Disability Access to Heritage

What are the experiences of disabled people in the heritage sector in 2025?

Direct Access

May 2025

Contents

Foreword

The heritage sector plays a pivotal role in preserving and presenting the cultural and historical narrative of a nation. However, the sector's commitment to disability access and inclusion remains inconsistent. We know from current UK statistics that around one in four people are disabled. From the data we already have about the heritage sector, we know that this one in four figure isn't reflected in the number of people working, volunteering, and participating in heritage. This report aims to explore the barriers faced by disabled people in the heritage sector, reflect on existing practices, highlight successful initiatives, identify shortcomings, and make recommendations for future improvements.

Historic England's 'Disability Access to Heritage' project is the first to take a sector-wide approach to identifying and addressing the barriers and issues facing disabled people when accessing heritage, whether that be through jobs and careers, volunteering, visiting, or participation. The first stage of the project is this research report, for which we commissioned Direct Access, an expert, disabled-led organisation to ensure disabled people's voices and experiences are front and centre. The report highlights the findings of this research, and its findings and recommendations will help shape strategic actions both at Historic England and for the wider heritage sector.

Throughout this report, there are comments showcasing the lived experience of disabled people. All of these are identified in the report, and these comments are the personal experiences and views of survey and focus group participants, and do not represent the views of Direct Access or Historic England.

Introducing Direct Access

Direct Access Consultancy is an established access consultancy company based in Nantwich, Cheshire founded by and operated by disabled people for over 20 years. A large percentage of our staff are disabled people, and we operate nationally and internationally to provide access consultancy and access auditing services predominately in the museum and heritage sectors.

Throughout the UK, Direct Access has collaborated with numerous organisations to offer access audits, access consultancy, design services, and assessments, along with providing disability consultation for various projects. Our involvement spans a wide range of design initiatives aimed at enhancing accessibility, useability and inclusivity. Direct Access believes that creating accessible environments enables products, programmes, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised modification. This approach creates facilities that are accessible to the widest range of potential users without the need for ancillary aids or additional support to access. If an environment is accessible, usable, convenient, and a pleasure to use, everyone benefits.

Our experience working with different organisations tells us that there is a high-level desire to go beyond mere compliance. That is where we excel, developing effective partnerships across all stakeholders to create innovative services, sites, and buildings that draw on international best practices in accessibility. As our team includes disabled people across the spectrum of limited mobility, sensory impairment, mental health and autism, we have drawn on our inherent expertise and understanding of the barriers that people face in their daily lives and the ways that these barriers can be mitigated.

Introducing Historic England

Historic England is a public organisation that protects and brings new life to the heritage that matters to us all, so it lives on and is loved for longer.

From the extraordinary, to the everyday, our historic places and spaces matter to us all. That's why Historic England work together with people across England, to discover, protect and bring new life to our shared historic environment. Historic England opens up heritage for everyone, using digital resources, media campaigns, our unsurpassed archive, publishing, public information and exhibitions.

Heritage is for everyone. Historic England believes that the historic environment in England should be accessible and relevant to everyone who lives and visits here, whatever their socio-economic background, race, religion, age, sexuality, gender, disability, or health.

Historic England also believes that an inclusive heritage sector is a resilient heritage sector; one which better represents and addresses the needs and concerns of society and is relevant to a greater number of people.

You can find out more about Historic England's role and their future strategy here: https://historicengland.org.uk/about/what-we-do/historic-englands-role/

Background to programme

As part of its strategic objective on Inclusive Opportunities, Historic England is developing work to make sure heritage is accessible for disabled people – whether that be through jobs and careers, volunteering, or visiting and participation. In 2024, the Disability Access to Heritage project was launched.

The first phase of the Disability Access to Heritage work is to gather data on the experiences of disabled people currently in the heritage sector, as well as those who have left the sector. The current data on disabled representation in the heritage sector is limited and where it does exist, it demonstrates that the levels of representation do not match the known demographics of the population of England today. There is also little comprehensive research across the sector on the types of accessibility features in place, and how successful these are at making disabled people feel included and welcome. Historic England commissioned Direct Access to conduct research to expand on this data, to help focus action plans and resources to support the sector in improving access and inclusion.

The Historic England Inclusive Heritage Team developed a Theory of Change model to address barriers to access to heritage for disabled people. In consultation with disabled people both across the heritage sector and outside it, this model governs how the project will research the experiences of disabled people, and work towards better outcomes.

This project will be the first to look at the issue of disability inclusion and access on a sector-wide basis, and the first to set sector-wide actions in place.

This research is governed by the principle of "nothing about us without us". It is disabled-led and will involve disabled people and disabled-led organisations throughout to reflect on findings, set action points, and develop the project outputs.

Definition of disability

Historic England uses a broad definition of 'disability' for this project.

Historic England acknowledges that this term is inadequate to fully capture the lived experiences of the people this project aims to work with and represent. However, it is a necessary shorthand to convey the nature and scope of the project to various audiences.

Individuals may identify with or prefer different terms to describe their lived experiences, and some people may not identify with the term "disabled."

This project has a wide scope to address the various barriers that many individuals encounter when engaging with heritage. It aims to include everyone who would benefit from embedding inclusion and accessibility as a higher priority in the sector.

Historic England have followed the definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 – which means encompassing physical disabilities, learning disabilities, mental health, neurodiversity, chronic illness, "hidden" disabilities, and other long term health conditions that have an effect on daily life. This means there is a very diverse range of lived experience reflected in this project, and people may not immediately associate all of these with the catch-all term 'disability'.

Historic England will reflect this diversity when writing about specific disabilities or conditions. Specific terms will always be used where appropriate, but when referring to the project as a whole, or about actions that are applicable to many situations, it will use the term 'disabled people' and then expand upon specifics where necessary and appropriate.

The term 'disabled people' in this project covers people:

- With a diagnosis of a disability or chronic illness

- With a diagnosed learning disability

- Who are d/Deaf, Culturally Deaf, deafblind, deafened or have hearing loss

- Who are blind or partially sighted

- With a diagnosis of a mental health condition

- Who are neurodivergent

- Who are currently in the process of diagnosis or investigation of any of the above

- Who identify as disabled

- Who are classified as disabled under the terms of the Equality Act 2010

Current data on disability access and inclusion

A variety of sources have been used to identify the demographics of disability communities in England. This data allows for a comparative analysis of survey results to determine how representative they are of the broader population.

The annual population survey (Department of Work and Pensions, 2023) identifies a 26.9% employment gap between disabled people and non-disabled in England for 2022/3.

This varies across regions. There are significantly higher employment gaps in the North:

North East	34.9
North West	31.7
Yorkshire and Humber	29.1
East Midlands	26.9
West Midlands	25.6
East of England	23.2
London	25.0
South East	24.7
South West	24.7

Existing data about disabled people in the working-age population covers the whole of the UK, and comes from UK Government research. (Department of Work and Pensions, 2023).

Figure 1: Proportion of the UK population in 2022/23 with a long-term health condition, aged 16 to 64 years

Working-age population

36%

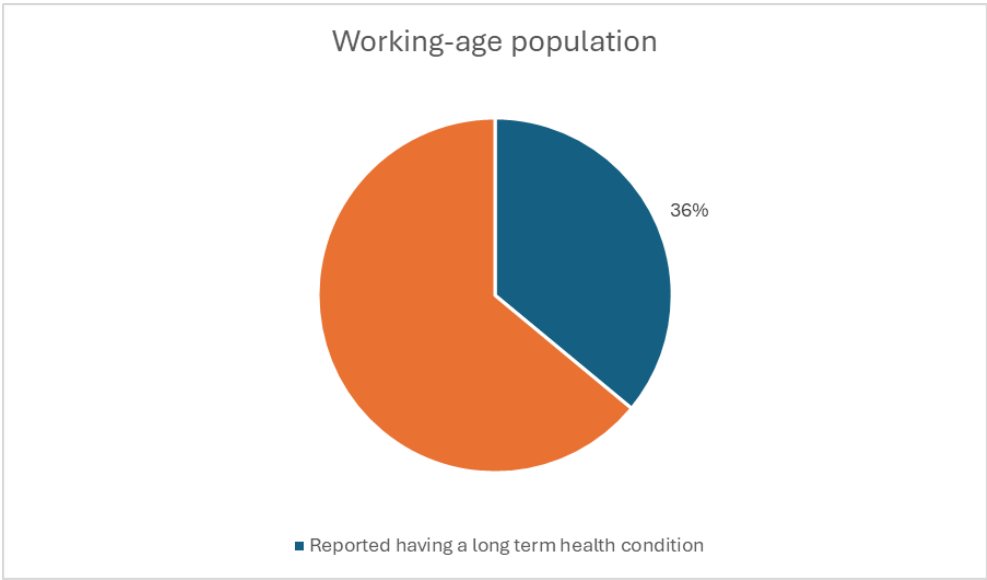■ Reported having a long term health condition

Figure 2: Proportion of the UK population in 2022/23 who are classed as disabled, aged 16 to 64 years
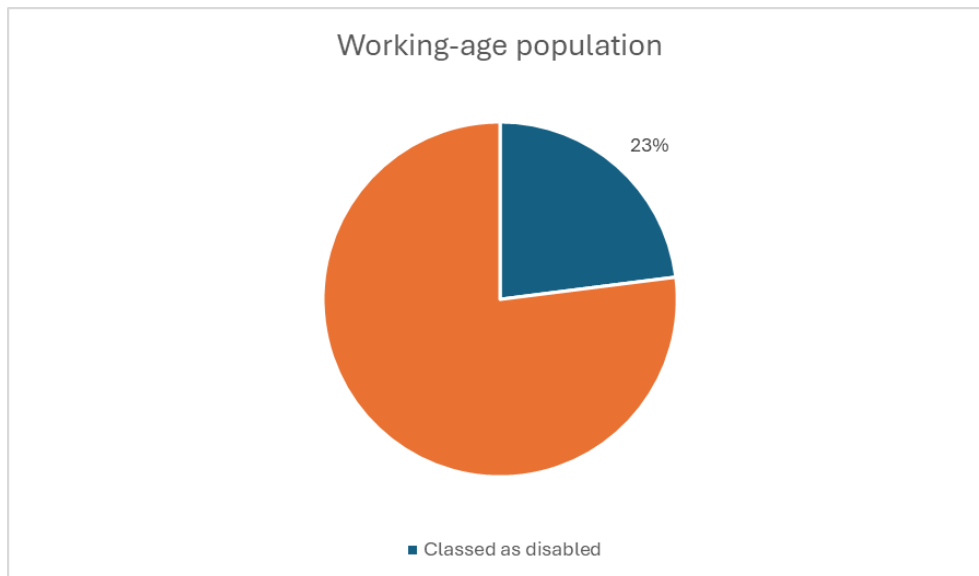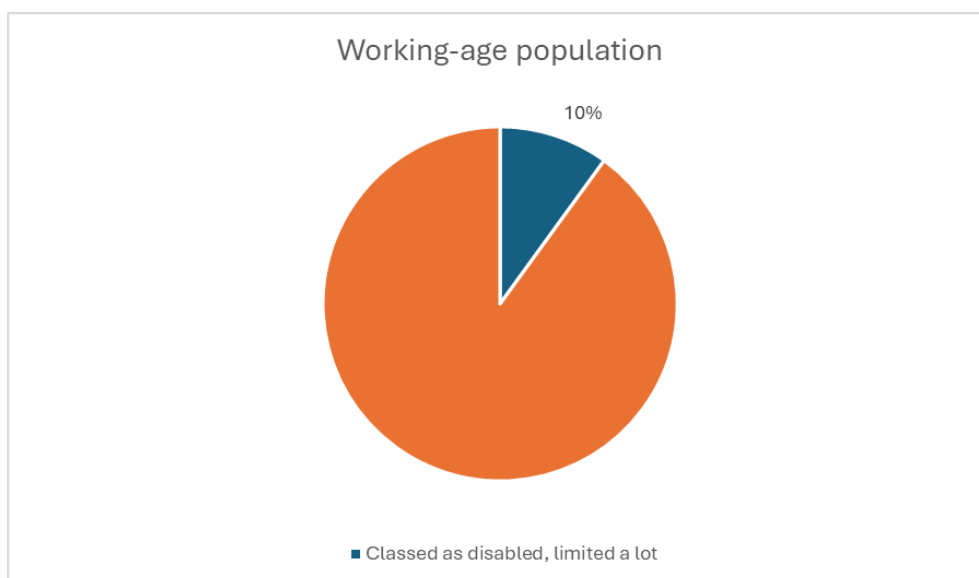

Figure 3: Proportion of the UK population in 2022/23 who are both classed as disabled and are limited a lot in their daily lives, aged 16 to 64 years

