

Accessibility why it matters





FOREWORD

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I am a passionate believer in Inclusive Design and I was responsible for its delivery at the new venues and the Olympic Park for London 2012. Now at Network Rail, I am working to make Inclusive Design part of our business as usual.

As Network Rail's Access and Inclusion Manager, I champion our Inclusive Design philosophy and principles, chair the Built Environment Accessibility Panel, produce design guidance and develop procedures for implementation. I also provide support, advice and expert guidance to staff and stakeholders to ensure the adoption of this approach.

What do I mean by Inclusive Design?

Inclusive Design is the design of buildings, products and/or services that are accessible to, and usable by, as many people as reasonably possible without the need for special adaptation. For a design to be inclusive, it must respect the needs of people with mobility, visual and hearing impairments, learning difficulties, and people from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

An inclusive environment does not attempt to meet every single need but, by considering people's diversity, inclusive environments break down barriers to their use and overcome exclusion, achieving superior design and management solutions that benefit everyone. Inclusive environments are also more economically successful by being accessible to a wider range of people. In essence, Inclusive Design is better design.

Is it different to Accessibility or Universal Design?

The term Accessibility is traditionally used to describe making places and products and, in particular, internet sites accessible or usable by disabled people. Alternatively, the phrase Universal Design suggests a single solution could meet everyone's needs. Inclusive Design recognises that a single solution may not meet every person's needs.

The term Inclusive Design, however, offers clarity to designers, clients and users alike. Recognising that every design decision has the potential to include or exclude users.

Inclusive Design emphasises the contribution that understanding user diversity makes to inform design decisions including understanding variations in capabilities, needs, and aspirations.

Designs and ongoing operations are further enhanced by engaging with users through stakeholder consultation. At the Olympic Delivery Authority, I set up a consultation group of users – The Built Environment Access Panel (BEAP) – who understood the need for the Games, venues and park to be inclusive. More than 50% of the BEAP members were disabled people and now at Network Rail, we have a nationwide BEAP made up of different people who are all rail travellers with Inclusive Design expertise either through their profession or through personal experience. Such groups are integral to the successful delivery of a well designed inclusive environment, service or product.

The business case for Inclusive Design is clear with one of the keys to designing inclusively being the recognition that the true common denominator of 'normal' people is that they are all different. Inclusive Designers need to understand the diversity in their target market and aim to design for that diversity.

The cost of change increases exponentially throughout the design and development life-cycle of any project; hence, costs can be minimised by ensuring a thorough understanding of the real user and business needs at the start of the design process, and correctly translating these needs into an appropriate requirements specification.

Design decisions based on appropriate insight into user needs are likely to carry less risk, and ultimately lead to customer satisfaction and

market success. In summary, good design costs, but bad design costs far more!

The adoption of Inclusive Design principles will help people use the designed environment safely, with dignity, comfort, convenience and confidence. People are in turn able to make effective, independent choices about how they use a building, employment, transport or product without experiencing undue effort or separation. This in turn enables everyone to participate equally in accessing buildings, employment, leisure activity, transport, service or product.

It is now widely recognised that the philosophy of Inclusive Design is user-centred and business-focussed. The outcomes are functional, usable, desirable, and ultimately, economically successful places, products and services.

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Accessibility

why it matters

Looking after the needs of disabled people is not just important from a legal perspective – it's good for business and everyone, from elderly people to parents pushing prams and buggies.

If you ignore disabled access issues, it can cost you in court and in damage to your reputation. Get it right and you gain recognition as an organisation which cares for its customers, its business partners, and its own staff.

That matters a lot to such businesses as shops, hotels, restaurants, entertainment venues and tourist attractions, which rely on attracting a constant flow of people through their doors. But it can also make a difference to offices, factories, warehouses, buses, trains and much more.

At About Access we explore, investigate and anticipate every scenario to provide our clients with affordable solutions. We can show you how to fix a problem but, more importantly, we can also advise you on how to avoid difficulties in the first place by adopting good practices in design, layout and attitude.

Experience and expertise

About Access has been specialising in identifying and addressing access issues since 2006, and our casebook is full of a wide range of successful projects completed for clients in the public and private sectors.

Our input varies depending on the needs of our clients and their customers, and on the stage at which we become involved. Prevention is better than cure – and usually much cheaper.

So we can assist from the planning and design stage through the construction and fitting-out procedures all the way to completion and snagging. And if things go wrong we can also offer expert witness services although our aim is to try and avoid that with early intervention.

Our Managing Director, Ian Streets, is a member of the National Register of Access Consultants and the Access Association and as such works with BSI Standards, the UK's national standards body, to advise on appropriate designs for buildings and their surrounding areas. Ian has also been appointed to the Network Rail Built Environment Accessibility Panel.

