

Essentially Free



Disability awareness
and the Church in
Canterbury and
Rochester Dioceses

Essentially Free a commitment to a Church accessible to everyone

*We think that ours is a friendly church and that everyone is
welcome...*

But

- How does it feel to be treated differently from everyone else because of the way you are?
- How does it feel to sit through a service and not be able to hear clearly because there is no induction loop?
- How does it feel to be given a hymn book, a service book and a notice sheet when you find holding or reading books difficult or when you only read Braille or large print?
- How does it feel when the person welcoming you at the door campaigned against new houses for people with mental health needs which is now your home?
- How does it feel sitting in a wheelchair waiting for the priest to come to you with bread and wine whilst everyone else goes up to the altar?

We want our churches to be welcoming but, despite our very best intentions, we can make people, especially people with disabilities, feel excluded. Between 10 and 15 per cent of the population have disabling conditions; if the church reflects the community in which it is set then people with disabilities would constitute the same percentage in the congregation. Are they there? If anyone of your congregation became disabled would they be able to continue their God-given ministry in your church? Can those with disabilities do so now?

Commitment

For many years the Church has been talking about the importance of a more inclusive attitude. As long ago as 1975, the World Council of Churches affirmed that church unity included 'disabled' and 'abled' people. Since then the Church of England has produced various reports ranging from 'The Local Church and Mentally Handicapped People' (1984) to the 'Church among Deaf People' (1997). Even though intentions have been good, time has passed, the language used has become dated and the challenge is yet to be met.

Reality

This situation is changing. In 1995 parliament passed the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and afterwards formed the Disability Rights Commission with similar powers to the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality.

The Act makes it unlawful to discriminate against people with significant disabilities in connection with the provision of goods, facilities, services, and employment.

In the Act disability is defined as having a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial, adverse or long-term effect on a persons ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

The Act defines discrimination as occurring when a person with a disability is treated less favourably than someone else and the treatment is for a reason relating to that person's disability and that reason does not apply to another person and the treatment cannot be justified.

Under the Act, churches are obliged by law to make full provision for people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, and for those with mental health needs.

In our churches this provision should include:

- attitude awareness for all people
- communication alternatives for people with hearing or visual impairments
- access and marking of physical hazards for wheelchair users and those with restricted mobility
- clear interpretation of the gospel for those with learning disabilities
- acceptance of people with mental health needs
- support for carers

Opportunity

This guide along with the diocesan training programme and audit is designed to help your church

- respond to the requirements of the Act
- grow in understanding of the inclusive nature of God
- address the disabling attitudes we carry
- look at church life from the perspective of those with disabilities
- find appropriate ways of meeting identified needs

The DDA brings disability issues into sharp focus. We hope churches will see the issues as opportunities not threats. Our response comes through the affirming and welcoming nature of God through Jesus Christ, not just as a legal requirement. The body of Christ includes all people. If people with disabilities feel excluded or discriminated against, the body is damaged. We hope that the suggestions in this guide will help everybody to feel the church is more open and inclusive. In fact the Act can be used as a God-given opportunity to re-commit ourselves to a Church and a faith which welcomes and values everyone.

‘The Church cannot exemplify ‘the full humanity revealed in Christ’, bear witness to the interdependence of humankind, or achieve unity in diversity if it continues to acquiesce in the social isolation of disabled persons and to deny them full participation in its life’.
(The fifth assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi 1975)

Section 1 Attitudes

'Friends, you must never disparage one another' James 3, 11

Care is not enough

'We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptised into the one body.' These words are familiar, but it is a long hard journey to become what we already are. We are one, yet we are challenged within the Christian community to face widespread prejudice against people with disabilities.

We like to believe we are loving and caring, but to be as God would have us be we have to be more sensitive to the needs and perspectives of others. We are discovering the painful truth that the biggest disabling situation faced by people with disabilities is not the disability itself but the attitude of others, including ourselves.

Distorted images

Our society, especially through the media and advertising, places great emphasis on images of normality measured as wholeness, beauty, strength and capability. A recent survey for the Leonard Cheshire Foundation revealed shocking levels of prejudice with nearly one third of people believing that those with disabilities are bound to be less intelligent than 'normal' people. For instance, those who use wheel-chairs are regarded as subnormal; those with scars or strange speech are avoided; those who are blind or deaf are ignored; few concessions are made for those who walk slowly, have poor balance or cannot hear clearly. In our misguided requirement for perfection many people with disabilities are rejected or excluded.

