

HOW CAN YOUR MUSEUM BETTER WELCOME FAMILIES WITH A WHEELCHAIR USER?



Kids in Museums believes museums are for everyone. But families with a wheelchair user find that some museums are much better than others at making them feel welcome and included in everything there is to see and do.

Wheelchair users come in all shapes, sizes and ages. Some wheelchair users will visit your museum with their parents, others will be the parent bringing their own young family. Some will come as part of a school visit or other group. Some wheelchair users will visit independently and others need someone to assist them. Wheelchair users have different levels of physical strength and different learning abilities. What all wheelchair users who visit museums have in common is the desire to be able to see and experience everything you have on offer – not just the exhibits but also your café, shop, toilets and outside spaces.

FIRST THINGS FIRST – make a plan

This is probably not the first time you've thought of how to make your museum welcoming to wheelchair users, so start with a review of how successful you've been in your original goals. Look at ways to achieve what you planned to do but haven't achieved so far and use the suggestions below to set yourself some new, innovative targets.

Some of these ideas will be familiar to you, others might set you thinking about some quite simple and low cost things that will make a real change. Make a plan of what you hope to achieve and think about how you might raise the money for the important things that will be expensive. Set yourself a target date.

- **Involving young disabled visitors and asking for their feedback:** This is a good place to begin.
- Use your existing networks or ask other local groups about their access groups to get a number of young wheelchair users together. Give them an incentive such as free entrance tickets or café vouchers and invite them to take a journey around your museum. These are the people who will give you the most honest feedback and they are the museum enthusiasts of the future!
- Ask a wheelchair user to navigate a new or existing exhibition or display to see what works and what doesn't. This will provide you with a useful perspective, particularly at the planning stage.
- **Space: being able to see the objects and exhibits.** A great deal of thought goes into putting together an exhibition and it's not difficult or costly to make sure that everything you have on display can be seen by a wheelchair user. Having enough space to manoeuvre easily around a museum is very important for wheelchair users. Invite some young wheelchair users to help you check that there is plenty of space between and around the objects and display cases.
- Having a space underneath the tables and display cases will make it easier for wheelchair users to get close enough to see the exhibit and read your description of it.
- The height of objects on display is also important. Are the objects and the exhibit labels placed at a level that is comfortable viewing for someone who uses a wheelchair? When it comes to the height of items such as books in display cases, as a rule of thumb, what works well for children is likely to work for wheelchair users of any age. Something as simple as putting an illustrated page or small item on a stand and tilting it at an angle can make a real difference.

- Interactive activities attract visitors who prefer to be active and discover things by seeing and doing. Young wheelchair users like to get stuck in to anything interesting and fun to do so make sure your interactive features are at a height which makes it easy for them to use and are not too heavy or difficult to manipulate. The Museums Association [website](#) has some useful information on interactivity (some content is only accessible to subscribers).
- **Height and space in your shop, café and outdoor activities.** Ask a wheelchair user to check out these places, particularly where you are planning changes and improvements. Can they reach things in the shop or café? Could they see you over the till? Tables with fixed seating are particularly difficult for wheelchair users – there's no way they can get to the table. Make sure that at least one table in your café or outside area has movable chairs. Bar stools and tables aren't very welcoming either – they are much too high.
- **Signage and text:** Good, clear signs around your museum will really help a wheelchair user and their family find the most accessible routes, particularly if they need to take a different route to other visitors. Make sure you have clear signs to lifts and ramps, toilets, the café and shop as well as the exhibitions. This will save a lot of time and energy and make the whole experience more enjoyable.
 - If your museum is large or has a complicated layout, think about having a leaflet with plans of routes for wheelchair users and make this easily available in print and on your website.
 - Exhibit text works best for wheelchair users when it is clearly written, not too dense and easy to read even from a bit of a distance. It's not always easy for a wheelchair user to carry a printed guide around on their laps, even ones with large print, so make sure all your information is clear enough to read from wheelchair height.
 - An audio guide which is light and flexible to use and doesn't need to be handheld can be very useful.
 - Although it is always important to aim for full accessibility, where you know that there is a part of your museum that is not easy for a wheelchair user to get to, a photographic pack with explanations or a lively interactive feature on an accessible computer can be very helpful.
- **Lifts, ramps and toilets.** When people think about access for wheelchair users, lifts and ramps and toilets are the first things that come to mind. There are good reasons for this as stairs are impossible for many wheelchair users and everyone needs easy access to a good, clean loo!
 - Ramps. Small changes can make a real difference. Making a ramped route where there has previously been a few stairs can make it possible for a wheelchair user to see a whole new part of the building.
 - A permanent ramp is safer than a temporary one. It's less risky to use and doesn't go missing. It's not much fun having to wait whilst an embarrassed member of staff has to try to find where someone has left the ramp.
- **Bigger lifts are better.** A wheelchair can take up quite a bit of space and when lifts are busy, people can be strangely reluctant to get out of the way. Small, tight lifts can make everyone feel grumpy and a bit claustrophobic so if you have plans to install a new lift, make sure it's as large as possible.
 - Where it's not possible to alter a small lift, it's helpful to have a sign encouraging people who can use the stairs to take this route and to give priority to those who need the lift most.
 - A mirror in the lift can be particularly useful as they act as a helpful aid when reversing out of the lift.
 - Platform lifts need to have room for a second passenger who can use the buttons for a wheelchair user if they need someone to assist them.
- **Wheelchair accessible toilets** are often a deciding factor when people are searching for a good place to visit.
 - Simple adjustments can make a huge difference. For example, removing surplus or oversized bins and other non-essentials will increase the amount of space wheelchair users have to manoeuvre.
 - Wherever possible, have clearly signed toilets for the use of disabled people and separate toilets with baby changing facilities for those with young families. Although often allocated the same toilet, the requirements of these two groups are quite different.
 - Some disabled people require help in using the toilet and an 'ordinary' accessible toilet is not enough. For best practice look at the Changing Places [website](#).

