness training | |
| 4.4 | 'Getting there'/venue information Entrances Guide/assistance dogs Mobility aids Parking Access routes Re-entry | |
| 4.5 | Around the venue: features onsite Captioning on AV/films Flooring Hospitality Induction loops Lifts Seating Sensory environment Toilets: accessible Toilets: Changing Places | |

6. Conclusion and next steps

| Section | Key areas to cover in your access information | Our organisation |
|---------|---|------------------|
| 4.6 | Around the venue: aids/resources onsite Audio described guide Braille BSL/captions on audio-visual material Ear defenders Fidget/fiddle products Handling/tactile objects Large print Magnifying glasses Sensory Kits Transcripts of audio-visual material | |
| 4.7 | Around the venue: Online resources for use onsite Communication Cards Easy Read guides Sensory maps Visual Story | |
| 4.8 | Access events Activities for SEND families Audio-described tours Autism-friendly events and openings BSL Signed tours Dementia-friendly events Relaxed events | |

Appendix 1: Proportion of sites with access information

Proportion of sites with access information, by UK nation and region (2022 compared with 2018)

| | 2022 | 2018 |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| Nation/region | Heritage sites with access information | Accredited museums with access information |
| Channel Islands | 100% (10/10) | 78% (7/9) |
| Isle of Man | 100% (8/8) | 100% (9/9) |
| Yorkshire and The Humber | 90% (155/173) | 93% (124/133) |
| North East England | 89% (71/80) | 96% (54/56) |
| London | 89% (101/114) | 88% (110/125) |
| South East England | 85% (284/335) | 81% (180/223) |
| Wales | 84% (140/166) | 76% (68/90) |
| South West England | 82% (257/313) | 80% (156/195) |
| UK average | 81% (1834/2258) | 81% (1301/1606) |
| North West England | 81% (124/153) | 83% (106/127) |
| West Midlands | 81% (134/165) | 80% (97/121) |
| East of England | 79% (162/205) | 80% (118/148) |
| East Midlands | 78% (104/134) | 76% (76/100) |
| Scotland | 72% (259/361) | 71% (163/228) |
| Northern Ireland | (68% (28/41)) | 79% (33/42) |

Appendix 2: Benchmark

The project team discussed at length but eventually rejected the idea of having a bronze, silver and gold style rating system for heritage access information, as we found it impossible to decide on a fair system that was purely based on presence of particular pieces of information and which would be appropriate across a broad range of heritage sites – from small volunteer-run venues, to large, national museums and major heritage sites – each with different challenges for accessibility, budgets and staffing resource.

Instead, we decided to establish a benchmark score for access provision, that would help us more clearly answer the question in the future: has access provision improved since 2022? We also wanted to answer this question for specific heritage venues, UK nations and regions, and UK-wide.

So, on the basis of the more pieces of access information the better, we assigned points for each different aspect of information. Most scored 1 point, but those which were universally relevant, such as information about accessible toilets, and contact details for access enquiries, scored 4 points. The maximum score possible would be 106 points if a venue had every aspect of heritage access and detail about it that we checked for. There is an interface to the benchmark data on the VocalEyes website. We have listed the 20 venues with the highest score on the next page.

It is reassuring to find that as well as some of the large national museums and major heritage sites here, including British Museum, Hampton Court Palace, Science Museum and Windsor Castle, we also find smaller venues from across the UK: Riverside Museum at Blake's Lock, near Reading, Woodhorn Museum in Northumberland, Wheal Martyn in Cornwall, and Chirk Castle in Wales. All are evidence that the amount of access information does not have to correlate to the size of your venue.

Appendix 2: Benchmark

| | | | |
|----|--|---|----|
| 1 | Science Museum | ScienceMuseum.org.uk | 63 |
| 2 | Hampton Court Palace | HRP.org.uk/hampton-court-palace | 62 |
| 3 | Craven Museum and Gallery | SkiptonTownHall.co.uk/craven-museum | 60 |
| 4 | Imperial War Museum Duxford | IWM.org.uk/visits/iwm-duxford | 60 |
| 5 | Woodhorn Museum | MuseumsNorthumberland.org.uk/woodhorn-museum | 59 |
| 6 | Riverside Museum at Blake's Lock | ReadingMuseum.org.uk/your-visit/permanent-galleries/riverside-museum-blakes-lock | 56 |
| 7 | Colchester Castle Museum | Colchester.cimuseums.org.uk/visit/colchester-castle | 54 |
| 8 | The British Museum | BritishMuseum.org | 54 |
| 9 | Wheal Martyn Museum | Wheal-Martyn.com | 54 |
| 10 | Oxford Castle | OxfordCastleAndPrison.co.uk | 53 |
| 11 | Glasgow Museums: Gallery of Modern Art | GlasgowLife.org.uk/museums/venues/gallery-of-modern-art-goma | 52 |
| 12 | Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse | museums.norfolk.gov.uk/gressenhall-farm-and-workhouse | 52 |
| 13 | The Lightbox | TheLightbox.org.uk | 51 |
| 14 | Windsor Castle | RCT.uk/visit/windsorcastle | 51 |
| 15 | Chirk Castle | NationalTrust.org.uk/chirk-castle | 50 |
| 16 | D-Day Museum | TheDDayStory.com | 50 |
| 17 | Dorset County Museum | DorsetCountyMuseum.org | 50 |
| 18 | Painshill Park | Painshill.co.uk | 50 |
| 19 | Coldstream Museum | LiveBorders.org.uk/culture/museums/our-museums/coldstream-museum | 49 |
| 20 | Ipswich Museum | https://ipswich.cimuseums.org.uk/visit/ipswich-museum | 49 |