Neither martyrs nor moaners

We like to feel that the church is different, not least because Jesus was himself rejected and excluded. We celebrate *'the power that was made perfect in weakness'* (2 Cor 12.9), but many people with impairments are disabled in the local Christian community. They do not want to be seen as saintly martyrs putting up with pain or hardship or as moaning minnies when they express their particular requirements. Like everybody else they should enter church unremarked upon and be fully integrated into the life, leadership, work and worship of the community of God.

We therefore need to reflect on:

- the place and role of people with disabilities in our congregation
- the type of language we use when discussing disability
- the needs of carers in our congregation
- our attitude towards people with mental health needs.

When we confess our belief in the complete oneness of all human beings in the family of God, we are clearly affirming that no one may be excluded or excepted from it however severely disabled.

No physical, mental or sensory disability may be made a pretext for denying this solidarity.

(Bad Saarow Declaration by European Churches 1978)

Together and whole

There are millions of people with disabilities in Britain today. Churches seek to be representative of the parishes in which they are set. In the ministry of Jesus people with disabilities were a priority; why then is it that they are mainly absent from our churches?

The self styled 'able' have to recognise that they need the wisdom insights and perspectives of the so-called 'disabled'. Christian communities are incomplete and cannot know wholeness without the participation of people with disabilities. By recognising and acknowledging our mutual weakness and vulnerability and our personal and corporate disabilities, we shall discover and realise the fullness of life Jesus promised to his church.

The language we use

Many of the hardest issues for people with disabilities come from external factors. That is, 'disability' occurs when people who decide on physical structures or make policies or organise the way things are done act only on behalf of the 'normal' majority. Such a factor is the language we use. For instance, words such as 'cripple', 'spastic' or 'retarded' have become terms of abuse or are used to ridicule people with disabilities. People must be reminded regularly of how important it is to use language and ideas which don't exclude or belittle particular groups. It is also important not to use words that suggest people with disabilities are necessarily dependent or helpless. In any context, choosing the right language can be difficult.

These ideas may focus our thinking:

- First and foremost, people are people. Talking about ‘the disabled’ ‘the blind’ or ‘the mentally ill’ depersonalises people. Use instead ‘people with disabilities’, ‘visually impaired people’, ‘people with mental health needs’.
- People who use wheelchairs are wheelchair users and should not be seen as ‘confined’ to a wheelchair or ‘wheelchair bound’.
- Avoid using ‘handicap’. Often, although not always, it can be replaced with disability or disadvantage.
- The term ‘Mental handicap’ is unacceptable, learning disability (of which there are several) or learning difficulty are usually used instead.
- Don’t confuse learning disabilities with mental illnesses. A mental illness can affect anyone at any time of their life. A learning disability usually results either from damage to the brain caused by inherited factors or from brain injury during birth, or after illness or accident.
- Remember that disabilities are not always evident. Disabilities resulting from conditions such as hearing loss, epilepsy or diabetes often do not become evident until the condition becomes severe.
- Don’t make judgmental comments about a person’s experience by saying ‘she suffers from.....’ You may see it as suffering, but that may not be their experience. Instead use – if it is absolutely necessary – ‘she has.....’

As a general code speak to people not about them.

The God of all

We are all created in God's image and are precious to him as we are. By our creation we are part of God's community and through that community God reveals himself to the world. Through our vulnerabilities and limitations as much as our strengths we seek to demonstrate the immense love that God has for his people, shown through Jesus.

Jesus died to save everyone. He unconditionally loves us as we are. Though we are uniquely different, we are also uniquely and equally loved. He came to lead us all into the fullness of life.

The Holy Spirit gives gifts to each of us. People with physical, learning or sensory disabilities or mental health needs have gifts which are needed to bring wholeness to the church.

People with disabilities who so wish should be encouraged to take leadership roles as for instance worship leaders, pastoral leaders, church wardens, PCC members. Offering a warm welcome without recognising the gifts of others is not enough. God has gifted all people. To ignore or assume that a gift from God is out of the question for a person with a disability is, in practice, discrimination.

