

Introduction

There are special problems associated with the provision of access for visitors with disabilities at historic buildings and ancient monuments that are open to the public. A balance must be struck between accessibility and the preservation of the character of the site. Accessibility should not threaten or destroy features and materials that convey the property's significance. In order to achieve the greatest possible level of accessibility, imaginative solutions must be sought which incorporate an integrated review of access and which do not diminish the value of the monument. In the end, however, physical access may not always be possible. However, in the assessment or management of a building or site in respect of access, it is important to recognise that disabled people have a right to expect, where possible, dignified and easy access to and within historic buildings and sites.

The provision of accessible visitor facilities such as shops and toilets has been found to be an important factor in enhancing the attraction of properties to visitors with disabilities. The majority of visitors with disabilities require facilities which can also have advantages for able bodied visitors and can be an added attraction to other visitors who would generally not be classified as "disabled".

With the emergence of anti-discrimination legislation the issue of access becomes increasingly more important. The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 states that where a physical feature of a property or site makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled persons to make use of a service it is the duty of the service provider to take appropriate action overcome the access difficulty. The Act, however, recognises that there will be circumstances where it will be impossible or unreasonable to provide access, due to excessive expenditure or the need to radically alter the nature of the building. Clause 21 of the Act ensures that listed buildings and scheduled monuments will continue to be protected by existing legislation which requires anyone wishing to undertake works (of any nature) to obtain specific consent. It will not be possible for that protection to be overruled in favour of allowing access for disabled people where that would compromise a building's special interest. However, under normal circumstances not directly concerned with listed buildings or scheduled monuments, it is the duty of the service provider to initiate appropriate action to:

- remove the feature;
- alter it so that it no longer has that effect;
- provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature;
- provide a reasonable alternative method of making the service in question available to disabled persons.

In response, this Technical Advice Note provides an introduction to disability awareness issues, details of the problems likely to confront visitors using wheelchairs at different types of historic sites and possible solutions to them. Indicative design guidance has been included for improving accessibility. References are given in the text and in the appendices where more specific advice and specifications can be obtained.

A range of different types of historic sites was surveyed to provide the information included in this Note, each with varying degrees of access for visitors with disabilities. Each visitor has a different individual degree of mobility. Similarly, every historic building is different and no technical advice can cover every problem that may be encountered. To enable possible

problems to be identified, a site assessment methodology has been given, based on the method used at the sites surveyed.

This Note shows how a compromise may be reached to provide universal access while maintaining the integrity of historic properties. It summarises the physical needs and priorities of visitors with disabilities with respect to access to properties where the primary objective is preservation and conservation.

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14. Bibliography

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