The latest data (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023) shows that:

- Nearly one in four of the working-age population are classed as disabled

- The number of people reporting a long-term health condition and the number classed as disabled continues to rise

- The increase in disability prevalence is associated with an increase in people reporting mental health conditions and "other health problems or disabilities"

- Nearly one in three people classed as being disabled one year were no longer classed as being disabled the next year

The disability employment gap is wider for:

- Disabled men

- Older (aged 50 to 64) disabled people

- Disabled people with no qualifications

- Disabled people living in social housing

- Disabled people living alone

- Disabled people living in Northern Ireland, the North of England, Scotland and Wales

The disability employment rate is lower for disabled people:

- With a mental health condition

- With five or more health conditions

Disabled people were more likely than non-disabled people to be:

- Working in Health, Retail and Education

- Working in lower-skilled occupations

- Self-employed

- Working part-time (and subsequently, fewer hours)

- Working in the public sector

- Working for a small employer (less than 50)

- Underemployed (looking for and available to start another job or work longer hours)

- Leaving work for health reasons

Disabled people were more likely to be economically inactive:

- The majority gave long-term sickness as their main reason for being inactive

- They were more likely (than non-disabled people) to want a job

- They were less likely (than non-disabled people) to have had a job in the last two years

Disabled women are as likely to be in employment as disabled men according to the Annual Population Survey (Office for National Statistics, 2023)

Figure 4: Proportion of people in employment by gender, disabled people aged 16 to 64 years, UK, 2013/2014 to 2022/2023

Disabled women are almost as likely to be in employment as disabled men
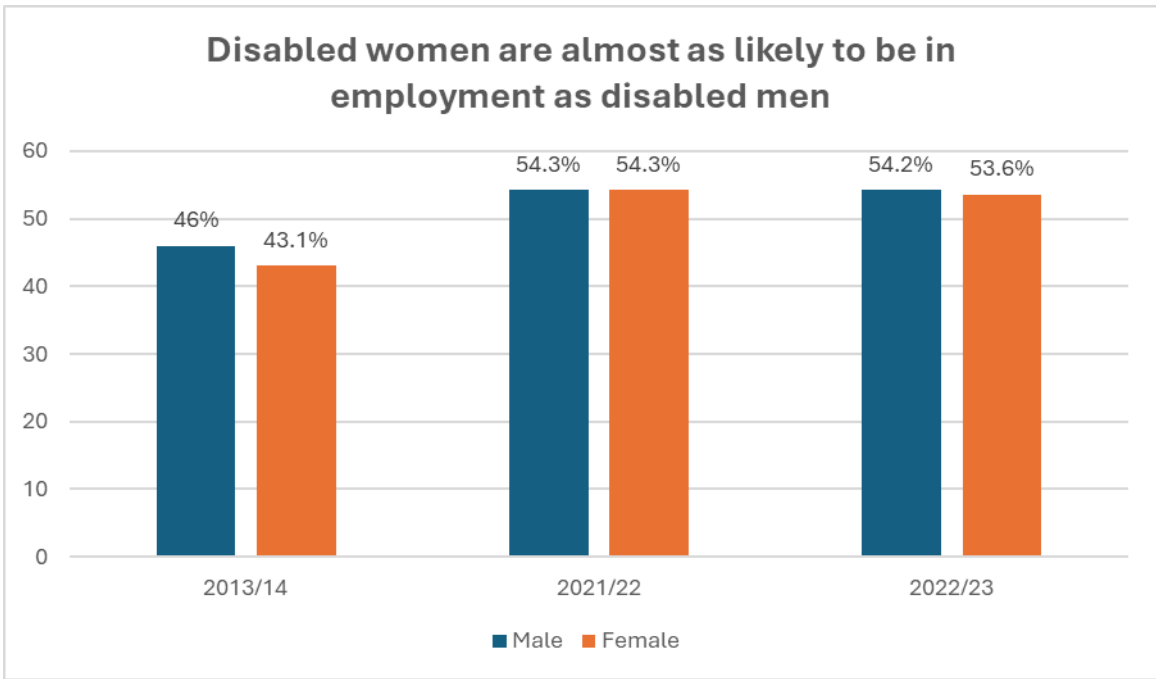
Over the past several years, the employment rate gap between disabled women and men has been narrowing. In 2022/2023, the employment rate for disabled men was estimated at 54.2%, slightly higher than the 53.6% for disabled women, though this difference is not statistically significant. This follows the 2021/2022 period, where both disabled men and women had equal employment rates of 54.3%.

This parity among disabled individuals contrasts with non-disabled people, where in 2022/2023, women had an employment rate of 78.6% compared to 85.0% for men, a difference of 6.4 percentage points.

Since 2013/2014, the employment rate for disabled women has risen by 10.5 percentage points, from 43.1%, while the rate for men has increased more slowly, by 8.2 percentage points from 46.0%.

Given the higher employment rate of non-disabled men compared to non-disabled women, the disability employment gap is narrower for women (25.0 percentage points) than for men (30.8 percentage points). However, the gap for women has widened by 1.8 percentage points in the last year, meaning the gap has closed more rapidly for men than for women since 2013/2014 (3.8 percentage points for women and 5.4 percentage points for men).

How does the national picture compare with Historic England?

While there is no data about levels of disability employment in the wider heritage sector, at Historic England there have been several actions to improve the diversity of its workforce and support other organisations to develop their practice.

8.8% of Historic England's workforce (90 employees) declared a disability in 2023/24, up from 4.4% and 40 employees in 2019/20. Also in 2023/24 17.5% of new starters to Historic England declared a disability Historic England aims to increase participation in heritage by disabled people and as part of this, became a Disability Confident Leader at Level 3. Historic England supports other organisations in the heritage sector to become Disability Confident.

What is the Disability Confident Scheme?

The Disability Confident Scheme is a UK government initiative designed to help employers recruit and retain disabled people and those with health conditions. The scheme encourages employers to think differently about disability and take action to improve how they attract, recruit, and develop disabled talent. It is structured into three levels:

1. Disability Confident Committed (Level 1) - Employers agree to the Disability Confident commitments and identify at least one action to make a difference for disabled people.

2. Disability Confident Employer (Level 2) - Employers must demonstrate that they have undertaken and successfully completed the actions and activities set out in Level 1.

3. Disability Confident Leader (Level 3) - Employers act as champions within their networks, encouraging and supporting other businesses to become Disability Confident.

(Department for Work and Pensions, 2024)

Barriers faced by disabled people

What barriers to heritage engagement exist for disabled people?

There are barriers to heritage engagement for disabled people, not because of an individual's disability, but because society is not inclusive and accessible for disabled people (Historic England, https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/inclusion/audiences/addressing-barriers-for-disabled-people). People are disabled by a lack of access, not by the disability itself, and this is the core concept of the Social Model of Disability. Recognising this concept enables organisations to treat disabled people with dignity and respect.

Heritage organisations should invest time in developing a sound understanding of the Social Model of Disability. In addition, they should work to understand the ways that disabled people are impacted throughout their daily lives by the physical environment and by society's preconceptions about and attitudes towards disability. There are links at the end of this guidance to get you started.

It can feel confronting and challenging to recognise the Social Model of Disability, especially if your organisation has already begun to take steps towards accessibility. It is important to start the change process not through recrimination, blame, or guilt but by acknowledging a society-wide issue and committing to action.

The first step to making heritage accessible and inclusive is to develop a good understanding of the barriers, and how these barriers affect disabled people's engagement. Below are some examples of known barriers for disabled people, and some questions to consider. It is also recommended to consult disabled people about your site and activities.

Physical

- How much of your building is fully physically accessible? This means no stairs or good alternatives where there are stairs, no corridors too narrow for walking aids and wheelchairs, no steep slopes, no uneven surfaces, doorways wide enough for wheelchairs and powerchairs

- Do you have a temporary or portable ramp? If so, who is responsible for it? Are all staff and volunteers trained to use it?

Environmental

- Are the lighting levels very bright or very dim? Are they adjustable?

- Are there any repetitive or loud noises? If so, do you provide noise-cancelling headphones?

- Are there dedicated quiet spaces?

- Are there any strong scents or odours?

- Do you have a sensory map of your site or building?

Social and Policy

- Do you have a sticker or lanyard system informing everyone of the interactions people prefer?

- Have all of your staff and volunteers had training in working with neurodiverse people, dignity and respect, invisible disabilities, and other relevant courses?

- Do you recognise the importance of interpretation in British Sign Language and understand why written transcripts can be unsuitable as an alternative?

- Does your volunteer or community engagement policy explicitly reference available and possible accommodations for disabled people?

- Is part of your core budget ring-fenced for accessibility costs?

It is important for organisations to note that disabled people do not need to share their diagnosis or produce formal medical evidence of their disability to request accommodations. There are many different types of disability and chronic health, and individuals can be affected in various ways.

It is also important for organisations to recognise that for many disabled people, sharing their disability is a complicated process as they may be wary of stigma and discrimination. Participants may not share their disabilities at the beginning of a project or activity. They may only do so later, when trust has been built or when they are assured of commitment to inclusive practice.

For the UK Government's Taking Part Survey in 2021, people in England who had not visited any heritage events in the past 12 months were asked why they hadn't. A large proportion (17%) reported a health problem or disability as a barrier. This suggests that disabled people and those with long term health conditions faced significant barriers to visiting heritage events.

Figure 5: Barriers reported by respondents in England to visiting heritage events in the past 12 months, 2019/20 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/taking-part-201920-heritage/heritage-taking-part-survey-201920

Barriers reported by respondents in England to visiting heritage events in the past 12 months, 2019/20

17%

■ Reported a health problem or disability as a barrier to heritage engagement
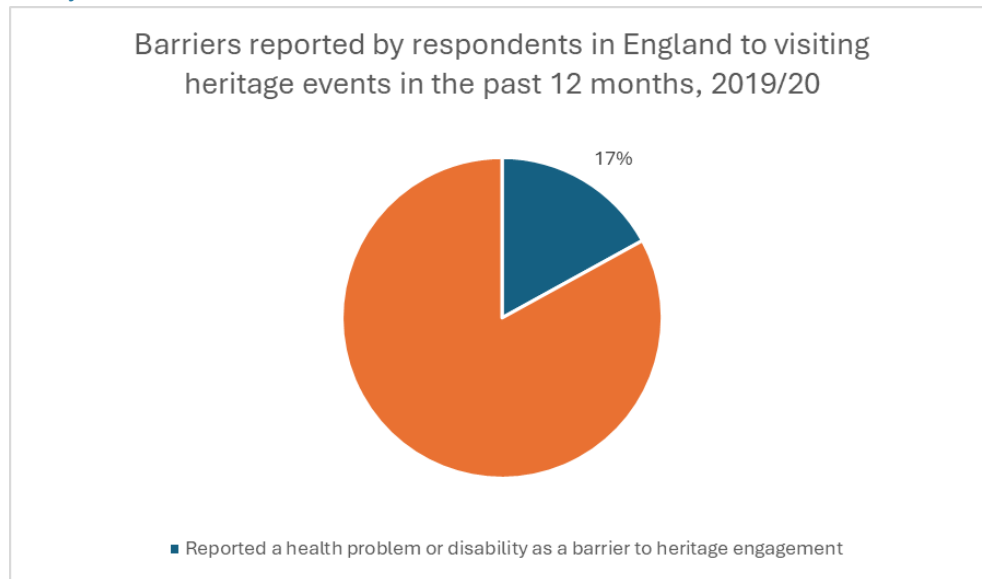
The Euan's Guide Access Survey, published February 2025 (Euan's Guide, 2024), reports on the experiences of disabled people visiting places and is collated from 6500 respondents, the majority of whom are disabled https://www.euansguide.com/get-involved/access-survey/

78% of the respondents were not confident about visiting new places when thinking about accessibility - "Unnecessary stress and anxiety are caused by poor or non-existent disabled access information and can lead to isolation". The access survey shows that 62% will avoid going to a venue if it has not shared its disabled access information, and 77% of respondents have found venue websites to be misleading, confusing or inaccurate when checking before a visit.

Methodology

To gather quantitative data, an online survey was run from 5 December 2024 until 5 February 2025. The survey was targeted towards:

- Employees in the heritage sector

- Former employees in the heritage sector

- Heritage volunteers

- Visitors to heritage sites

The survey was created online using Survey Monkey. It was designed to be completed within a short period of time with a range of open and closed questions, multiple choice, single answers and free text options.

The survey was shared with existing heritage networks across England as well as with individuals.