- **Promotion and information.** Even if you have the best accessible facilities in the world, they aren't much use if you don't tell people about them. 95% of disabled people will search for information about disabled access online before visiting a venue for the first time.
 - Does your website include clear and up to date information about access for disabled people? At a minimum it should include information on your pricing policy, toilets, lifts, if appropriate, how to book spaces in your own car park and nearby parking for Blue Badge holders. It's very helpful to include the name and contact details of someone who has knowledge of all aspects of your building.
 - Have you thought of having out of hours openings of popular exhibitions specifically for disabled people? Some wheelchair users really welcome the idea of visiting a museum when things are a bit less crowded. This was something Tate Britain organised for the very popular David Hockney exhibition.
- **Parking:** Bookable parking spaces for disabled people (with clearly marked extra space to get the wheelchair out of the car) is one of those things that can make a difference between a family with a wheelchair user choosing to visit your museum or deciding to go somewhere else.
 - If you do have spaces, is this information clear on your website with contact information? It's great if this can be as flexible as possible so that if a space is available, it can be booked at short notice.
 - If you don't, is it possible to allocate some parking spaces for disabled people?
 - In all cases, it's helpful to provide up to date information for nearby on road or car park spaces for Blue Badge holders.
- **Pricing policy and the use of language.** It's helpful to have a clear pricing policy for people who use wheelchairs and it's important that all your staff, including volunteers, understand this policy and the reasons for it. This policy should be clearly explained at the ticket desk and on your website.
 - When a wheelchair user visits a museum, the most common pricing policy is to offer a concession of one free ticket for a person accompanying them.
 - Don't assume that this person is their 'carer'. They might be visiting with a parent, other relative, their own children or just some friends. Using the term 'companion' to cover all the people who visit with a wheelchair user is clear and non-patronising.
- **Becoming 'disability confident' as an organisation.** Wheelchair users, whatever their age, don't want to be treated any differently from their friends or family. They want you to be welcoming, friendly and polite in the same way as you treat any of your visitors. Your visitor services, security staff and volunteers are usually the primary contact for people visiting your museum. They need to know the best routes around the building and feel comfortable talking to disabled people.
 - You will also have a team of people involved in designing and curating exhibitions: your own staff, freelancers and volunteers. All of these people need to understand what you mean when you talk about developing an inclusive museum.
- **Disability confidence training:** Some basic equality training can be very helpful, especially when it is delivered to everyone who works in the museum, including the chief decision makers.
- **Offering help.** As a rule of thumb, it's better to wait until you are asked a question before you offer help. If you feel it's appropriate to offer help, don't do anything until your offer has been accepted and you are clear what help the visitor wants.
- **Educational workshops.** Tours and workshops for schools and colleges are an important part of what museums offer so think about how to include wheelchair users right at the start of your planning.
 - Work with teachers in advance to find out the needs of any wheelchair users who are going to attend a tour or workshop. This will help you to develop a flexible approach and show your activities at their best.
 - If writing, drawing and reading activities are part of the trip, remember that it might be difficult or impossible for a wheelchair user to work from the floor. It's much easier to have a table to work from although they won't want to be the only person working from a table when everyone else is lying on the floor!
- **Big sites and outdoor spaces.** If your museum is a large one, particularly where there are large outdoor spaces, is it possible for you to offer the loan of mobility scooters? Some open air museums like the Beamish Museum offer 'hop on – hop off' accessible buses, allowing wheelchair users to see everything on offer at their own pace.

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- **Where parts of your museum are inaccessible and there's no way to change this.** Providing images, plans or a virtual tour on a computer of the inaccessible parts of an historic building which can't be altered can be helpful. You will also need to explain why it hasn't been possible to make it accessible.

AND FINALLY...

- **What story is your museum telling?** Is there anything a wheelchair user sees or does in your museum that reflects themselves? Museums are about telling stories of the past, present and future. Is there any part of your story that reflects the lives of these visitors?

Making your museum wheelchair accessible will mean your museum welcomes everyone

Organisations that can provide information and advice:

- [Changing Places](#) provides best-practice advice about creating fully accessible toilets
- [Scope UK](#) provides a range of information about accessibility on its website and via a free helpline
- [Shape Arts](#) offer Disability Equality Training, Access Audits and online resources about creating and marketing accessible events

Resources created for and by families:

- [Euan's Guide](#) features disabled access reviews to a wide range of venues written by disabled people and their friends and families. Euan's Guide also has an extremely helpful '[Top Tips for Museums](#)'

Some of the things museums are offering:

- [Access advisory group](#) at the Horniman Museum
- [Access Guide](#) The Deep, Hull
- [Accessible bus](#) at Beamish to improve access to a large outdoor site
- [Clubs for disabled children and their families](#) Eureka, Halifax
- [Excellent car parking](#) Tate Modern
- [Pre-visit information and maps](#) The Roman Baths, Bath
- [Private views for visitors with disabilities](#) Tate Britain

Although it is always important for museums and galleries to aim for full accessibility, where this is not possible, it can be helpful to offer alternatives such as this example at [Tudor House Museum](#) where there is a DVD tour of the first floor.