

Hands on!

Inverness Museum and Art Gallery is a busy museum with about 100,000 visitors a year. In 2001 it won the Cramond Award for the museum that has done the most to promote access by visitors with learning disabilities.

We had received requests for some time for more objects to be on show, and for family and child-friendly facilities. An award from the Heritage Lottery Fund presented the opportunity to develop such a display - Hands on the Highlands. It was designed to be as welcoming as possible, and a key feature was that it was to be accessible to all and user-friendly for people with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The display was not specifically aimed at people with learning difficulties, but the approach we took was particularly relevant to them. Museum staff consulted widely with individuals and groups. INTACT (the Intellectual Access Trust) provided valuable contacts, and local day centres came with clients on a series of visits.

The resulting new centre is versatile and innovative, with modular mobile units housing the collections and technology including touch screen presentations, a roof-mounted camera, video macroscope, and a satellite weather program. Its uniqueness stems from the fact that real objects from the museum's collections are at the centre of the design.

Hands on the Highlands has moved away from the traditional didactic methods of presentation to encourage and promote self-learning. Adults enjoy showing children how to use the facility, and both enjoy discovering it for themselves. The bright colours and attractive layout are appreciated by people of all ages, and the attractive graphics help set a welcoming and informal tone for the centre. The centre is well-used by local groups of people with learning difficulties. Its text has been kept to a minimum, so visitors who do not speak English also find it easy to use.

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“He is able who thinks he is able.” Buddha