The survey was shared with the following groups:

- Historic England

- English Heritage

- The National Trust

- Visit England

- Heritage Fund

- Heritage Trust Network

- Heritage Alliance

- GEM (Group for Education in Museums)

- Many other smaller organisations

The survey was shared via Direct Access social media platforms on Facebook, LinkedIn, Bluesky and X (formerly Twitter).

Focus groups were undertaken via Microsoft TEAMS between 27 and 29 January 2025. These were advertised to the same organisations and shared across Direct Access media platforms. The questions were shared with the interviewees before the meetings were held.

Both the survey and the focus groups were anonymous.

The survey was distributed to organisations to share with those who currently or previously worked in the heritage sector, or those who visit heritage sites or participate in heritage, as

well as advertising across Direct Access social media platforms around the 5th of December 2024. Further distribution was made around the 5th of January 2025.

Survey results and analysis

The survey was distributed to organisations to share with those who currently or previously worked in the heritage sector, or those who visit heritage sites or participate in heritage, as well as advertising across Direct Access social media platforms around the 5th of December 2024. Further distribution was made around the 5th of January 2025.

In total, there were 208 responses to the survey.

Gender

Of the respondents, 76.27% were female, 20.34% were male, and 3.39% preferred not to disclose their gender. None of the respondents identified as non-binary. This distribution contrasts significantly with the general population of England and Wales according to the Office for National Statistics, where women make up 51% (Ethnicity facts and figures, 2021).

The gender imbalance of respondents is significant. Overall in the UK population, more women than men are disabled - 25% vs 21% (UK Disability statistics, 2024). Disabled women potentially face additional barriers to heritage careers, including gender pay gaps, the increased likelihood of them having caring responsibilities, and the associated limitations on career advancement and opportunities.
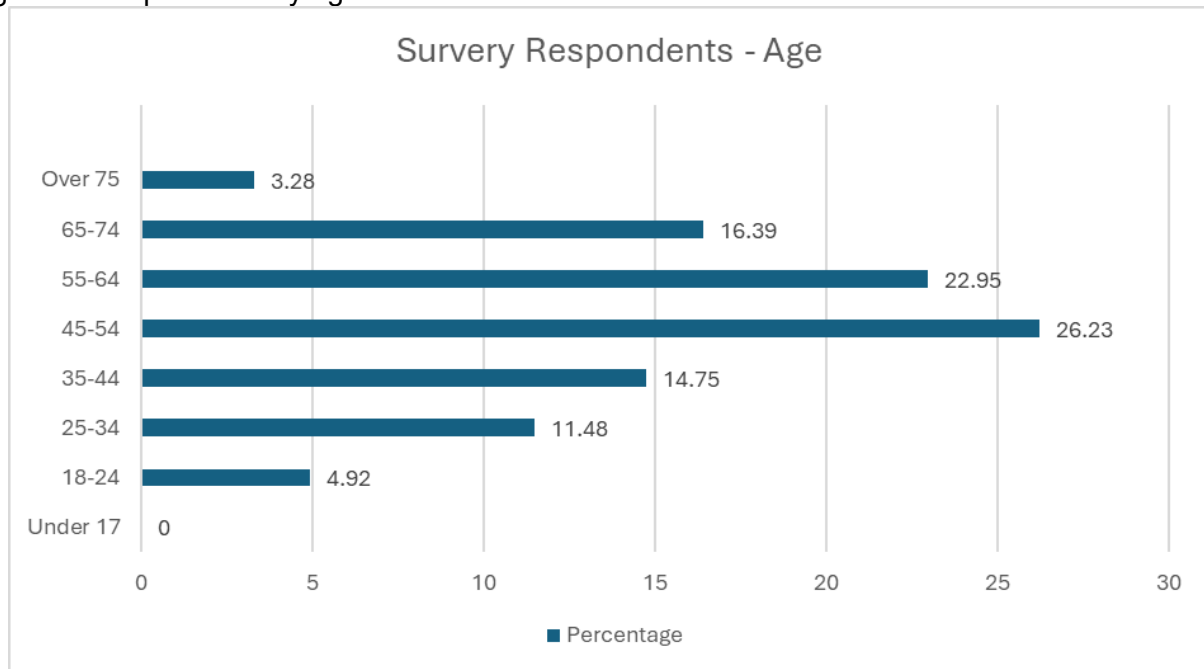
Figure 6: Respondents by gender
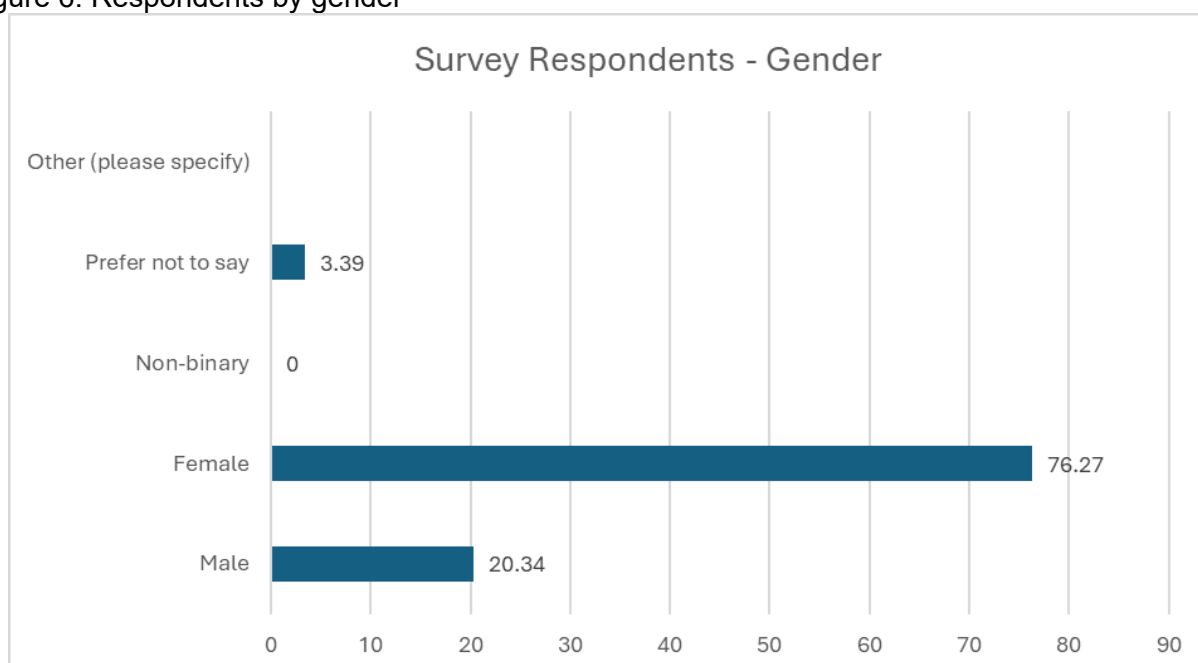
Age

Of the respondents, 26.23% were aged between 45 – 54, 22.95% aged between 55-64, 16.39% aged between 65 – 74, 14.75% aged between 35 – 44, 11.48% aged between 25

– 34, 4.92% aged between 18 – 24, 3.28% aged 75 and over while there were no responses from those under the age of 17.

Figure 7: Respondents by age

Ethnicity

Of the 208 overall survey respondents, only 61 chose to respond to this section.

Of these 61, 86.89% stated that they were White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Ireland/British Irish, 9.84% stated Other White background, 1.64% were White and Black Caribbean and 1.64% stated Other Black/African/Caribbean background.

Disability and Long-Term Health Conditions

Of the 208 respondents to the survey, 124 chose to answer this question. Of these 124, 20% disclosed they did not have a disability or health condition and 2% preferred not to say.

Mental Health condition e.g. depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder, 14% Dyslexia, dyspraxia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	15%
Autistic spectrum condition or another condition affecting speech, language communication or social skills	12%

Physical disability or mobility issue e.g. impaired use of arms/legs, use of wheelchair or mobility aids	12%
Long-term illness e.g., cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease or epilepsy	10%
Deafness or hearing impairment	5%
Condition affecting motor, cognitive, social and emotional skills, speech or language	3%
Blindness or visual impairment	2%
'Other', this included joint misalignment, neurodiversity (OCD), Temporomandibular joint misfunction, polycystic ovaries, endometriosis and incontinence	9.2%

# Employment status

From all the responses, for those employed in the heritage sector; 37.5% are full time employees, 15.87% are part time employees, 12.02% are volunteers and 7.69% are students.

For those who left the sector; there were 3.85% who are retirees and 2.8% were ex-employees.

20.19% responded that they were visitors who visit heritage sites.

Figure 8: Respondents by employment status
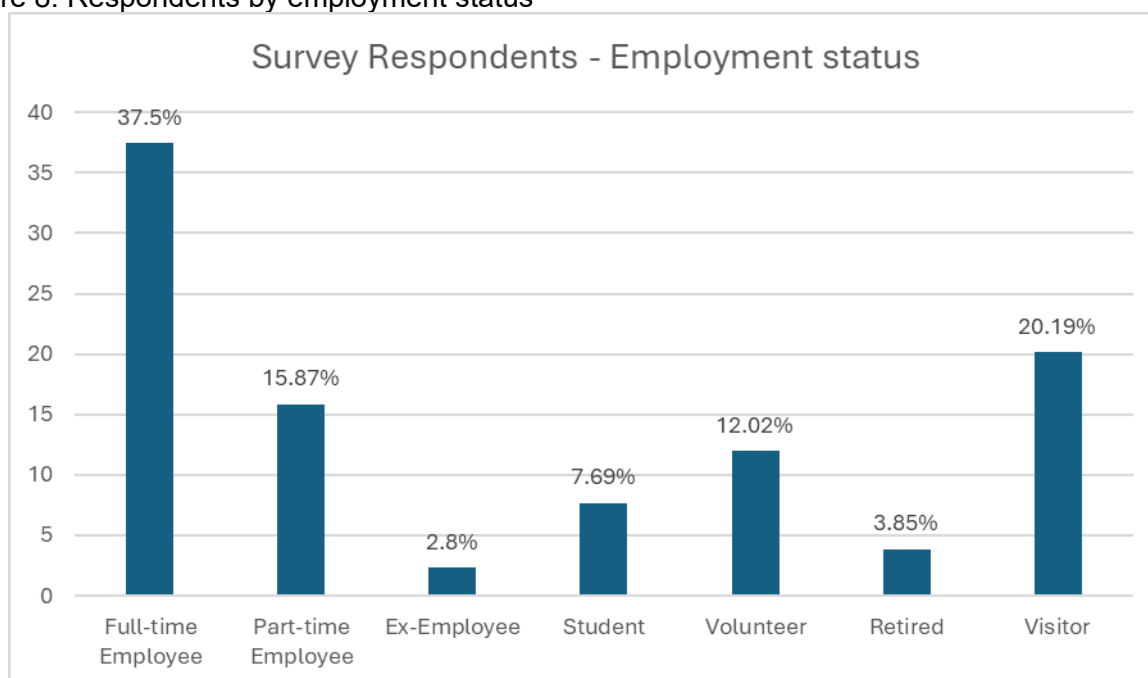
Responses from those who work and have worked in the heritage sector

Length of time worked in the heritage sector

We asked full and part time employees, students and volunteers how long they had worked in the heritage sector for. 53.01% had worked in the sector for over 10 years, 18.07% between 5-10 years, 10.84% between 2-5 years, 12.05% between 1-2 years and 6.02% for under a year.

