



How to conduct a disability audit

TN135 Training Notes series: Administration

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Churches, and therefore leaders, administrative staff and pastoral staff in particular, need to take disability seriously.

Jesus went out of his way to care for disabled people in his healing ministry. He also had an embarrassing habit of befriending people who were considered to be socially unacceptable as defined by those who thought they were fine.

He had compassion on the crowds and although part of that was because they were not taught, part was because of their physical, mental and emotional needs.

This is not just an issue about the people in your congregation who are visually impaired, who use a zimmer frame or who are on the autism spectrum. You need (by law, as it happens) to consider those who do *not* come to your services, perhaps because they are not currently catered for. Or visitors at an activity using your premises (whether a funeral or a birthday party), or a future Minister who may be disabled.

There is plenty in print that is really helpful; I list a few sources at the end. But let me attempt a quick overview of what administrators and pastoral staff need to investigate if they want their church to be disabled-friendly. I am not covering the related issue of staff employment.

The range of disability

Some disabilities are clearly visible (such as someone in a wheelchair), some may be partly visible (such as some people with a learning disability) and some not so easily seen or deliberately hidden (such as some long-term recurring mental health disorders). The wheelchair is what comes first to most people's eyes and therefore minds, but disability is much wider than this.

Similarly the disability accessible toilet is what most people will consider in connection with buildings but, again, the issues are much broader.

You may have spaces that are inaccessible for some disabled people (eg. because of steps or doors hard to open without help) or where others cannot benefit from what is on offer (eg. because the hearing – *aka* ‘audio induction’ – loop system is not working well or the screen print is too small).

The ‘problem’ is not the disability. There are many aids to help. The barrier is in the building or service people are trying to access. Disabled people do not want to be treated as special needs but as ordinary people, because they can benefit from all our churches offer just like any other person.

The legal position

The legislation affecting disability is contained in the wider Equality Act 2010 which replaced most of the Disability Discrimination Act. It is unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in connection with:

- employment;
- the provision of goods, facilities and services;
- the management of premises.

The duties under the Act are the responsibility of what are known as ‘service providers’. These include churches both in the provision for worship but also other activities they run on church premises and clergy housing.

The first part of the definition of disability is ‘a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on the ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’. But the definition goes on to include learning disabilities, diabetes, arthritis, autism and conditions that cause chronic pain. Your church may include more disabled people than you realise.

A Church Administrator or Pastoral Carer may well find themselves responsible for ensuring their church fulfils its legal and moral obligations. It is important to take a proactive line on this subject and not wait until an issue arises.

You need to take ‘reasonable’ steps in policies and procedures to ensure disabled people can make full use of what the church is offering and that includes making ‘reasonable adjustments’ to your buildings.

Like Health and Safety this is not an exact science and hence the use of the word ‘reasonable’. Churches are not required to wave a magic wand over a 13th century building and turn it into a modern facility designed with disability in view.

But they do have to demonstrate that they have considered what could reasonably be done to welcome disabled people and to have taken all appropriate action. This might involve physical adjustments to buildings, the provision of additional aids designed for the disability community and the provision of reasonable alternatives where a feature or service cannot easily be changed.

The investigation

So, what needs this proactive action in your church? Here are four ways forward – not as alternatives but as a single agenda to enable you to make your church accessible to all and produce a Disability Action Plan.

1 **An access audit**

This requires an on-site inspection of all church properties to check out where there are both barriers and inconveniences for a wide range of disabilities. It should include both Sunday and other worship services and mid-week meetings and activities, everything from reaching the church office through to coming to a coffee morning. List all barriers and allocate a rating to each one according to how serious it is and what might be done to remove an obstacle or improve a service.

2 **A services audit**

Do the same for what you provide for all visitors so consider furniture, equipment, means of communication, training, etc. How easy is it for someone in a wheelchair to order and drink a coffee, or find and read your promotional literature, or understand where to go next at any activity? Are welcomers on a Sunday trained in how to recognise and help disabled people without either patronising or ignoring them?

3 **Practical advice**

If you are an able-bodied person it is almost certain you will be unaware of many of the issues impacting different kinds of disabled people. So it is vital that your investigation involves the 'experts', those who have to struggle with your present short-comings. Ensure that you involve people who would see themselves as disabled in some way. And if you really believe you do not have such people, invite some local community representatives who are disabled to help you.

4 **External advice**

You should access some of the disability organisation websites. You may also need help from your church's architect if you are going to make alterations to buildings, some of which may need permission, such as a 'faculty' for Church of England buildings. Exterior alterations may require planning permission but changes for reasons of disability can be zero-rated for VAT for charities.

Record everything you investigate and discuss in print, and then get everyone involved to agree what has been written. Like the minutes of a meeting you need to have documentary evidence that you have considered these issues and set out a reasonable action plan. Avoid expressions that upset the disability community (ask them).

Remember that many actions can be relatively simple. Adding a hand-rail, producing a large print service sheet, adding low level door handles, training the welcome team, appointing a disability champion are, on the whole, straightforward actions that can make a significant improvement for disabled people.