Appendix 3: List of venues used for the research

We decided at the start of the project to expand the number and scope of venues used as the basis of our research, from those surveyed in 2018, which was those on the official list of UK accredited museums (in 2022 this includes 1,717 venues). It will not surprise those working in heritage that there is no publicly available single list of UK heritage sites, so we began by compiling a list from various sources.

Using freely available and well-documented Python libraries (Python is a general-purpose computer programming language), plus public APIs (Application Programming Interfaces), we were able to create candidate lists of sites in a largely automated way.

This was done by Simon Wilson, analyst at Historic England, and a member of our Advisory Panel. Simon began by geocoding the project's original venue list. We had postcodes for most venues, so he used the Postcode & Geolocation API for the UK to geocode these to latitude/longitude points that we could use in spatial analysis. For the small number of sites without postcodes, he used the Nominatim API to find likely locations. These were then checked manually.

Next came the challenge of identifying new sites that were both in scope for the project and not duplicates of sites already listed. Simon began by compiling candidate lists from publicly searchable directories of heritage attractions and converting their locations to latitude / longitude points, using the same techniques when applicable, or the BNG library for Python when grid references were provided.

With the existing list and candidate list in the same spatial format, we could use a programme called GeoPandas to perform some rudimentary spatial analysis to identify, for each site on the existing venue list, all those candidate sites within a given radius. Many candidate sites had no near neighbours and could be added to the venue list with confidence.

Appendix 3: List of venues used for the research

When a candidate site did have neighbours, the textdistance library was used to calculate the Levenshtein distance between the candidate site's name to that of its near neighbour.¹¹ Candidates with very low distances were dropped as assumed to be duplicates of existing sites. The rest were given light manual review, guided by the computed distances. This combination of spatial and text-based approaches produced good results relatively easily and is recommended to anyone preparing a similar project.

This generated a list of 3,125 sites. Aware that these might include some that were out of scope, we passed the final sift to the volunteer researchers; their first task on visiting each website was to decide if the site was in scope. 591 were found to be out of scope. A further 221 were removed as the venue was closed, either for refurbishment or as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and 51 were removed either because they had no website (16) or the website was not working at the time the researcher visited (35).

We were thus left with a total of 2,258 heritage sites in scope.

One output of the project is that we will be making a donation of this list to Wikidata, the free and open knowledge base that can be read and edited by both humans and machines. Wikidata acts as central storage for the structured data of other Wikimedia projects, including Wikipedia. The content of Wikidata is available under a free license and can be exported using standard formats and interlinked to other open data sets on the linked data web. Our data will thus be re-usable by other services and projects in future.

Links

Postcode & Geolocation API for the UK, postcodes.io

Nominatim API, nominatim.org

BNG library for Python, github.com/volcan01010/bng

GeoPandas, geopandas.org/en/stable

Textdistance library, pypi.org/project/textdistance

Wikidata, wikidata.org

Appendix 4: Acknowledgements

Project partners

VocalEyes (VocalEyes.co.uk)

VocalEyes brings theatres, museums, galleries, heritage sites and digital media to life for blind and visually impaired people. Services include live, recorded and film audio description and training for arts and heritage staff in visual awareness, sighted guiding, audio description and digital content accessibility.

Autism in Museums (AutismInMuseums.com)

Autism in Museums is an initiative to raise awareness of accessibility for all in museums. It has been created by Claire Madge who has been sharing autism in museums best practice and events on her blog Tincture of Museum since 2012.

Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE.org.uk)

CAE offers consultancy access audits, design appraisals for refurbishment and new-build projects, accessibility advice and guidelines.

Stagetext (Stagetext.org)

Stagetext is a deaf-led charity that advocates for and provides captions, live subtitles, digital subtitles and training to the cultural sector.

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Appendix 4: Acknowledgements

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Appendix 4: Acknowledgements

Volunteer researchers

With thanks to the volunteer researchers who gave their time to visit and assess over 3,000 heritage websites between 29 April and 7 August 2022:

| | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
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Appendix 5: Disability access organisations and initiatives

AccessAble ([AccessAble.co.uk](https://www.accessable.co.uk))

AccessAble, originally called DisabledGo, was set up in 2000 by Dr. Gregory Burke, as a result of his own experiences as a wheelchair user and disabled walker. AccessAble specialises in providing detailed access information for public buildings and places of interest. Museums should supplement their own access information with a link to their venue on AccessAble's site, and if there is no listing for them, work with AccessAble to get your venue reviewed.