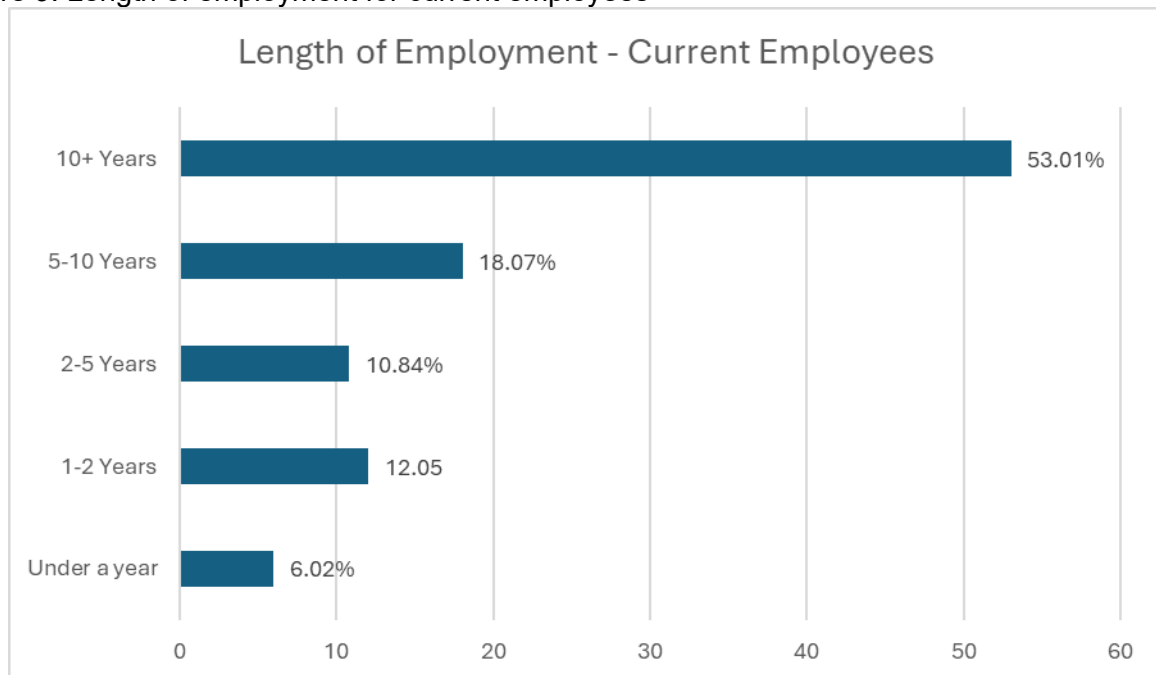Figure 9: Length of employment for current employees

Figure 10: Length of employment for former employees
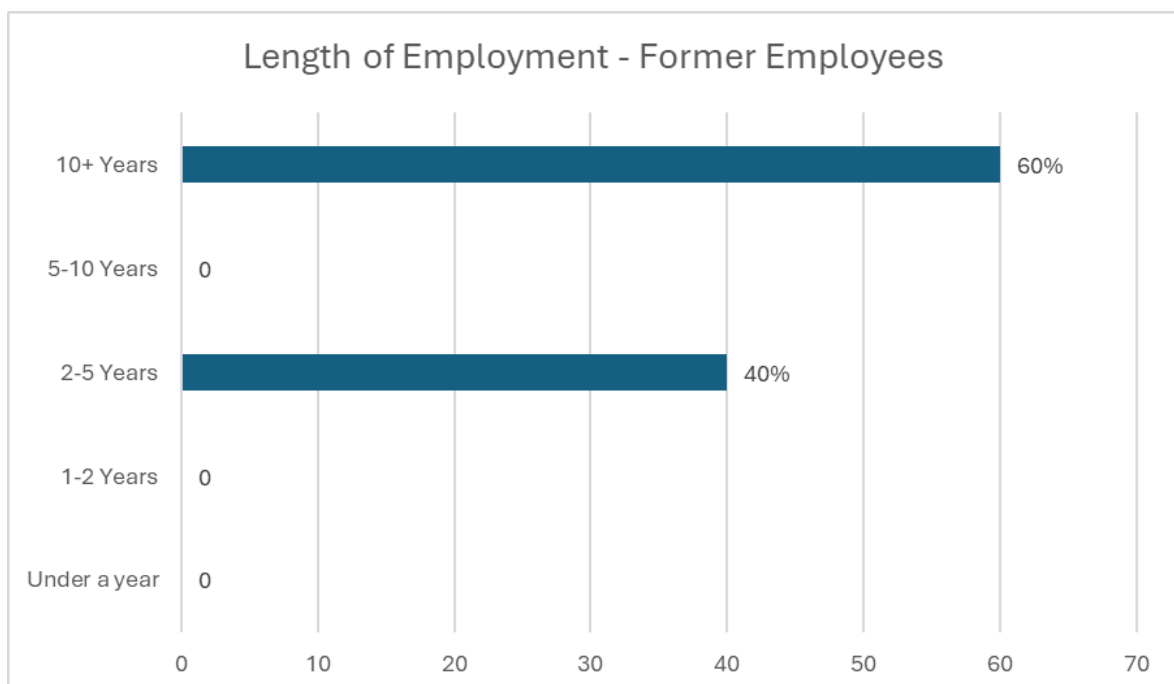
40% of the ex-employees and retirees had worked in the sector between 2-5 years, and 60% for over 10 years.

What were your reasons for leaving employment with the heritage sector?

At 40%, the figure was the same for those leaving the heritage sector due to change of job in a different sector, and those leaving due to retirement, while 20% left due to health reasons.

Figure 11: Reasons for leaving employment with the heritage sector
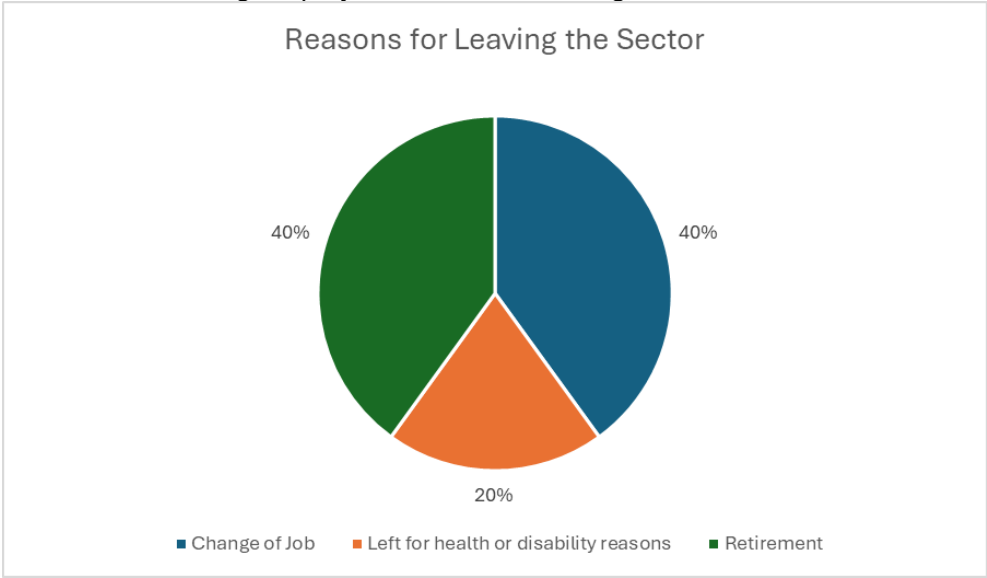
Is your line manager aware of your access needs?

74% of those within the heritage sector stated that their line manager was aware of their access needs.

Figure 12: Respondents whose line manager is aware of their access needs
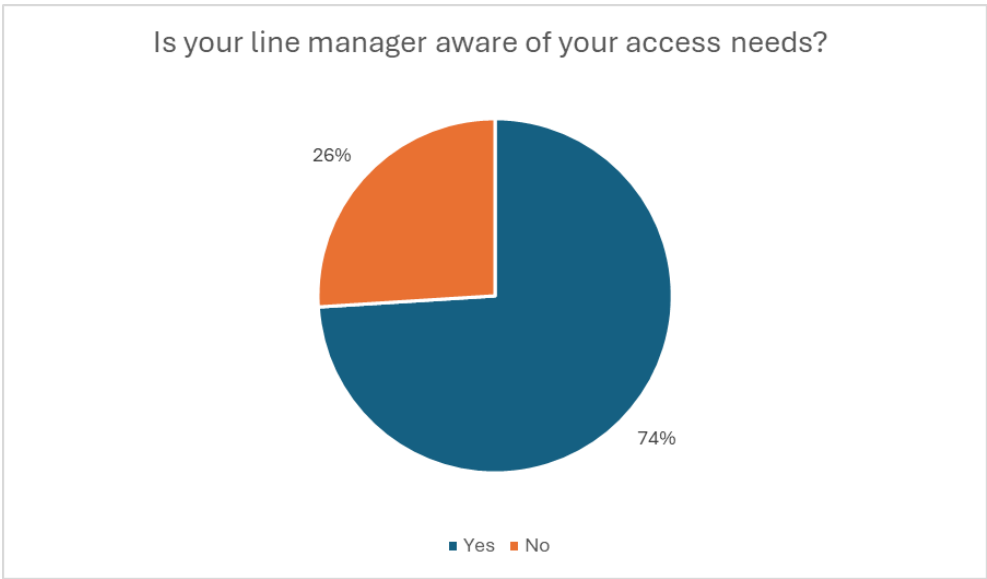
For those who left the sector 60% of the responses stated that their line manager was aware of their access needs.

Figure 13: Respondents who have left the heritage sector whose former line manager was aware of their access needs

Was your former line manager aware of your access needs?

- 40% (No)
- 60% (Yes)

Yes ■ No ■
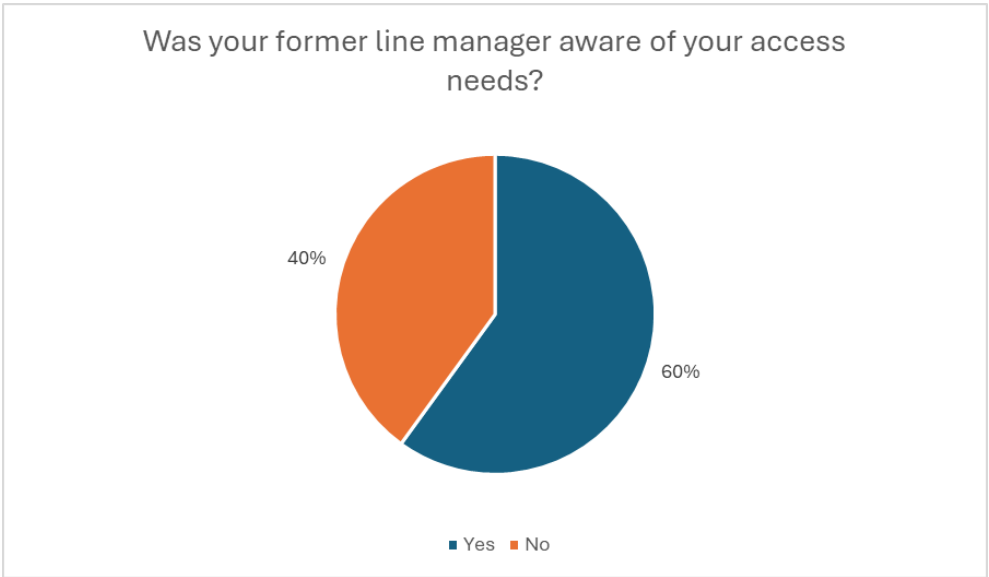
In the heritage sector only 34.67% were offered a workplace assessment.

Figure 14: Respondents currently working in the heritage sector who have been offered a workplace assessment

Were you offered a workplace assessment?

- 34.67% (Yes)
- 65.33% (No)

Yes ■ No ■

For those who have left the sector, only 20% were offered a workplace assessment.

Figure 15: Respondents formerly working in the heritage sector who were offered a workplace assessment

What is a Workplace Assessment?

A workplace assessment is a process designed to evaluate the needs and challenges faced by disabled employees in the workplace. The goal is to identify barriers that might impact their confidence, well-being, and productivity, and to recommend adjustments or support to help them succeed.
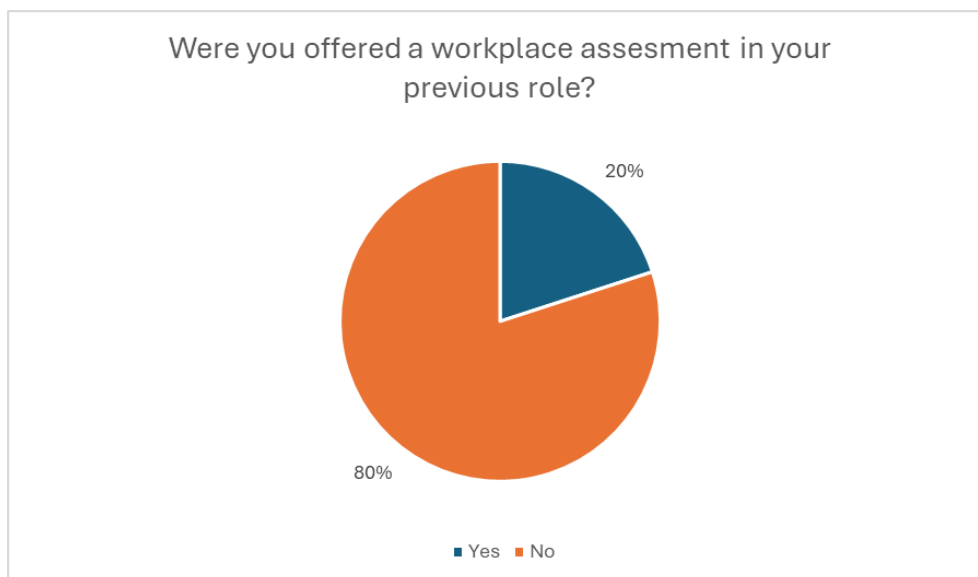
Key Components of a Workplace Assessment:

1. Evaluation of Individual Needs - This includes understanding the specific disabilities and conditions of the employee, such as physical limitations, sensory impairments, or cognitive challenges.