If people with disabilities are equally valued in the life of the church, then the community is demonstrating the inclusive nature of the Christian faith. An accepting non-patronising environment affirms that all are of equal value in God's creation. This is achieved when people who have physical, sensory or learning difficulties, or mental health needs, and those who care for them are alongside others sharing bewilderment, frustration and anger, as well as achievements and joys.

People with mental health needs

People with mental health needs experience discrimination and stigma, as do people with disabilities. Mental health illnesses range from short-term anxiety, or depression to longer-term conditions such as schizophrenia. Most people recover from a mental illness, others live with the condition stabilised. Around one in seven people in Britain consult their GP with mental or emotional needs. One in four will find their life disturbed by mental distress.

If a member of your family has a mental illness do you feel able to talk about it?

Do you think members of your church feel able to share their needs?

The fear and the myth

The general attitude towards mental health can be summed up in one word: fear.

- It is a fear based on misinformation about mental illness and those who experience it.
- It is a fear reinforced by negative and sometimes inaccurate media coverage.
- It is a fear based on the more extreme forms of mental illness.

The reality is that those who experience mental illness are far more likely to be victims of violence than perpetrators.

From fear to fellowship

The church needs to play its part in breaking down these fears and stereotypes.

- Be aware of resources available for support and advice. The local Citizens Advice Bureau is a key resource.
- Take the opportunities of flag days, special weeks and guest speakers to inform people about mental health issues.
- Present sensitive accurate information about the nature of mental illness.

Be informed and understanding

By trying to understand what life is like for people with mental health needs we can enable those who have such experiences find acceptance within the church community. Make sure those in your congregation with this ministry are informed about mental health issues, recognise their own limitations, and when professional support is required.

It may be useful to be aware of the following:

- Times of services: Morning services may be difficult to attend because medication can make coping difficult at that time of day.
- Church environment: may be excluding. Lack of sufficient good lighting, too much noise, inadequate space or no quiet space all contribute to an excluding environment particularly for people with mental health needs.

- Communication: face to face contact, telephones, answer-phones and emails may cause anxiety for some.
- Participation: offering a ‘supporter’ can encourage people to share in decision making and leadership roles.
- Community awareness of mental health issues is as important in witnessing to the local community as it is in the church family.

Family carers

Approximately one in seven people in your parish may be looking after a friend or relative who has a significant disabling condition. Carers can be of any age, and look after people of any age. They may have given up work, or they may be in full-time education and offer care. For some, caring can be a 24 hour seven day-a-week role, resulting in stress, ill-health and loss of friends and social life.

There are many examples of Jesus caring for the carers. The friends of the paralysed man, the father of the child with epilepsy, the parents of a sick daughter. Your church can follow his example by providing practical support. If carers share in Christian fellowship, their gifts can develop our corporate spiritual life.

Practical and emotional support.

The needs of the carer are often very different from the needs of the person they care for, so offers of help by members of the church could make all the difference to the life of the carer. Regular telephone calls or visits, help with practical tasks, providing some ‘time out’ are appreciated. Be specific in what you can offer, ‘Let me know if you want any help’ is rarely taken up. Do not set out to meet a need, rather to build a relationship.

Your church may be able to provide people as a source of information and support between church and carer. People may want to join a local carer support-group or may wish to explore the possibilities of becoming a group offering support in the community. Contact your Citizens Advice Bureau or Community Volunteer Service for further information.

Taking part in church life

Church life can be a life-line to carers. If you review service times, venues, style of worship or activities be sure to include carers in the discussions.

- Are your planned activities taking place at the busiest time of the carers' day?
- Do carers need assistance in getting to church with the person they care for?
- Is seating arranged so chairs and wheel-chairs can be together if required?

Carers also need time to worship, pray or take part in church activities without the person they care for. Welcoming the carer and the person they care for into different church groups values them as individuals.

It is important to acknowledge that individuality while not seeing carers as either 'saints' or recipients of help. 'Aren't you wonderful?' and 'I don't know how you manage', however kindly said, prevent us from facing the real issues of caring and honouring the enrichment carers bring to the community. Carers and those they care for need to be welcomed for who they are, not for what they can or can't do.