Do pay due attention to any building features that might restrict rapid escape from the building in an emergency. The Act requires this.

Areas to audit

Here is a simple listing of areas for your two audits in the fourfold investigation above. Points included under one heading that relate to other headings are not necessarily repeated. Be aware that what follows is the ideal to aim towards where possible. You may not be able to match it all.

1 **Website, signage**

- Accessible website, with required use of font sizes, colours, etc.
- Website with information for disabled visitors, eg hearing loop, lifts by car
- Social media promoting disability-awareness
- External signboards with disability symbols clearly visible to all

2 **Arriving by car**

- Marked and protected disabled bays in car park or on road
- Marked and protected drop off point if bays not possible
- Smooth, step-free, slip-resistant path/route to the building entrance
- Path short, firm and wide enough for a wheelchair to be self-propelled

3 **Arriving on foot**

- Smooth, firm, slip-free, step-free paths from road to entrance
- Steps that cannot be easily ramped with grab rails on both sides
- All parts of the path no more than 1 in 12 slope
- Paths with no obstructions and adequately lit at all times in use

4 **Entrance**

- Steps of any kind ramped for wheelchairs
- Doorway wide enough for wheelchairs with low level handles/buttons/bolts
- Trained welcomers on duty, some of whom may be disabled
- Clear signage for the entrance especially needed by those with ASD

5 **Lobby/porch**

- Space between inner and outer doors to enable both to be negotiated independently
- Lobby area free of hazards or obstructions and accurately level
- Entrance mats recessed so there is no lip, with ramps over doorsteps
- Glass doors clearly separated visually from surrounds and marked when closed

6 **Seating**

- Some seats with cushions and arm rests if most are hard pews
- Suitable arrangements for guide and assistance dogs
- Colour contrasts and grab rails for different levels on raised pews
- Provision for disabled leaders, preachers, choir, band, AV techies

7 **Flooring**

- Level flooring to all seating areas with tiles, boards and carpets without lips
- Properly constructed ramp to dais or steps with grab rails on both sides
- Created spaces for wheelchairs both front and back
- Any steps shown up with appropriate colour contrasts at their edges

8 Hearing

- Hearing loop clearly signed, with simple controls, regularly serviced
- PA controlled by trained operators available for all events
- Group discussion with adequate physical separation between groups
- Members trained in British Sign Language for services

9 Screen and print

- Screen images, colours and font size sufficiently large and clear
- Printed order of services with large font format available (18 point)
- Disability policy and procedures available on an accessible notice-board
- Braille materials available

10 Lighting

- Adequate lighting levels for those with impaired sight
- Lack of glare for leaders, preachers, choir, band, etc.
- Some areas with low lighting in quiet spaces for time out
- Due care with flashing images for those impacted by such

11 Emotional needs

- Trained counsellors available within the congregation
- Provision of those who understand the autism spectrum
- Clear system for welcomers to seek help when necessary
- Congregation to form relationships over refreshments

12 Services

- Involvement of those with disabilities in leading/enabling worship
- Use of drama, visuals, regular explanations in services
- Prayer ministry handled with great sensitivity and accountability
- Streaming including speech-to-text facility

13 Children / young people

- Children with special needs given appropriate attention
- Accessibility for all young people's group venues
- Limited use of the colour yellow for autistic children
- Disability-trained leader(s) available

14 Toilets

- Disabled WC conforming to current building regulations part M
- Clear signing to it on website, social media, in welcome packs, etc.
- WC accessible for wheelchair transfer with space for helper and wheelchair
- WC cleaned regularly, not used as a store

15 Kitchen/dining

- Adequate wheelchair space between tables
- Hatch area low enough for wheelchair users
- Cutlery and crockery easy to hold
- Disabled people asked for advice over all kitchen/dining issues

16 Meeting rooms/halls

- Same requirements as for the church building
- Route from church to halls checked for any form of obstruction
- Hirers of rooms informed of disability policy
- Lift or stair-lift provided to reach other levels

17 Home-based

- Services and sermons made available to all through streaming or DVDs
- Printed materials posted or delivered to those who cannot get to church
- Systems in place to ensure there are adequate visits, home Communion
- Appropriate links with care homes where there are church members

For more detailed help (just a small selection)

Widening the eye of the needle, John Penton, Church House Publishing
Worship and disability, Katie Tupling and Anna de Lange, Grove Books
Disability: the inclusive church resource, John M Hull, DLT

Some denominations and dioceses have excellent materials. Google '... diocese disability'. London and Exeter are good examples.

The key organisation is *Through the roof* <https://www.throughtheroof.org> and their *Come in!* booklet, but there are many other specialist organisations for disability and church. Some of these resources listed here include detailed lists.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN135. See also Training Notes TN33, *Danger at church!*, and TN44, *The message of your buildings*.

John writes: 'Disability is a sensitive subject. These notes have been checked with disabled people for correct terminology and thinking, but if I have said anything that is unhelpful in any way, please tell me so I can apologise and correct the material.'

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN135 under Administration with a link to Planning.

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