2. Environmental Assessment - Examining the workplace environment to identify potential barriers, such as lighting, noise levels, and accessibility of workstations.

3. Job Duties Analysis - Reviewing the employee's job responsibilities to determine if any modifications or accommodations are needed to perform their tasks effectively.

4. Recommendations - Providing actionable steps to improve the work environment, such as ergonomic adjustments, assistive technologies, or changes in work processes.

Do you use Access to Work?

Only 6.53% of survey respondents who work in the heritage sector use Access to Work.

Figure 16: Respondents currently working in the heritage sector who use Access to Work
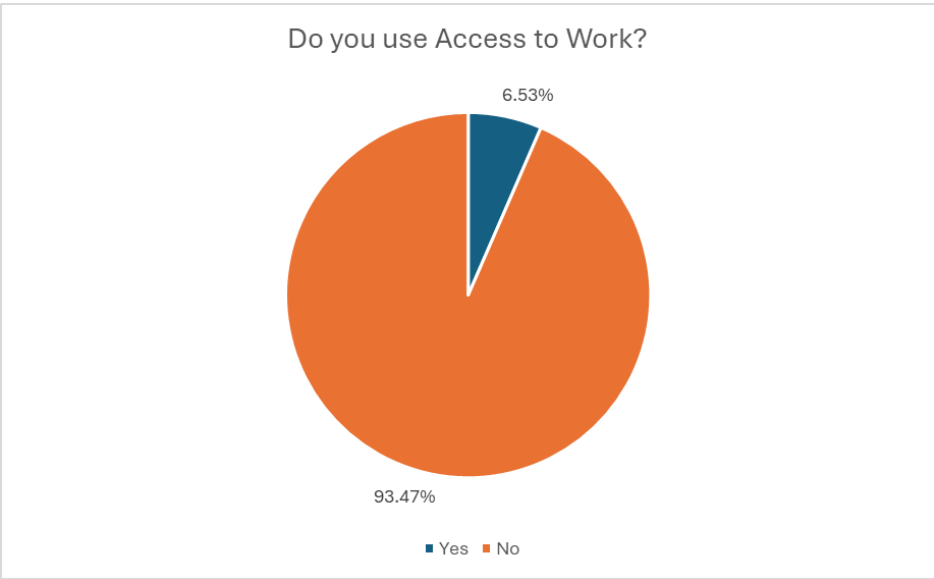
For respondents who had left the heritage sector, none had used Access to Work.

Figure 17: Respondents formerly working in the heritage sector who used Access to Work

What is Access to Work?

Access to Work is a government-funded employment support programme in the UK designed to help disabled people or those with health conditions start or stay in work. The programme provides practical and financial support tailored to individual needs. Support includes:
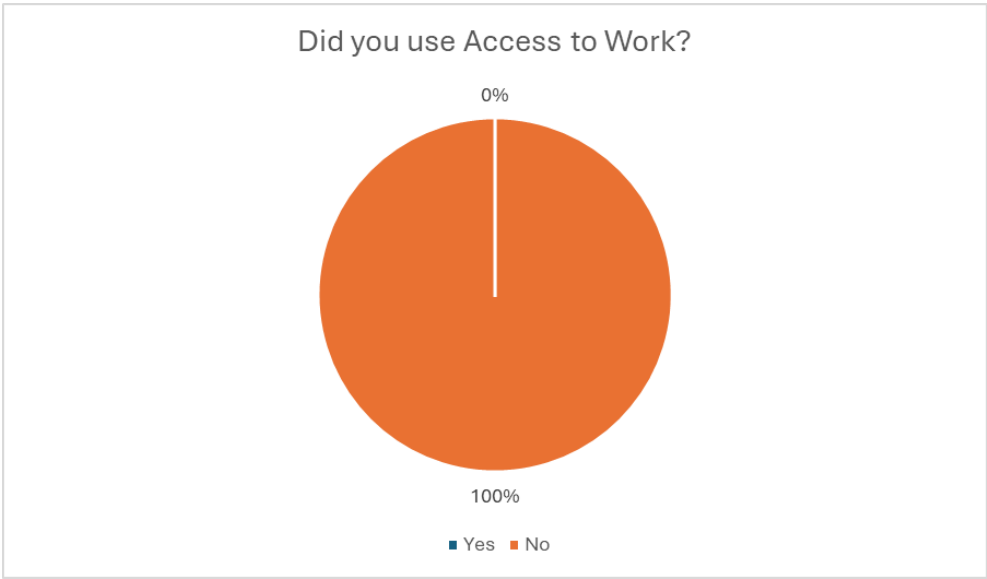
- Grants: Financial assistance to cover the cost of practical support, such as specialist equipment, assistive technology, or adaptations to the workplace.

- Travel Support: Help with extra travel costs to and from work if public transport is not a viable option.

- Mental Health Support: Assistance in managing mental health at work, including tailored plans and one-on-one sessions with mental health professionals.

- Communication Support: Funding for communication support at job interviews, such as British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters or lip speakers.

The programme aims to remove barriers to employment, ensuring that individuals with disabilities can work effectively and comfortably.

Which of the following disability awareness training have you received at your workplace?

50% of the current workforce does not receive any training.

38.75% received disability awareness training, 17.5% for visually impaired awareness, 12.50% for Sunflower Lanyards, 11.25% for d/Deaf awareness, 8.75% for British Sign Language Training and only 5% for Induction Loop training.

Disability awareness training	38.75
Visually impaired awareness training	17.5
Sunflower lanyards training	12.5
d/Deaf awareness training	11.25
British Sign Language training	8.75
Induction loop training	5
Other training	16.5

'Other' included autism and neurodiversity awareness, dementia friendly training, Mental Health First Aid, inclusion and diversity training and safeguarding.

Figure 18: Which of the following disability awareness training have you received at your workplace?

Which of the following disability awareness training have you received at your workplace?

Category	Percentage
Other	16.5%
Induction Loop Training	5%
Other	8.75%
d/Deaf awareness	11.25%
Sunflower Lanyards	12.5%
Visually Impaired Awareness	17.5%
Disability Awareness	38.75%
None	50%

However, the responses from the ex-employees showed that 83.33% did not receive any disability awareness training and only 16.67% received any disability awareness training.

Figure 19: Which of the following disability awareness training did you receive in your former role?

Which of the following disability awareness training did you receive in your former role?

Category	Percentage
Induction Loop Training	
Other	
d/Deaf awareness	
Sunflower Lanyards	
Visually Impaired Awareness	
Disability Awareness	16.67%
None	83.33%
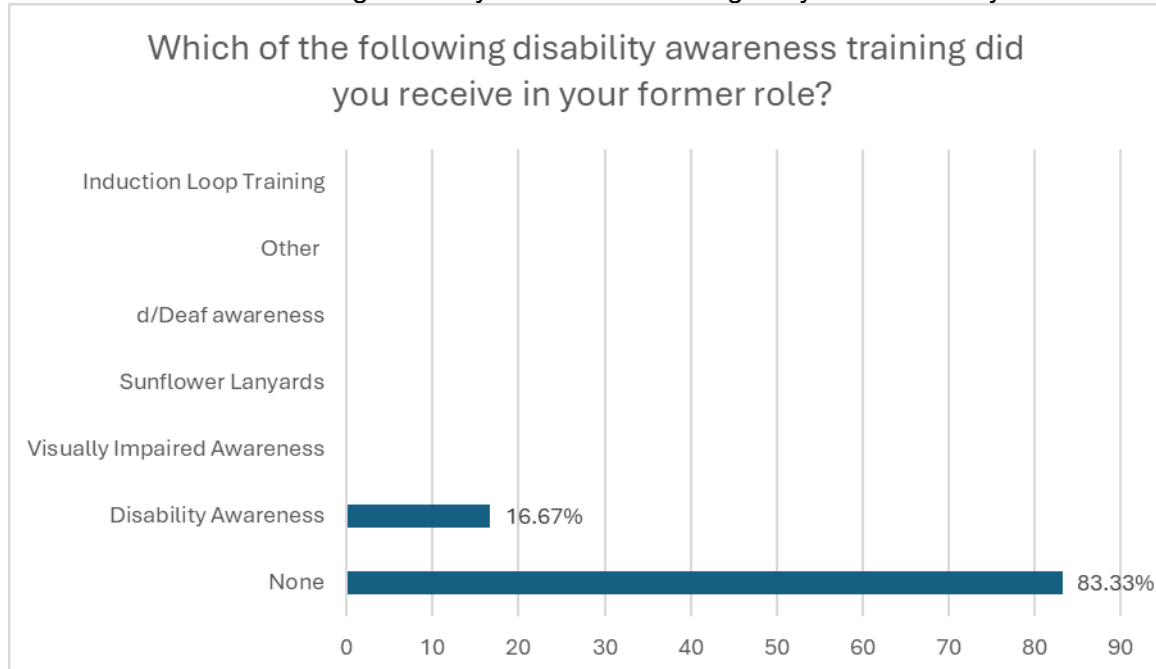
Do you know if there are any policies or procedures in place for accessibility?

Of those currently working the sector, 64.63% were aware of policies and procedures for accessibility in their workplace and 35.37% were not.

Figure 20: Do you know if there are any policies or procedures in place for accessibility?

Do you know if there are any policies or procedures in place for accessibility?

35.37%

64.63%

■ Yes ■ No
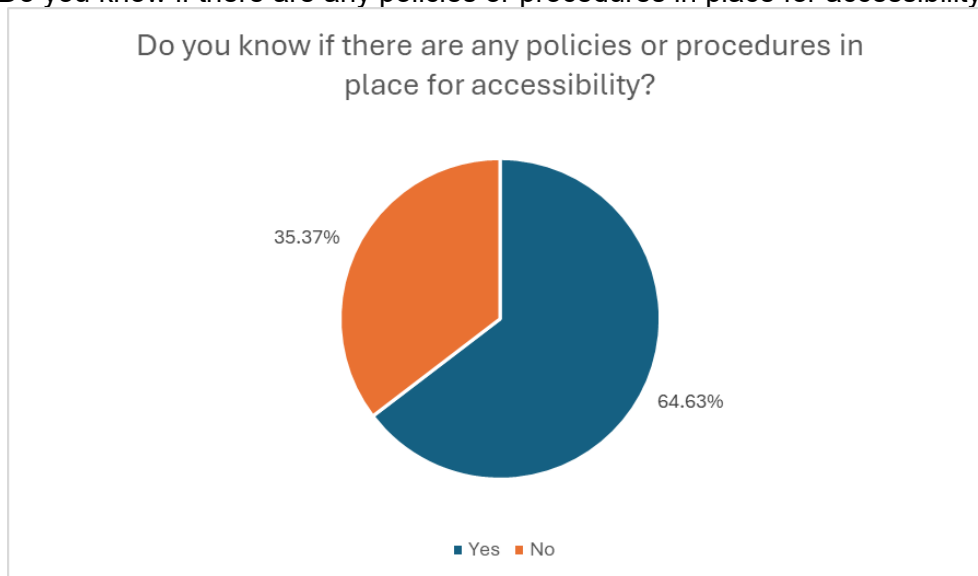
However, for those who left the sector, 83.33% did not know if there were any policy and procedures in place, while 16.67% did.
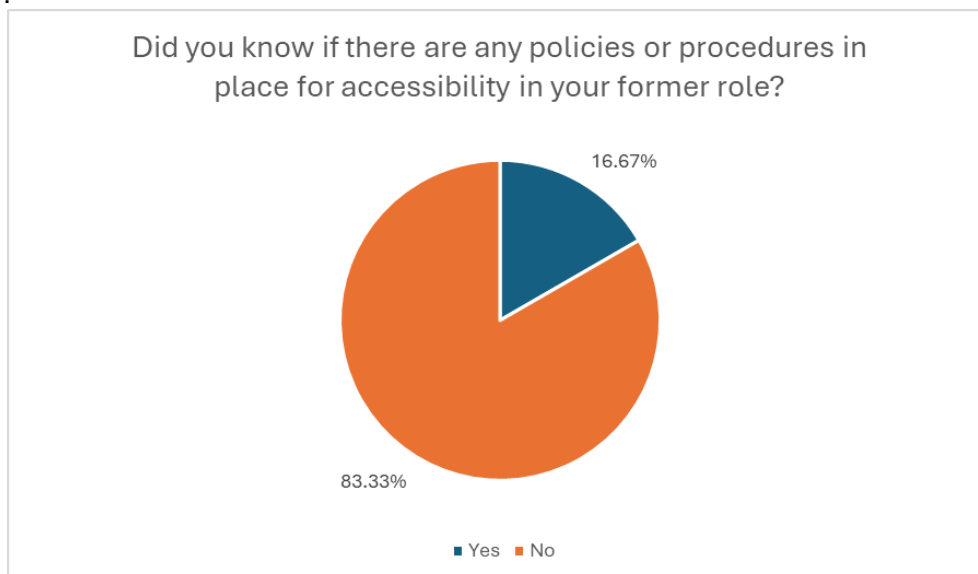
Figure 21: Did you know if there are any policies or procedures in place for accessibility in your former role?