At home and beyond

The Church's ministry is not confined to activities that happen within its own premises. We should not exclude by insisting that people come to the church building. Right attitudes and good communication are vital to the church's wider parochial ministry. It is important to value ministry in the home as part of the corporate church life. It may be appropriate for church members to join in a home service. We need to be sensitive about when this might be more appreciated.

What can we do?

- Set aside time at a PCC or DCC Meeting to consider our ministry to those with disabilities, and how we may meet their needs
- Consider training sidesmen to be responsive to different people's needs, to be welcoming and alert to offer assistance when appropriate
- Attend a diocesan training seminar

Section 2 Communication

'And how could they have faith in one they had never heard of?'
Romans 10, 14

John the Evangelist identifies Jesus as the Word made flesh and our faith is centred in a relationship with Him, the Living Word. Church worship can give the impression that Christianity is really about the spoken or written word and our ability to understand it. Worship can become a matter of understanding a book rather than meeting Jesus. An over-emphasis on words can become excluding, think about how it feels to be in a foreign country and not understand the language!

In this section we invite you to reflect on how to include in the ongoing life and worship of your church those who find it difficult to see, hear or understand.

We also invite you to think about how best to show the facilities that your buildings do offer.

*'The barriers set up by forms of worship and liturgy must be broken
down'*

(The Bad Saarow declaration 1978)

The spoken word

Church buildings are often unhelpful places in which to communicate. The architecture may distort or muffle sound, lighting may be weak. Those who lead worship may sound far away and be poorly illuminated. As a result a person with even a slight loss of hearing or visual impairment may have difficulty making out what is going on.

The human voice

Many people who would not describe themselves as deaf find they use a combination of both listening and lip reading. So those who publicly speak need to do so clearly and not too fast. Their faces should not be hidden by a lectern or microphone. Speakers should be well illuminated with no areas of shadow or intense light. Light requirements vary quite dramatically between age groups, on average people over 60 need three times the light required by a 20 year old.

Sound systems

Where a sound-system is installed care needs to be given to ensure that it enhances speech without distortion. Equipment must be well-placed and the volume and tone well-balanced. Operating instructions need to be given in simple language. If your equipment is kept locked, make sure everyone knows who has the keys, especially for events outside normal worship times. A system could be used to record worship or meetings and copies made available to anyone.

Induction loops

Although the need for good acoustics and lighting cannot be over-emphasised people who use hearing aids can benefit considerably from an induction loop system. Hearing aids tend to amplify everything, making it difficult to identify one voice over other sounds. A loop system linked to a microphone transmits only sound picked up by the microphone as a magnetic field, avoiding distortion by bad acoustics or extra noise. Most hearing aids have a switch enabling them to receive this sound. It is sometimes possible to hire induction loops for special occasions.

Ideally, a permanent induction loop should cover all areas of the building. If some areas are not covered or reception is better in certain places, make sure everyone knows. As with all equipment sound systems need to be checked regularly.

Signing

Sign language is the way that most people with a profound hearing loss communicate. It can also bring a richness to the liturgy especially when used in conjunction with spoken word.

You might arrange for one of your services at a major festival to be signed. A member of your congregation may be willing to offer to train in sign language as their special ministry and then minister in a group of parishes or deanery. More information is available through the Diocesan Deaf Committee. (See appendix A for address.)

Beyond words

Thankfully human communication is much more than words. It also involves a range of signs, symbols and gestures. Similarly, our patterns of worship need to include a variety of non-verbal communication. By drawing on all our senses, not just focusing on lips and ears, our worship becomes richer and more inclusive. The corporate body of Christ can share in worship which is a response to God using the whole of our being.

It can be helpful to develop other visual ways of communicating within worship. The use of overhead projectors, videos, slides, mime, dance, drama and ritual action can all help reduce an over-dependence on the spoken word. It is important that such activities are clearly visible to all. When using overhead projectors copies may be appreciated by those with impaired vision or those who prefer to sit when others stand. Consideration must be given to the position of the screen, if sunlight is reflected from it no-one can see anything. The recommended text size is 16 point, coloured inks look good but many are hard to read. Experiment to see what suits your situation.

