

## The Design Challenge

Imagine you've retired, you're not as sprightly as you used to be and you're visiting a new exhibition at your local museum, gallery or heritage site. You arrive a little puffed; so you decide to sit down while you get out your specs to read the guidebook before looking round. But where do you sit? The only seating is low down, with no arms or back to grip as you bend your creaking knees. You fear that, once seated, you might be unable to get up again; so on second thoughts you decide to start looking at the exhibition, which is about birds of the Scottish Highlands.

As you enter, you are dismayed to find the lighting is very subdued: why? You find a notice explaining that it is to prevent the colours of the birds' feathers from fading. You understand; but it means that you can't quite read the information about the birds because it is too small for you to see clearly in low light.

Disappointed, you sit down to watch an AV presentation on the Capercaillie. The pictures are beautifully clear but you can't say the same about the soundtrack. These days you find it difficult to listen to two sounds at once, and a burst of fiddle music drowns out the commentary just when it's telling you how Capercaillie mate. And what is polygyny anyway? You wish they wouldn't use jargon without explaining what it means.

As you come away you reflect that, although you have never thought of yourself as disabled, that exhibition has disabled you. It has put unnecessary obstacles in the way of your understanding and enjoyment.

This scenario shows how we in the heritage business can do a disservice to our visitors through not understanding their needs. That disservice is so much greater when the visitor uses a wheelchair, carries a white stick, wears a hearing aid or is dyslexic - to list just some forms of disability. Under the Disability Discrimination Act we have to take reasonable steps to make our services, including exhibitions, accessible for disabled people.

Staff of the National Museums of Scotland have addressed this by compiling a manual of the statutory access requirements relevant to exhibitions, together with all the advice on inclusive exhibition design they can find. Exhibitions for All, a practical guide to designing inclusive exhibitions<sup>1</sup> deals firstly with physical access features such as ramps, lifts and automatic doors. However, it also covers matters of sensory and intellectual access, which affect many, many more than the 5% (approximately) of disabled people who use wheelchairs.

A major part of the guidelines deals with 'Communication and Display', and in particular with the written word. Here advice provided by Mencap and the Plain English Campaign, amongst others, was used to draw up the guidelines for drafting text that is easily understood. Advice from the Joint Mobility Unit helped to establish guidelines for presenting text (and images) clearly and in a suitable font and type size. Advice from Access in Mind by Ann Rayner and The Informability Manual<sup>2</sup> by Wendy Gregory was used to suggest alternatives to print, such as symbols, audio-guides and exhibits that can be touched or smelt. The necessity for making audio-visual presentations accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people is addressed, with advice on the use of subtitles and induction loops.

One of the two most important messages in the manual is "know your audience". It is essential to consult some of your intended audience before, during and after the exhibition's development so that you provide a service that is as accessible as possible to them. The other message, which has become almost a mantra, is "better access for disabled people means better access for all".

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**"The first problem in any design situation is to discover what the problem really is." Anonymous designer**

- 1 Available from Dot Western, Department of Technical Services, National Museums of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF. £5 to members of MAGDA (the Museums and Galleries Disability Association), £10 otherwise. " NMS.
- 2 See the publications list on page 11.