About Access works with organisations of all sizes around the country, and on all property types from listed buildings to those still on the drawing board.

Successful outcomes are a more inclusive world in which disabled people are treated fairly, and everybody else recognises that access is about procedures and policies as much as physical barriers.

We deliver our advice in a number of ways, from a simple phone call to a briefing or site visit, a referral to one of our specialist services or a booking on one of our training courses.



Our services

About Access provides a variety of services to improve accessibility for disabled people.

The key to what we do is attention to detail. In particular, we look beyond the obvious; we understand that people with hidden impairments can face the same sort of accessibility problems as someone whose impairment is clearly visible.

We also recognise that some features of a building's design and layout can be identified very easily as obstacles by disabled people, whereas with others the features are less evident.

Our services therefore extend from consultancy and accredited practical advice on disabled access to training courses on disability awareness and policies. We also address the provisions of the Equality Act that are relevant to access.

Our aim is to help companies and other organisations ensure that their premises are accessible, and their staff are properly trained and aware of the needs of disabled people and the business opportunities that can result from looking after them properly. Here are some of the services we offer to achieve that aim.

Access consultancy

New-build is an obvious situation where a business, local authority or other organisation might come to About Access for the guidance that will ensure – even before a brick is laid – that the design and facilities are accessible for all.

However it is far from the only scenario, and because of that, our access consultancy service takes many different forms and is shaped by the requirements of the individual client.

It may be that a building is to undergo some alterations, and so the occupiers need advice about access around the new-look premises. There may even be questions about new furnishings or colour schemes – on one occasion we were called in to advise on the possible impact for partially-sighted people of the pattern on a new carpet.

Generally, as access consultants, we provide advice on how to incorporate accessibility into the design and management of the built environment by thinking about the broad spectrum of disability. Our information allows for informed decision-making.

We ensure that the facilities and services provided in buildings are accessible to disabled and non-disabled people alike. We offer support throughout the property development process to completion, giving ongoing advice at all key stages. We can also assist where accessibility issues emerge due to factors such as customer complaints, and we help to achieve resolution with minimum cost and inconvenience.

We also offer a range of tailored services to deal quickly and effectively with specific situations as and when they arise.

CASE STUDY

Our access consultancy is about taking a broad view of accessibility issues and offering advice as and when required. It covers the principles and practice of accessibility to help clients when they are in a jam, including how to reply to a complaint. One client showed us their proposed reply, and we suggested a different way of doing it, one which was more positive and productive. Our work with a major leisure and entertainment complex involves liaising with their access group and looking at the queries they receive and the things they would like to improve. One complaint was about the door to an accessible WC being too heavy. We removed the door closer. However there was also a complaint about the horizontal bar on the door, but we advised that was recommended by the design guidance.

Access audits

As a rule of thumb, try working your way round a building using your elbow or a clenched fist rather than open hands and flexible fingers. You'll get an idea soon enough of whether office doors can be opened, toilet doors locked and lights turned on and off by someone who has difficulties with manual dexterity.

These are some of the issues we examine in our access audits, which are at the core of our business.

We take a fresh look at a building and its facilities, drawing on our experience and training with disabled people.

We approach a building from the viewpoint of disabled people – for example noticing that someone with a hearing impairment might experience difficulties with the background noise at a reception point.



Our access audit reports are unique to each project because computerised tick boxes cannot interpret a building's specific design features or its overall accessibility.

The reports are also free of jargon, produced with the end-user in mind because there's no point in delivering a document that cannot be used or understood.

And because About Access don't sell any of the products that are recommended in our reports, you can be sure you will receive unbiased advice.

CASE STUDY

Businesses have an anticipatory duty to ensure they don't have physical features that are disabling. But if you are not aware of, or don't understand, how disabled people use the built environment, you're unlikely to know which physical features or services within your business are disabling.

Historic England appointed us to conduct an access audit at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight. They recognised that the more accessible they made their facilities, the more revenue they would generate, and the more people would speak positively about the visitor experience. By conducting an access audit, we enabled them to put in place the reasonable adjustments which helped to increase the number of visitors to the property, the gift shop and the restaurants and cafes. It had a direct positive impact, bringing in more revenue from disabled visitors and – significantly – from their travelling companions.

Design appraisals

A common misconception is that you will automatically comply with the disability provisions within the Equality Act by designing a building to meet with the Building Regulations or BS8300 Design of buildings and their approaches to meet the needs of disabled people – Code of Practice.