Other ways of enhancing spoken communication to an individual include:

- Talk to any a person with a disability directly, not through the person who is with them. Make eye contact at the same level. When talking with a wheel-chair user don't lean over them or lean onto the chair; this intrudes into their personal space.
- When talking to a person with hearing loss make sure your face is in the light; look directly at the person, speaking clearly and naturally. Remember to keep your hands away from your face.
- Hearing aids do not correct hearing losses perfectly. It may be difficult for a user to distinguish one voice from many; in formal situations it is helpful if only one person speaks at a time.
- When you meet a blind person introduce yourself. When you are moving away tell them. Don't leave them talking to an empty space.
- When you are talking with someone with a speech impairment concentrate on what is being said, be patient and don't try to guess what they want to say. If you don't understand, say so, don't pretend that you do.

- If someone has difficulty understanding you, be patient and be prepared to explain more than once. Concentrate on using simple language, but don't talk down to them.
- Avoid shouting, raising your voice, or sounding patronising.

The Written word

Books have become a major part of Christian worship. At any service we could be given any combination of a bible, hymn book or books, prayer book, service order, notice sheet, parish magazine and diocesan newspaper. How many of these are accessible to people who have some form of visual impairment?

Larger print

Many people registered as blind who use canes or other aids, have some vision. A number read large-print books and appreciate large-print versions of what ever is being produced on the computer. Minimum print size for all communications should be 12 point, for large print use at least 14 point although many will find 18 or 24 point easier to read, especially for signs and notices. Choice of type face, double-line spacing, and contrast between print and paper can significantly improve readability. Black on white or pale yellow produces the best contrast. Black on white is the best for photocopying.

Braille

Braille is most likely to be used by people with little or no sight whose blindness occurred early in life. It is essential for deaf-blind people who are unable to use print or tape. Braille comes in various formats. It is important to talk to the person and find out what is most useful for them. The RNIB provide a brailleing service and can give information or supply catalogues of Braille materials. Common Worship is available in Braille.(See appendix A for useful addresses.)

However do not assume that all visually impaired people read Braille. A significant minority use a system known as Moon. Computers and electronic mail are also becoming increasingly popular in accessing information.

Other practical hints which will help people with visual impairments to feel more involved:

- Guide dogs, hearing dogs and dogs for people with disabilities should be allowed into church under the Act. They are not pets, so should be left alone to do their job. Clean water should be provided for them.
- Many people with visual impairment will appreciate assistance in finding their way around the building. First, ask if you can help, and if so how the person likes to be guided. Most prefer to hold an arm just above the elbow. Keep your guiding arm relaxed and walk half a pace ahead of the person. If you need to negotiate steps or slopes tell your companion whether these go up or down. Give them time to find the handrail if there is one. Walk one step ahead so they can tell from your position when you have reached the level again.
- Invite new people to visit the church and familiarise themselves with the environment.
- Braille users and those with hearing loss may like advance notice of the service order so they can prepare and bring appropriate resources.
- Announce the first line of hymns as well as the number; people using different books will have different numbering systems. This also gives everyone time to recognise familiar words.
- Be aware and sensitive to those who find reading and writing difficult, including people with low levels of literacy or with dyslexia.

The Understandable word.

Christianity is a wonderful balance between the mystery of God, God revealed in the earthly ministry of Jesus and God revealed through the Holy Spirit. In seeking to share our faith we must neither hide in the mystery nor trivialise and over simplify great truths. This balance is particularly difficult to achieve for people with learning difficulties. They should always be treated in ways appropriate to their age and life experiences and not sheltered from the difficult issues of life and faith. They feel the whole spectrum of human emotions and share the same struggles of faith and daily living.

Appropriate worship

The church should offer teaching and worship which provide for people with learning difficulties to express their faith, share their talents and participate in services. It is not appropriate, for example, for a young person with learning difficulties to be kept in Sunday school rather than join the youth group.

Concentration

That people with learning difficulties appear to have a limited ability to concentrate may reflect our inability to communicate in a stimulating and varied way. Everyone benefits from a variety of communication skills.

Being a part

We all like to feel needed and have useful roles in church. People with learning difficulties are often so anxious to please that they may become over-enthusiastic in what they are doing. It is important not to set limits on what a person with a learning disability can do, and to offer appropriate support before the enthusiasm takes over! Practical non-threatening roles such as giving out books, taking the collection or clearing up may not be enough. They may also wish, for instance, to participate in dance or drama, or to become a server. Opportunities should be as available as they are for anyone else.