Did you know if there are any policies or procedures in place for accessibility in your former role?

16.67%

83.33%

■ Yes ■ No

What accessibility policies and procedures are in place?

There was a mixed response about what policies and procedures were in place in the workplace. Respondents noted that there were policies in place for Equality, Inclusion and Diversity, reasonable adjustments, flexible working, Health and Safety and generic accessibility. Some were unsure of what policies or procedures were in place.

It was noted in a few responses that the policy and procedures were lacking in some areas. Information about receiving reasonable adjustments and support to accessing Access to Work were identified as lacking.

Respondents highlighted a lack of accessibility procedures for meeting rooms both virtually and in person. For example, one response noted the lack of guidance on the use of captions when online, or guidance on speaking up and looking at colleagues directly for lip reading purposes for in person meetings.

There are a lack of clear processes for line management and staff dealing with access issues. Where this was available, it was noted that the focus was on visitors, rather than on staff or volunteers. It was also felt that management teams have a lack of awareness or a lack of interest.

Some of the respondents who answered 'unknown' or 'not sure' about what policies and procedures were in place noted that they may exist, but are not always communicated well by management. It was also noted that it was not clear on who to approach within the organisation with queries about access, and that there was a lack of communication when new policies have been developed.

It was felt that the recruitment process was not accessible, from advertising right through the application process and interviews.

There was very little information about policies and procedures relating to mental health conditions and invisible disabilities. This was identified as a weakness in staff training.

Responses from visitors and potential visitors to heritage sites

We asked the survey participants about visiting heritage sites, we asked them if they did, and if so, what their experiences were.

Do you visit heritage sites?

96.77% stated that they visit heritage sites, while 3.23% did not.

Figure 22: Do you visit heritage sites?
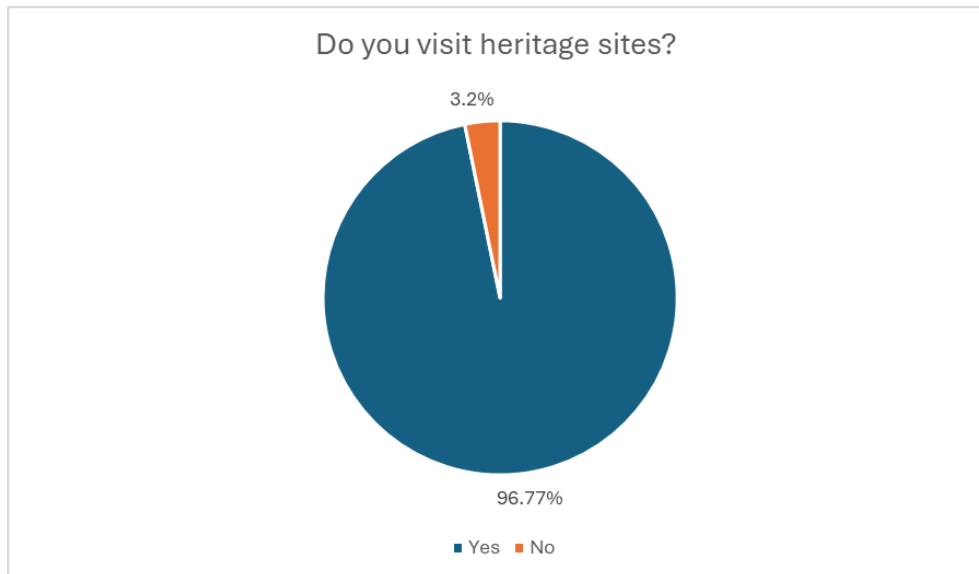
How often do you visit?

Of those who visit heritage sites, 67.74% visit a heritage site four or more times a year, 22.58% visit once a year, 6.45% visit three times and 3.23% visited twice a year.

Figure 23: How often do you visit heritage sites?

Reasons for not visiting

Although the majority of respondents did visit heritage sites, 41.38% stated that there were some reasons why they do not visit. This reflects that although heritage site visits were popular, some sites have barriers which mean that even very engaged visitors cannot access them.

Of those who responded to this question, 75% said that accessibility was the main reason for not visiting. Specific reasons include:

- "Most sites are inaccessible except by car, unable to drive due to poor vision."

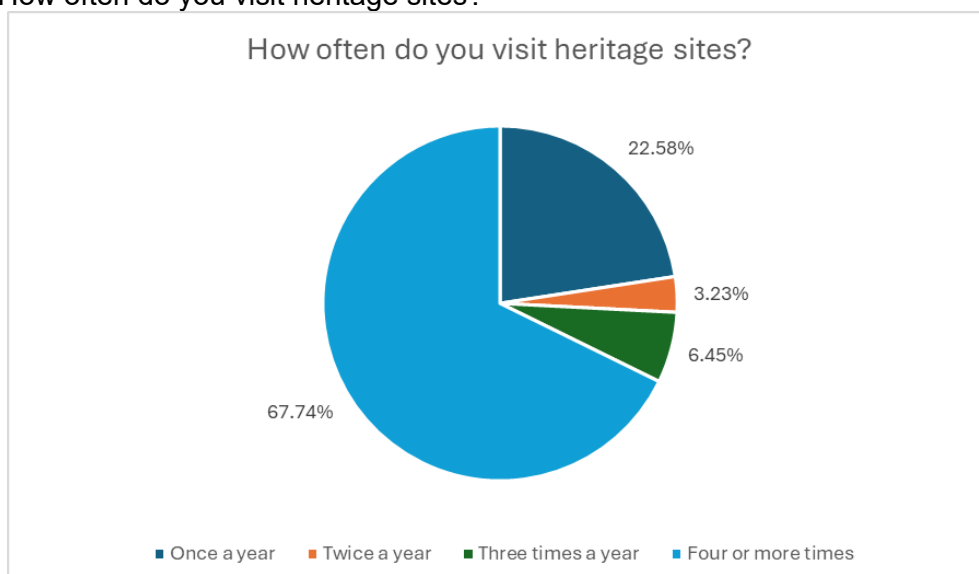- "Accessibility or the lack of it."

- "Expensive to visit. The cost of historic sites and museums is 4 times more than visiting heritage sites in Europe."

- "Wheelchair access is sometimes not appropriate, and it can be very busy."

- "There are doubts about accessibility."

- "Too busy for someone who is autistic."

- "Sites are not very accessible."

Give examples of specific heritage sites you have found easy to access or demonstrate good accessibility practice

Lanhydrock, Cornwall

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/cornwall/lanhydrock

"It is accessible with a lift."

Croome, Worcestershire

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/worcestershire-herefordshire/croome

"They have transport from the entrance to the house as it is a fair distance to walk."

Beningbrough Hall, North Yorkshire

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/yorkshire/beningbrough

"Has upper floor access and a range of access needs covered."

Clumber Park, Nottinghamshire

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/nottinghamshire-lincolnshire/clumber-park

"Has good outdoor and facilities access including Changing Places."

Royal Air Force Museum, London

https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/london/plan-your-day/accessibility/

"The site is step free, Changing Places toilet and plenty of other accessible toilets provided, quiet room, wheelchair and mobility scooter available for loan (no deposit required)."

People's History Museum, Manchester

https://phm.org.uk/visit/plan-your-visit/

"The exhibition 'Nothing about us without us', it was great to see disabled people being represented and this feels very inclusive, step free site, changing places toilet and plenty of accessible toilets."

Cutty Sark, Greenwich

https://www.rmg.co.uk/plan-your-visit/facilities-access

"Step free access, accessible toilets and creative ways of making venue step free."

Wellcome Collection, London

https://wellcomecollection.org/visit-us/accessibility

"The gold bar of accessibility, step free, changing places toilet and plenty of accessible toilets, lots of seating, accessible tours, tactile paving for exhibition, excellent customer care regarding accessibility, good representation of disabled people in their exhibitions and events."

V&A, South Kensington

https://www.vam.ac.uk/south-kensington/visit#access

"Very helpful staff and very accessible building."

Nottingham Galleries of Justice

https://cdn2.assets-servd.host/njm-caves/production/uploads/museum/NJM-Sensory-Map-8pp-2021-AW.pdf

"It was really good for a complicated site with mixed physical access. The mapping was really good for understanding high stress areas and issues with sensory overload etc."

Lincoln Castle

https://www.lincolncastle.com/plan/accessibility

"A good approach to physical accessibility in the past as part of the Lincoln Castle Revealed project. It was the first time [that I had seen] physical accessibility being considered as part of general inclusive design."

Stowe Gardens, Buckinghamshire

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/oxfordshire-buckinghamshire-berkshire/stowe-gardens

"They had worked to make the gravel paths to the main visitor centre compacted gravel that would work for as wide a range of wheelchairs as possible and also, they offered golf buggy hire for visitors that included a short training session or even a volunteer could be booked to drive it if the visitor didn't feel confident."

National Paralympics Heritage Centre, Buckinghamshire

https://www.paralympicheritage.org.uk/planning-your-visit

"It has adjustable lighting to suit visitors with differing needs, tactile displays, audio description."

Flaxmill Maltings, Shrewsbury

https://www.shrewsburyflaxmillmaltings.org.uk/visit/visitor-accessibility/

"They have worked very hard on their access."

The National Trust

https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/who-we-are/about-us/access-for-everyone

"The National Trust sites are always considered and well thought out in terms of accessibility. The provision of walk-through videos in and around areas that are not accessible areas e.g. stairs or other levels. Provision of Trampers [a specific brand of off-road mobility scooter] were provided for wheelchair users to transfer into to get around uneven grounds."

Turner Contemporary, Margate

https://turnercontemporary.org/accessibility/

"Changing places toilets, access hubs at entrance where all access aids can be found i.e. wheelchairs, magnifying glasses, SEN bags. "

Wellcome Collection and Royal Air Force Museum, London

https://wellcomecollection.org/visit-us/accessibility

https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/london/plan-your-day/accessibility/

"Both the museums have access groups of disabled people to test out access for new exhibition layout, etc. Anywhere where staff are engaging around issues of access and willing to listen.

It is also refreshing to see a Wellcome Collection that recognises disability and neurodivergence as perfectly normal human experiences. As long as museums and heritage continue to see disabled people as an afterthought, nothing will ever change.

They have such a broad range of resources to enable engaging visits, especially to their main permanent gallery. Audio described guides, BSL guides, sensory packs, foldable seating, large print guides, even a tactile book that recreates ALL of the main exhibits and makes them touchable. And they replicate as much of the key access materials as they can with their temporary exhibitions too with there always being BSL, AD, sensory maps, large print, easy read, etc. as standard. They completely normalise museums having these things."

National Paralympic Heritage Trust
https://www.paralympicheritage.org.uk/planning-your-visit

"The National Paralympic Heritage Trust paid a small group of access consultants with different lived experience to be an advisory group for them as part of their work between 2017-2019 when they first were starting up. The panel met three to four times during the design and delivery phases of the heritage centre at Stoke Mandeville Stadium and touring exhibitions in heritage sites around the country. The whole approach was person centred including working wholly with disabled groups and charities as a major audience group. Whilst the whole ethos and core values of the Paralympic Heritage Trust is about the history of disabled sport, it works a lot with integrated schools to ensure that they were breaking down barriers in the heritage of the paralympic and sport in general."

The Box, Plymouth
https://www.theboxplymouth.com/access

"The Box in Plymouth is a museum, they have opened their doors earlier for groups with autism and sensory issues so they could have a quieter experience."

The National Theatre, London
https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/your-visit/access/

"The electronic guides [which can be] synced to hearing device equipment. The National Theatre has caption screens or special live caption glasses with text showing both dialogue and a summary of the sounds [audio description] to augment sound."

Overall themes and further comments

As well as the specific heritage sites respondents identified, themes emerged from general comments on occurrences of good practice for accessibility. Overall, many organisations are making disabled people's needs a priority, and improvements have been seen generally, though there are still improvements to be made.

- More videos have had subtitles added, however subtitles are often located at the bottom of a screen and screens are often positioned low on the wall. This means that the subtitles cannot be seen clearly when there may be a group of people in front.