This is not the case because the Equality Act is about how people are treated, for example in the work place or a shop. The physical features of premises play only a small part in that, and the Act gives no guidance on design standard. Nor does it advise on where such guidance might be found. The Act does require that provision is made to overcome the discriminatory effects of any physical features of a building that place disabled people at a disadvantage.

At About Access, our appraisals set out to ensure that inclusive design is achieved throughout the construction process.

We study accessibility provision from the earliest stage, looking at the plans and giving our advice at a point where corrections and improvements can be easily accommodated.

We use our experience and understanding to make recommendations that will assist a design team in incorporating features to improve access, and we also help them save time and money by avoiding potentially costly corrections once construction is under way – or even complete!

It could be as simple as suggesting the provision of a meeting room on the ground floor for visitors to a building, but even that can be a significant saving in an environment where a little knowledge can be dangerous and expensive.

CASE STUDY

At a school in Camden, the architects were reviewing the external approach from the public highway to the main entrance. The proposed route involved negotiating two flights of steps. The accessible route was 25 metres further down the highway and took people through the staff and visitor car park. We asked if they would be happy to display a sign saying that women, children, and ethnic minorities should also use the accessible route. We illustrated the point that what they were proposing was clearly discriminatory. We had appraised their design and found it lacking.



Access Statements and Strategies

The aim of the Access Statement is to explain the design principles around access and to argue the case for features that are an alternative to the conventional guidance in the Building Regulations Approved Document or from other recognised sources.

An Access Statement produced by About Access starts at the concept stage, works its way through the development and stays with the building for its lifetime. As a living document, it is updated as changes are made to the building and it should be seen as a companion to documents relating to, for example, the heating and ventilation system.

It will demonstrate how your design meets with the statutory guidance, why any variations might exist and what measures have been taken to make them accessible. The Access Statement gives you the opportunity to show your awareness and appreciation of features within your property that might present a problem for disabled people, and to set out how you have managed to overcome or minimise the impact.

Access Strategies are not as detailed as Access Statements and were introduced to focus on why specific design features do not meet the Approved Document and on how you intend to resolve the issues.

CASE STUDY

We were brought in to advise on a scheme in London which combined retail, office and residential accommodation, and to write an access statement to accompany the planning application. The aim was to demonstrate the philosophy of the design regarding accessibility and to identify areas of the design that didn't meet with the Approved Document to the Building Regulations. By doing that, we were able to show how aspects of the scheme could be designed in a different way and still meet the guidance within the Approved Document.

Strategic planning

The most effective way to approach the issue of accessibility is to build it into your organisation's long-term plan, make it part of your culture.

Paying attention to loos and lifts, ramps and rails will make life less difficult for disabled people, but the best way to make a real difference is to start at the top. If you get the strategy right from the start, then everything else should fall into place.

At About Access we can help you frame your plans to develop your organisation with disabled access in mind. The built environment will form part of the process, but we will also show you how to think at a higher level about how you are going to provide your services.

For example, if you're buying a shop you should have an access audit done on the building. If you're buying a chain of shops, you should review all of them, individually and as a group, as part of a comprehensive and cost-effective strategy for accessibility.

You might need a template or a check-list of guidelines that cover what you need now and what sort of modifications you might require in the future. It would cover buildings and people because attitude and awareness are vital, and it would promote forward-thinking, helping to future-proof your business as legislation and facilities change.

CASE STUDY

We were appointed to provide disability confidence training at a school in Cambridge, helping the staff understand how to interact with disabled children, colleagues and visitors. In talking to people, asking questions and presenting scenarios it became clear that the requirements of disabled people had not been given a lot of thought. We recommended that more detailed consideration should be given to accessibility. We identified areas in which they were lacking, and we suggested ways to resolve the issues. We wrote a plan for them, and we proposed further training and a policy review. Issues included emergency egress, physical features and the policy of welcoming visitors to the school. The beauty was that people identified the issues themselves as a result of the training. They could see what action they should take and what obstacles might be preventing them from making improvements.



Part of your Design team

A new construction project can involve an army of experts all working towards the same aim but not necessarily aware of the fine detail which can make or break the best-laid plans.

In addition to your lead designer, you might have a fire engineer, a mechanical and electrical expert, a landscape architect. They are all specialists in their respective disciplines, but they may not necessarily anticipate the accessibility impact of their individual contributions on the wider project.

By appointing an access consultant to the team, you can ensure you get things right first time and avoid the delays to a project that result from having to revise the work of one specialist and then make sure it fits with the plans of all the others. The savings in time and money are such that typically the investment will pay for itself.