EMBED ([embed.org.uk](https://www.embed.org.uk))

EMBED helps its clients to create places and spaces, policies and practices that welcome, enable and support people from diverse backgrounds and with different life experiences. It was founded in order to offer a unique approach to embedding real culture change informed by the lived experience of colleagues, customers, visitors, service users or communities.

Euan's Guide ([EuansGuide.com](https://www.euansguide.com))

EuansGuide.com is the disabled access review website where disabled people, their families, friends and carers can find and share the accessibility of venues around the UK and beyond. The website shares thousands of experiences and is the go-to tool for many disabled people.

National Register of Access Consultants ([NRAC.org.uk](https://www.nrhc.org.uk))

The National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC) is an independent UK-wide accreditation service for individuals who provide access consultancy and access auditor services. It was set up to provide a single source for organisations seeking competent advice in relation to inclusive environments and accessibility.

Appendix 5: Disability access organisations and initiatives

SEND in Museums ([SendInMuseums.org](https://www.sendinmuseums.org))

SEND in Museums provides clear guidance for museum, heritage or other arts and cultural professionals, on supporting the inclusion of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).

VisitEngland and VisitScotland Accessibility Guides ([AccessibilityGuides.org](https://www.accessibilityguides.org))

Use VisitEngland and VisitScotland's website for the easy production and publication of Accessibility Guides. Produce a guide by answering a series of questions on your venue's accessibility, uploading useful photos and inputting any further information. You will be given a unique URL to promote your guide, which you can add to your website and share across social media channels.

Notes

1. VocalEyes, *State of Museum Access 2018*, [VocalEyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018)
2. Throughout this report we have used the terms “D/deaf, deafened and hard of hearing” to describe the diverse population of people with any form of deafness or hearing loss, in which we include the Deaf community. Where we are referring specifically to the community of BSL users, we use the term “Deaf”. This is based on feedback from our volunteers. We know that language is always evolving and so we welcome your feedback.
3. See for example, Shape Arts, *Social Model of Disability*, [ShapeArts.org.uk/news/social-model-of-disability](https://shapearts.org.uk/news/social-model-of-disability)
4. *Euan’s Guide Access Survey 2018* had 903 respondents comprised of disabled people, their families and companions. Of those respondents 88% said they were more likely to visit somewhere new if they can find access information about it beforehand, 94% said they tried to find disabled access information about somewhere before visiting for the first time, 85% through checking the website and 53% said they avoided going if a venue has not shared its disabled access information, because they assume that it is inaccessible. [EuansGuide.com/news/the-access-survey-2018](https://euansguide.com/news/the-access-survey-2018). See also *Euan’s Guide Access Survey 2021* [EuansGuide.com/access-survey](https://euansguide.com/access-survey)
5. House of Commons Library research briefing, *UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences*, [CommonsLibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602](https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602)
6. UK Government, *Equality Act 2010*, legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents
7. Rachel Coldicutt, *Systemic Digital Care*, careful.industries/blog/2022-7-systemic-digital-care

8. The first disclaimer is that a venue may have an access facility but does not mention it on the website (and in a few cases vice versa). As we have not visited and checked the actual venues, we are careful only to state that heritage sites “mentioned a specific access facility on their website”, rather than “have a specific access facility at their venue”. We are thus using online access information as a proxy measure of accessibility at the venue, but we believe that this is appropriate, given the strong evidence that if a venue does not share information about an access facility or resource, it may as well not exist: visitors for whom that facility or resource is essential for their visit, will not visit if they don’t find information about it during pre-visit planning. The second is that, while close, the two sets of venues which we are comparing from 2018 and 2022 are different. In 2018, percentages are based on 1,301 accredited museums with access information, while in 2022 they are based on 1,833 museums and heritage sites with access information. Nearly all the 2018 museums were included in the 2022 list (except for a few which either lost their accreditation status, were closed permanently or temporarily, or had removed access information from their website). So, while we are not comparing figures based on the exact same venues, we can state with some confidence that somewhere close to 70% of the 2022 venues are among the 2018 venues.
9. *Euan’s Guide Access Survey 2021*, *ibid*.
10. British Standards Institute (BSI), [BSIgroup.com/en-GB](https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB)
11. The Levenshtein distance is a string metric used in information theory, linguistics, and computer science for measuring the difference between two sequences, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Levenshtein_distance

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Please help us to spread the word about this report and raise awareness of how to improve access and inclusion at museums and heritage sites.

You can download this report from

VocalEyes.co.uk/research/heritage-access-2022

It is also available in audio format (mp3) and Large Print (Microsoft Word).

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[@AutismInMuseums](https://twitter.com/AutismInMuseums) and [@CAE_info](https://twitter.com/CAE_info)

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