- Changing Places toilets enable access for families otherwise excluded from visiting, and there are an increasing number across England.

- When powered scooters, Trampers [a specific brand of off-road mobility scooter] and other mobility aids are available to borrow on site, this increases independent access, as do buggies to transport visitors between areas on a historic site.

- Clear lanyards for staff and volunteers help visitors find out who can support them.

- Handrails are important access features, especially on slopes and gradients.

- Interpretation translated into Braille, BSL, and other formats is an excellent way to make content inclusive.

- QR codes can be a good way of making more in-depth information as well as information in different formats available.

- Live captioning and audio description of performances is increasing at theatre sites but could be beneficial at any heritage site where performances or tours take place.

Give examples of heritage sites you have found difficult to access or where accessibility could be improved

For this section, we have anonymised the feedback. We are aware that challenges of this nature exist in many sites, and did not want to single out specific places where improvements could be made. All sites named by the survey respondents will be contacted by the project lead at Historic England with feedback, to establish if there are ways that they could be supported to make changes and improvements.

- Site A: "It has rough grounds, slopes and steps throughout the site and even getting access to the toilet and entrance kiosk [is via these rough paths]."

- Site B: "It has poor access information on their website, poor signage so did not know where step free entrance was, accessible toilet was behind locked door, which was only accessible via staff, accessible toilet looked half finished off with a shower not installed properly in the space, one of the lifts not working."

- Site C: "Was asked to complete a PEEP [Personalised Emergency Evacuation Plan] on arrival and asked medical details at the reception counter where I could be overheard and the form with my details was left at the counter. Mega bucks refurbishment relocating museum in building but their star room, a long corridor with floor to ceiling height cabinets was too narrow for me and my crutch and other visitors to pass by each other easily, also could not bend down to see lower cabinets, extremely disappointing."

- Site D: "They had clearly tried to make it more inclusive by providing a map with an accessible route but got lost and gave up trying to work it out in the end."

- Site E: "It is very difficult to access for visitors. It is a ruin in a small village in rural Lincolnshire with no parking or current access considerations at present. They are aware of it and are in talks with a local group, but rural landscape heritage can still be tricky for access on some levels. Historic houses are often difficult to access, due to raised ground floors. Need to consider access, which is dignified, but does not compromise the architectural integrity of the building."

Are there any areas in regard to accessibility that could be improved?

We asked respondents to reflect on ways heritage sites could improve accessibility and be more inclusive of disabled people, based on their experiences as visitors and their lived experience of disability.

Engagement with disabled people

Respondents commented that working with disabled people from the beginning of projects, particularly with building works and during the planning stage and not when it has been completed, would avoid retrospective corrections. Preventing problems from the start rather than fixing them after they have occurred saves time and money, and builds trust.

Respondents also said that representation of disabled people in exhibitions and events should be increased and improved.

Often mobility access design has only thought of wheelchair users, but there are people with mobility aids and mobility impairments who require routes with less walking and with regular seating and rest points.

Toilets

Respondents commented that there seem to be a lack of toilets at heritage sites, and the cubicles are not big enough. Gender neutral toilet facilities would be much easier, with a greater number of toilets available to lessen queues, and it would be more inclusive to non-binary and transgender people. Provision of Changing Places would enable visitors access at many heritage sites.

Changing Places

Changing Places are accessible toilets with specific facilities and dimensions, that are designed to meet the needs of a larger number of disabled people than other accessible bathrooms. They have to be at least 12 square meters, allowing space for a wheelchair user and two carers. They feature adult sized changing benches and ceiling hoists. They should also feature wash basins at different or adjustable heights, plenty of handrails, and a privacy screen. Changing Places offer disabled people a better experience, and better safety. Locations of Changing Places and more information can be found at: https://www.changing-places.org/

Signage

Some respondents noted that improving directional signage would be beneficial for those with visual impairments. Black and white signage can be difficult to read for some people.

Accessible formats

Visitors should have the ability to have information in a variety of formats. This could be large print, audio description, braille, captions, BSL or other formats. This would allow an audience to enjoy visiting without having to take part in specific tours or live interpretation, which may not always be available.

Training

Respondents said that more awareness training for staff and volunteers is needed, particularly the use of sunflower lanyards, as well as a better understanding of neurodivergent people and those with an invisible disability. When new staff are being employed or volunteering within the heritage sector, during their inductions it should be made clear what accessibility features are available on site, so that staff are aware.

Respondents also said that it would be beneficial if staff were able to wear badges showing what training they have completed and have a designated person on site for visitors or staff to approach if assistance is required.

The need for accessibility to be built into heritage training and studies was also highlighted by respondents. Architecture students, for example, need to learn about access auditing and consultancy as part of their training, and heritage sites should be viewed the same.

Awareness around autism and the differing needs of audiences is inconsistent and can make or break a visit for a family. It appears that many volunteers who have not received adequate training, are not confident in their understanding of neurodivergence, and do not adapt their approach or language for different audiences.

Displays

Respondents said that the layout of displays should be designed so that they are easy for everyone to access, and the contents should be clear and easy to see.

Television screens should be located where they can be seen by all, without being blocked by crowds or groups, especially when there are subtitles or captions that are located at the bottom of the screen.

Transport

Issues were raised by some respondents with the lack of access to heritage sites via public transport. Some respondents did not drive, making some heritage sites inaccessible.

Other comments noted that parking facilities need to be close to the entrance of a heritage site where possible, otherwise alternative means of transport such as a buggy service should be provided.

Environment

Respondents said there should be provision of more seating and quiet areas.

Step free access should be provided and signposted if it is achievable. The option of virtual tours should be standard. Stairs can be an issue, particularly with the prevalence of misconceptions that adaptations can't be made to listed buildings, or where spaces are too narrow to put in lifts or handrails. A route around a heritage site that has consistent level access, or a level access route to specific areas of interest or facilities should be in place and signposted. There needs to be better use of ramps, handrails and other aids for stairs and uneven surfaces. Not all ramps allow easy access for wheelchair and mobility aid users, audits involving disabled people should take place to review current accessibility and to advise on improvements.

Respondents also commented that consideration should be given in extending opening times, so that people do not feel rushed out at closing times, especially if it is during designated quiet times.

Sites should be mindful of managing visitor numbers, as busy crowds can be overwhelming for people with certain disabilities.

Visibility and sound are often neglected. Induction loops are insufficient if the space is busy and are often not checked or serviced regularly. One respondent commented that a lack of absorbent surfaces makes acoustics worse, heritage sites often have large spaces with stone walls and hard floors, which reflect rather than absorb sound, making it difficult to hear.

The colour contrast between surfaces should be improved, especially on floors and stairs. Surfaces without a good level of colour contrast are difficult to tell apart for blind, partially blind and colourblind people, which can make navigating spaces challenging.

Respondents said that heritage sites should take account of neurodiversity more. Good provision for neurodivergent visitors is not just about sensory bags. Respondents pointed out that interactions with staff and volunteers are an important factor in neurodivergent people having a good experience.

Other

Respondents said that accessibility information including pre-visit videos or photos should be easy to find, easy to read, and kept up to date. A map of the site/building should be available online so people can plan ahead. Information should be provided on site in a

variety of formats without having to ask someone, such as large print and easy read being available at the reception as standard.

Visual stories should be provided with detailed images and easy to read descriptions of the heritage site. This allows disabled people to make their own judgement on the accessibility of a site and gives informed choice for all visitors. It also importantly allows neurodivergent people to prepare for their visit by providing a "walk through" of the site, so visitors know what to expect and can plan their visit.

Disability is often seen as physical issues and not about those for whom text, language and imagery present barriers. Taking these into account when drafting access guides and developing resources for visitors is key.

Do you know of any physical adaptations that have been made to specific heritage sites?

- "Lifts have been provided in buildings such as Godolphin, Lincoln Castle access up to the wall walks, Auckland Castle, Manchester Museum and the British Museum."

- "The National Trust - guides by AccessAble, [access details in] their handbook, similar for English Heritage and Historic Royal Palaces will provide lots of examples. [Access has been improved by] lifts, scooters, smooth path surfaces, wheelchairs, ramps (provided the gradient is correct). Provision of all terrain buggies for access to the grounds."

- "Ramp access has been provided in buildings such as St Paul's Cathedral, Hughenden Manor, which can be brought to the entrance which allows wheelchairs into the building."

- "The bridges into places like Tintagel and Beaumaris, which allow easy access but also look beautiful."

- "The Landmark Trust who rent heritage and often listed properties to the general public. Wherever possible they go the extra mile to make properties accessible with ramps, lifts, walk in showers, etc."

- "Installation of stair climbers or ramps within the National Trust, especially at places in Herefordshire where they are trying to achieve a more accessible estate. This includes the installation of accessible walks and virtual tours."

- "St Saviours created a new accessible entrance, parish rooms and WC serving the Grade II* church."

- "Pathway alterations at Corfe Castle (woodland walk access to the site)."

- "Increased the boardwalk at Studland in Dorset."

- "Bonded path surfaces to make them easier to walk on, shuttle buses, free hire of mobility scooters, induction loops at tills."

- "Hop on hop off trolley bus service at Harewood House."

Focus group discussions

Focus Group Discussions on Experiences in the Heritage Sector

The focus group discussions centred on both positive and negative experiences within the heritage sector, covering both employment and visits to heritage sites. The discussions also explored best practices to support the needs of individuals and identified changes or improvements to enhance accessibility within the sector.

Please note that all of the comments in the following sections reflect the personal experiences and opinions of the focus group respondents and not those of Direct Access or Historic England.

Positive Experiences

Most interviewees reported positive experiences within the heritage sector, both in their workplaces and while visiting sites. Line managers and colleagues were noted for their supportive attitudes and willingness to implement reasonable adjustments in the workplace in accordance with their legal duty under the Equality Act, contributing to efforts to reduce barriers.

The National Trust was highlighted for its significant efforts in welcoming individuals from diverse communities to join and visit the heritage sector. The Trust invests in and supports its staff, fostering a nurturing work environment. An example of this is their understanding of different communication styles. Participants noted that some organisations, particularly those with a high number of neurodivergent employees, strive to ensure accessibility through a person-centred approach and a strong culture of kindness[1]. It was suggested that many other workplaces could learn from the National Trust's practices.

The Museums Association was commended for providing opportunities for staff, including freelancers, to be heard. Additionally, other organisations were praised for offering virtual events for those unable to attend in person, which helped foster a sense of team inclusion. Sending materials by post for various activities was also seen as an inclusive and commendable practice.

Some organisations have demonstrated good practices in supporting staff needs. Examples include accommodating individuals with ADHD by discussing sick days

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[1] Using the word "kindness" when talking about disability is not inherently wrong, but it is important to be mindful of the context and how it's used. It can imply pity or condescension therefore reinforcing ableist attitudes or stereotypes. Ableism is a form of discrimination that devalues people with disabilities. However, as it was a word used occasionally by respondents, it has been included here.

differently, incorporating various types of breaks, providing specific workstations, and adjusting management practices.

In some cases, reasonable adjustments have been easily obtained, and employees felt heard and supported. For instance, staff have provided assistance to individuals needing rest by offering comfortable chairs and allowing time out.

Challenges and Negative Experiences

Despite these positive experiences, getting reasonable adjustments made has often been challenging. Smaller organisations were frequently cited for having toxic leadership and a lack of intention to accommodate disabled people, which may stem from a lack of understanding or awareness.

Negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities were reported, including instances where enthusiastic efforts to improve conditions were ignored. Issues such as gaslighting (the process of making an individual doubt their perception or experiences through emotional manipulation), bullying, and exclusion were also mentioned, affecting both paid staff and volunteers. These negative experiences have had a detrimental impact on those volunteering to gain employment within the heritage sector, leading to underemployment and feelings of not being valued.

Most of the interviewees are aware of the Access to Work programme, but its provisions have not been widely implemented. While reasonable adjustments are required from employers under the Equality Act, those working during a probationary period often do not receive these adjustments, affecting their ability to perform their jobs effectively.

While some organisations have successfully met the needs of employees requiring time off for reasons other than sick leave, they have often neglected the needs of those with physical disabilities.

Recruitment and Interviews

A simple accommodation for interviews is for interview questions to be provided in advance. Although online interviews have become the norm, there have been instances where candidates had to travel long distances for interviews, highlighting a need for more accessible practices.

Inclusion of Disabled People

It was felt that disabled people are often perceived as invisible or as an expense. It is crucial to include people with lived experiences of disability, experiences with having to navigate inaccessible environments mean they often have creative solutions. Their contributions can make the heritage sector more attractive for both employees and visitors.