CASE STUDY

We work for a London firm of architects who do not have the skills in-house to understand fully and appreciate accessibility. They bring us in to advise on various types of projects just as they do when they need experts on fire engineering or BREEAM. By being part of the design team we add value to the project, helping to create a design that is as accessible as is feasible and a building that is user-friendly. One of the buildings had an underground car park which they were planning to turn into a cycle park with accessible WC and shower. The only way in and out was via the car ramp. We worked with them on the design, and they added a platform lift to improve accessibility for wheel chair users and others who have difficulty with steep ramps.



Training Courses

About Access provides training in different ways, from an informal meeting with members of a trade association or professional body to specific issues around disability or the built environment. It can be delivered to a range of businesses off-site, generating valuable interaction and enabling them to learn from each other's experience, or it can be in-house, direct to clients at their own premises.

We offer access audit training, disability awareness training, user needs, disability provisions within the Equality Act. It can be prompted by fresh guidance on disability issues, new premises, changed layout of premises, new staff. It is relevant to staff at all levels from senior management to shop-floor and customer-facing staff.

Our courses include the following.

Accessibility overview

A training session for employees or volunteers within an organisation can cover any or all of our specialist areas, depending on the requirements of the group. For that reason the duration of the course is flexible, so we'll work with you to try and fit the things you need to know into the amount of time that you can spare.

The access audit

Our Access Audit training is a two-day course that deals with user needs. We ask: What is an access audit? We look at the legislation that an Access Audit is designed to address, and we study practical examples of good and poor practice from the built environment.

Access Audit training is generally delivered at a client's premises as an in-house course, but it can also be done as an open course.

Delegates can draw on their own experiences, and we will help them to learn from each other. It's particularly useful for surveyors who want to work on access, and it has also proved valuable for health and safety professionals.

The Equality Act

Our dedicated course on the disability provisions of the Equality Act 2010 will give you greater insight into what the legislation demands. We don't do chapter and verse, but we do make sure we cover the provisions of the Act that are relevant to you.

The Equality Act was introduced to provide protection throughout society against many forms of discrimination. At About Access we only deal with the Act from the point of view of disability. It will look at the terms of the Act, the definition of disability, what sort of preventative and remedial measures are considered reasonable, what the various duties are for staff and visitors and what the impact is on local authorities and businesses. The duration of the course is flexible.

Disability Confidence

This is the name given to training with the aim of giving customer facing employees and managers the confidence to meet and work alongside disabled people. It also goes under the name of disability awareness or disability equality training.

The course is either a full or half day and delivered at a client's premises as an in-house course, occasionally being run as an open course for anyone to join.

The content will look at areas such as language and what you should and should not do with a brief synopsis of the Equality Act, politics of disability and scenario based case studies.

CASE STUDY

Our disability confidence training for a school in Cambridge embraced people in various roles – reception, grounds, admin, the bursar. We gave them the confidence to interact with disabled people without feeling frightened or intimidated. One of the ground staff said the training was really good – much better than the ladder training they had received! The general feedback was that the people felt less apprehensive and more confident in dealing with requests from disabled people for information and assistance. Disability confidence training is a new and better name for something that has been happening for a long time. It is a description which recognises that the problems are not always with disabled people but with the perception of what sort of assistance disabled people need. Sometimes they don't need any help at all.



Our clients and their customers

When disability is mentioned, most people immediately think of someone in a wheelchair, but in reality, there are about 750,000 wheelchair users among a disabled population which is in the order of 11.2 million.

People with memory, concentration or learning impairments are said to have a hidden impairment. Such conditions are not obvious when looking at a person, whereas a mobility impairment is more easily visible.

Our aim is to stop people being discriminated against. We work with disabled people, their representative organisations and statutory bodies to reduce the likelihood of disability discrimination and to provide an inclusive environment.

Our advice and consultancy services are designed to influence businesses and organisations, whether they are dealing with colleagues or customers. We also provide guidance for a range of business professionals including:

- Architects/designers/surveyors
- Facilities/estates managers
- Human resources for training of staff
- Health and safety companies who are asked for access audits and don't provide the service.

We operate across the UK and internationally if required, and we provide services to a variety of buildings and property managers including:

- Retail and shopping centres
- Education sites
- Ecclesiastical buildings
- Local and national government
- Healthcare establishments
- Elderly care facilities
- Hotels and resorts
- Car park buildings
- Airports
- Railway stations
- Sports stadiums
- Housing associations
- Travel facilities
- Industrial sites
- Tourism
- Heritage.

We are known for our straight talking and our non-nonsense approach. We listen to our clients, look at the issues and then give you the options so that you can make informed choices. And we complete all our work to set deadlines and agreed budgets.

For further information on how About Access can help you and your properties, please contact

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