

Access all areas

Delivering equal access is an important challenge to Scottish interpreters. Those who benefit most directly have 'disabilities' that can be physical, sensory, intellectual or multiple. But equal access benefits us all as individuals and as a society.

There are four key reasons why interpretation should be more accessible:

- * It is a basic human right
- * It is a legal requirement under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)¹
- * It improves access for everyone
- * It makes economic sense

Human rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that people have a right to equal access to public services, and to participate in the cultural life of the community. These rights are universal.

Statistics on people with disabilities are available from a number of sources², but there are substantial numbers in our population. For example, there are an estimated 8.7 million disabled people in the UK who are not wheelchair users. One in four UK families has a disabled member, and one in five adults has poor literacy. Considering their interpretive needs is a fundamental to respecting their (and our) human rights.

Disability Discrimination Act

Since 1996 the DDA has made it illegal to treat disabled people less favourably than others. Any service providers (including museums, visitor centres and heritage sites) have to make 'reasonable adjustments' to provide for disabled users. While what is regarded as 'reasonable' is a grey area, it is important to realise that there are a wide range of things that can be done.

The starting point should be an access audit to plan what is required under the Act. A number of bodies undertake access audits including ADAPT and the Joint Mobility Unit³. These can be expensive and a full-scale audit may be beyond the reach of smaller facilities. Using local groups to find out problems with your facility is an alternative, and demonstrates your awareness of the issues.

Social Services Departments may be able to help make initial contacts. You can then invite groups of people with disabilities and community bodies to your facility and talk over any access issues they might have with your facility and its interpretation. Visits by people with disabilities might encourage them to get out more and take up new interests, so a mutually beneficial partnership can result.

Everyone benefits

Many improvements made for people with disabilities help other visitors. Physical modifications like lifts, ramps and easily opened doors help those with wheelchairs, parents with buggies, those with a broken leg or arthritis, and older people who tire easily.

Clear labels in conjunction with good lighting helps visitors with poor sight while making it easier for everyone to read. Any visitor will find it difficult to read text printed over a distracting background, or find it hard to distinguish spoken words on an audio guide with loud background music or sound effects. People with poor literacy or who don't speak English as their first language can be put off by language they don't understand or that appears too demanding. Considering their needs will make your interpretation more accessible to all.

The bottom line

More people with disabilities are living in the community than before. They expect to participate in the same activities as everyone else. This can often mean they want to visit in a family group or with friends. If your institution is not accessible, they won't come, and you will lose the entire group. On the other hand, a reputation for good access can bring visitors with disabilities, along with friends and family, from a considerable distance.

It makes financial sense to consider equal access when planning any interpretation and to get advice before the process is well advanced. If it is left until later in the process, equal access measures will cost far more to remedy than if they had been an integral part of the design at the beginning.

These are powerful ethical, legal, social and economic reasons for taking an inclusive approach to interpretation. Accessibility should be integral, not an afterthought, and local consultation is a good start to achieving this, whether you are planning a new display or refurbishing an old one.

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"Equal Rights were created for everyone."

Contestant in 1990 Mr. New Jersey Male pageant

- 1 See www.disability.gov.uk for details
- 2 Informability Manual, Wendy Gregory, HMSO 1996; Disability Directory for Museums and Galleries, Resource, 2001
- 3 For contact details see page 7