Volunteer Reliance

Many heritage sites rely heavily on volunteers, but these volunteers are sometimes not informed or trained. In addition, volunteers may not always be available: one respondent gave an example of having to navigate a site without a buggy due to there being no volunteers around to support.

Intersectionality and Inequalities

Individuals with multiple intersecting identities are more likely to have disabilities or health conditions, leading to greater inequalities at heritage sites. The heritage sector is generally perceived as especially unwelcoming to minority ethnic, disabled individuals.

Accessibility Information

The accessibility information available online for visiting heritage sites is often very generic. It can lack specific details, such as days when facilities are unavailable or when services, like buggy service times, are increased. It was observed that many heritage sites do not provide adequate access information. There is a heavy reliance on digital platforms, and often the access information provided is not up to date. This reliance poses challenges for individuals who do not have access to electronic devices, face additional data costs, lack of Wi-Fi signals, or encounter malfunctioning devices. Providing a comprehensive access guide on site would be beneficial.

Accountability and Training

To improve accessibility, it is crucial for central bodies like Historic England and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to collaborate and hold the organisations they fund accountable in their daily work. Higher education institutions should also be involved in training those involved in planning and developing access in heritage, including architects, heritage managers, and site managers, and ensuring they are accountable for accessibility. Focus group members felt that accessibility often falls off the priority list within organisations due to financial constraints. There needs to be a coordinated effort from the heritage sector to address these issues.

Workplace Challenges

The heritage sector is seen as highly competitive, with demanding work hours and a pace that is not suitable for some disabled individuals. Some disabled employees may hesitate to speak up about their needs through a fear of jeopardising their job prospects. The sector needs to address staff shortages and underfunding to prevent burnout and negative impacts on mental health and personal life. Efforts to improve accessibility should extend to employees within the sector, not just visitors.

Leadership and Representation

There is a notable lack of disabled leaders within the heritage sector, resulting in systemic issues due to the concentration of power among non-disabled individuals. Without

disabled individuals in leadership positions, significant changes are unlikely to occur. The sector requires inspiring disabled leaders to demonstrate effective practices. The heritage sector needs to work to create development opportunities for potential disabled leaders, as well as career paths and different entry and progression routes in the sector.

Accessibility For Low Vision or Visually Impaired Individuals

The sector is perceived as lagging in providing adequate resources for blind people and those with complex vision or visual impairments. Audio guides, when available, are often found to be non-functional. It is essential to include disabled individuals in the design and creation of accessibility solutions to ensure their effectiveness.

Accessibility Initiatives in Heritage Sites

Focus group participants were invited to share their experiences of accessibility initiatives they had seen in practice at heritage sites, and the benefits these initiatives had.

Lake District Parks

Parks in the Lake District have implemented tactile signs [those with raised features and sensory elements to make them inclusive of people with low vision, visual impairment or sensory processing differences] and other accessibility features to enhance the visitor experience for individuals with visual impairments.

Stowe Gardens

Stowe boasts expansive gardens. Visitors can hire mobility scooters for a small fee or even rent a golf buggy after receiving training from a volunteer. Volunteers can also assist by taking visitors around the park, which is particularly beneficial for wheelchair users.

National Paralympic Heritage Trust

The National Paralympic Heritage Trust's centre is designed with disabled individuals as the primary audience. The exhibition space includes tactile wayfinding with handrails indicating different zones, audio descriptions, headphones at various heights and lengths, and braille. This centre comes highly recommended for its comprehensive accessibility features.

St. Paul's Cathedral

St. Paul's Cathedral features an external permanent ramp, making it accessible for wheelchairs and buggies.

RAF Museum, London

The RAF Museum in London offers changing places facilities, manual wheelchairs, mobility scooters, and a quiet room, which is particularly beneficial for neurodivergent people.

People's History Museum, Manchester

The People's History Museum in Manchester is an accessible, step-free building with accessible toilets that indicate whether they are right or left-handed transfer. The museum has made significant efforts to accommodate wheelchair users, and the exhibition space feels inclusive, reflecting the cultural backgrounds of disabled visitors.

Showtown Museum, Blackpool

Showtown Museum in Blackpool has a buddy system where volunteers assist visitors in navigating the museum. This service can be booked three weeks in advance at no charge.

Wheal Martyn, Cornwall

While Wheal Martyn is not fully accessible, it has partnered with the Sensory Trust to enhance interactivity, signage, and readability, making it easier to access.

Wentworth Woodhouse, Rotherham

Wentworth Woodhouse actively engages with communities and employs disabled individuals, allowing them to influence activities and organisational operations.

Blenheim Palace, Woodstock

Blenheim Palace has created bespoke sensory bags to enhance the visitor experience for individuals with sensory needs.

National Trust Sites: Montacute House & Stourhead, Somerset

Both Montacute House and Stourhead in Somerset offer good physical access, with flat terrain that accommodates wheelchair users.

Imperial War Museums

At the Imperial War Museums, volunteers stand at tables with several handling objects to describe and facilitate touch and sensory experiences, which is particularly beneficial for visitors with visual impairments.

Areas for improvement

Focus group participants were also asked to reflect on heritage sites they had visited that could improve their accessibility. The participants gave details of their specific experiences and how these experiences impacted them.

As with the survey responses on places that could make improvements, these have been anonymised, and the sites referenced during the focus groups will be contacted separately with feedback and advice.

Site A

"The exhibition space was noted for being very dark, making it difficult for individuals with visual impairments to see and navigate, especially those using wheelchairs. Additionally, the noise levels were disturbing for an Afghan veteran with PTSD, and there was no

signage indicating these [noise levels or other environmental] conditions. Staff were unaware of accessibility information and directed visitors to the website, which did not provide the necessary details."

Site B
"Buggies were unavailable due to the absence of volunteers to operate them, limiting accessibility for visitors who rely on this service."

Site C
"Navigating the steps is challenging for individuals with sight loss. It would be beneficial to have information available about assistance options before purchasing tickets to avoid wasting time [and money]."

Site D
"This location heavily relies on volunteers to assist with access, which can be problematic if volunteers are not available."

Site E
"The site has low lighting, making it difficult for visitors to read large print materials. Additionally, the museum does not provide audio guides, further limiting accessibility for individuals with visual impairments."

Recommendations

Access to Work

Organisations within the heritage sector should make use of the Access to Work scheme, for members of staff or applicants who require it. Access to Work can help people to get or stay in work if they have a physical or mental health condition or disability. The support given will depend on individual needs.

Access to Work can provide a grant to help pay for things like:

- Specialist equipment and assistive software

- Support workers, like a BSL interpreter, a job coach or a travel buddy

- Costs of travelling to work, if public transport cannot be used

- Adaptations to vehicles to be able to get to work

- Physical changes to a workplace

Should the potential employee or employer need to pay some costs up front, they can be claimed back later. Access to Work can help pay for communication support at a job interview if:

- A person is deaf or hard of hearing and needs a BSL interpreter or lip speaker

- Has a physical or mental health condition or learning difficulty requiring communication support

Find out more and apply for communication support at a job interview.

Access to Work will not pay for reasonable adjustments. These are the changes that an employer must legally make to support employees to do their job. Access to Work will advise an employer if changes should be made as reasonable adjustments.

Disability Access Groups/Engagement with Disabled People

The heritage sector will benefit from regular consultations with disabled staff and local disabled people, who can be called upon as a 'Disability Access Group' to provide living experience feedback. This could provide invaluable insight into the diverse needs of staff and visitors with disabilities and help ensure that workplace, museum spaces, exhibitions, and programmes are accessible to all.

Further benefits of engagement with a Disability Access Group could include offering feedback on existing accessibility features and suggesting improvements to enhance the overall visitor experience. The Group could also contribute to the development of accessibility policies, guidelines, and best practices that align with legal requirements, and

may be willing to participate in training sessions for staff. This could increase awareness and understanding of disability-related issues and improve interactions with visitors. Such Groups should be fairly remunerated, and this payment should be established as standard practice in heritage organisations. Expertise through lived experience is valuable and this should be recognised through paying consultants for their time.

Training

Disabled people are reaching record numbers. Employment of disabled people has been encouraged by the Government. With more disabled people being employed each year, it is crucial that organisations offer a strong programme of training opportunities for their staff and volunteers. Accessibility training would not only give the heritage sector knowledge of the barriers to heritage for disabled people, but also the confidence to support, welcome, and include disabled people in heritage.

All staff and volunteers should be provided with the opportunity to undertake inclusion, diversity and equality training. This will ensure that all employees can fully contribute to creating equality of opportunity and fair practices.

Additional training could include:

- IDE training

- Visual impairment awareness training

- Dementia friendly awareness

- Autism awareness

- Basic BSL (British Sign Language) – with focus on key areas relevant to the heritage sector, which may include exhibition content, information about the café and WC facilities.

Training should be provided on a regular and refreshed basis for all staff. Management level staff should especially undertake training in order to promote the understanding of legal requirements and implement the right support for disabled staff, volunteers, and visitors.

Quiet Times

Many disabled people like to visit sites during quiet periods. This applies to many people, such as those who have a hearing impairment (due to background noise), wheelchair users (to ensure accessible toilets are free and good manoeuvrability), people with impaired vision (to ensure that their assistance dogs are not distracted), and people who are neurodivergent.

Google has a feature which illustrates busy and quiet times using a chart. It is recommended that heritage sites consider using the API key (the unique identifier code for

their site's Google listing) in order to provide this information directly on its own website. This will provide people with the knowledge and reassurance of when is a good time to visit.

This feature takes advantage of the location data Google receives from people who choose to enable Google Location History on their phones. Using this data, Google will estimate how busy it is at a particular location. It also remembers historical data and can average it to show you when a store is usually the most and least busy every week.

Access Guides/Map

The best way to get good quality access information to visitors and potential visitors is by creating a range of new access guides for heritage sites in a variety of accessible formats. This is critical to ensuring greater access for disabled visitors, and for any potential visitor to have enough information to decide about the accessibility of a place for them.

According to the Euan's Guide, 70% are more likely to visit somewhere new if they can find the access information beforehand.

The guides should be available in the following formats:

- British Sign Language
- Audio description
- Large print
- Easy read/pictorial
- Dyslexia-friendly

The Access Guides should cover but not be limited to advance information such as:

- Accessibility for Wheelchair Users
- Facilities for those with a hearing impairment
- Facilities for those with a vision impairment
- General information
- Noisy and busy areas such as shops and cafés
- Quieter times to visit
- Parking entrances and exits
- Location of toilets

In addition, the Access Guides should:

- Be reviewed and updated frequently

- Have recent photos

- Indicate if areas are being refurbished

- Indicate whether staff have had disability awareness training or/and British Sign Language

- Indicate whether there is information in audio, British Sign Language, or large print

- Be easily and instantly found on the website with key terms

Conclusion

Feedback from both the survey and focus groups revealed a mix of positive and negative experiences from disabled people, including current and former employees, as well as visitors to heritage sites. While many respondents were critical of the sector and heritage sites, there were also valuable examples of good practice that the sector can learn from. This evidence provides an essential foundation for making long-overdue improvements and reducing barriers for disabled employees, volunteers, and visitors.

Disabled people within the heritage sector workforce and disabled visitors highlighted a widespread lack of awareness and understanding around disability among staff and organisations. This included neurodivergent conditions, vision impairments, and other health-related challenges. To address this, it is recommended that all staff, including senior managers and volunteers, receive regular disability awareness training, alongside specialised training on specific disabilities.

Although some staff shared positive experiences of employers making reasonable adjustments, uptake of the Government's Access to Work scheme remains low. This is partly due to a lack of knowledge about the scheme and how it operates. Managers should be well-informed about Access to Work and actively support eligible staff to apply, ensuring they have the resources they need to thrive in their roles. This could also help increase future employment opportunities for disabled people within the sector.

Both staff and visitors emphasised the need for greater engagement with disability organisations and disabled people during the planning and development stages of heritage projects. Their insights are essential for creating more accessible environments, for both visitors and the workforce.

Many disabled people visit heritage sites frequently, with some visiting more than four times a year. However, a consistent theme in the feedback was the poor quality of pre-visit information. Visitors often rely on this information to plan ahead, but it is frequently out of date or lacks key information, such as ramp availability, quiet times, accessible routes, volunteer support, or buddy systems. Virtual tours were especially recommended as a tool for neurodivergent or learning-disabled visitors, helping them better understand what to expect. On-site access guides in a variety of accessible formats would also be beneficial.

In summary, while the findings reveal a mixed picture of accessibility in the heritage sector, they also highlight promising examples of progress. The insights and lived experience shared by disabled participants in this research should serve as a call to action, and we hope they will be taken seriously by heritage organisations across England.

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