Encourage people with learning disabilities to develop and grow in faith, the level of understanding is never fixed and final for anyone. Their full participation in the worshipping, witnessing and serving life of the church enriches the whole community.

Simple but not simplistic

Reflect on the intelligibility of bible readings, prayers, hymns, and other texts used in worship. Ensure that difficult concepts are explained to the benefit of all. In seeking to simplify we must not become simplistic.

Dignity



Some disabilities result from muscle spasms which cannot be controlled. They are often manifest as inappropriate sounds or actions. The congregation should learn to accept this and not show disapproval by staring. It is important that we all value the self-esteem of everyone by treating one another with dignity.





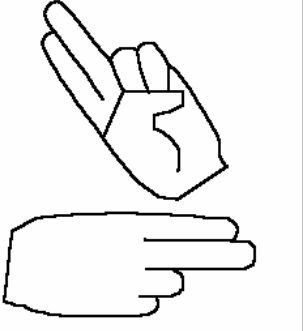
Proclaiming the friendly church


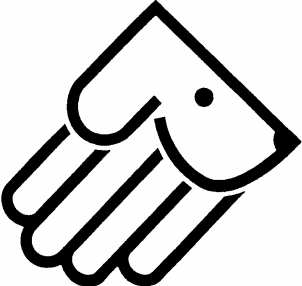
People with disabilities feel welcome when they find that they have already been provided for. You need to tell people about your provision and the information you give must be correct. Clear and accurate information allows people to make their own judgement as to the suitability of a particular building or event.

Make sure that any facilities you provide are clearly advertised both in a place that is visible from the road, and in the main entrance of the church and other buildings. Have a comprehensive information sheet for those planning baptisms, weddings or funerals. Make sure the local undertakers have copies. Send copies to your local Council's Access Officer, local organisations for people with disabilities, health centres, community centres, libraries and the press. The local Council for Voluntary Services and the Citizen's Advice Bureau often have newsletters and will be glad to include your information.

Facilities should be regularly listed on your newsheet or in your magazine. People may not come again if they have struggled through a service not knowing that there were facilities which could have enabled them to participate more fully. Equally be honest! Take care not to state facilities you do not have.

	<p>ACCESSIBLE CAR PARKING</p> <p>Denotes designated wider space(s) for people with a disabled parking badge.</p>
	<p>RAMPED ENTRANCE</p> <p>Used to show ramped entrance which complies with Building Regulations</p>

	<p>ACCESSIBLE LAVATORY</p> <p>Indicates wheelchair accessible unisex lavatory complying with Part M1992/BS5810. (For accessible single sex lavatories use standard male/female sign accompanied by this sign.).</p>
	<p>PUBLIC TELEPHONE</p> <p>Denotes public telephone accessible to wheelchair users. If fitted with inductive coupler (as most public phones are) add 'T' sign.</p>
	<p>INDUCTION LOOP</p> <p>Denotes that an induction loop (or similar) is fitted in building to improve quality of sound for hearing aid users.</p>
	<p>SYMPATHETIC HEARING SCHEME</p> <p>Denotes that facilities, including trained people, are available to assist people with a hearing impairment.</p>
	<p>SIGNED PROCEEDINGS</p> <p>Indicates BSL signer/interpreter for profoundly deaf people. (State in accompanying text whether the signing is only occasional, or available on request, etc.)</p>

	<p>FACILITIES FOR BLIND and PARTIALLY SIGHTED PEOPLE</p> <p>Denotes availability of large print, Braille or taped material.</p>
	<p>ASSISTANCE DOGS</p> <p>Denotes that assistance dogs (i.e. guide dogs, hearing dogs, dogs for the disabled) are welcome.</p>
<p align="center">Copies of these symbols can be obtained from your Local Council for Voluntary Service (address and telephone number in your telephone directory).</p>	

What next?

- List the ways you could immediately improve communication.
- Invite all those who lead intercessions, read, preach, lead services or run meetings to attend a training session on vocal techniques.
- Review heights of microphones, lecterns and where people stand.
- Consider the installation of a loop system.
- Consider ways in which church lighting could be improved, particularly at the entrances, pulpit, altar and lectern.
- Consider signing a major festival.
- Consider producing service sheets in a large print.
- Put together a leaflet to be distributed locally, saying what is available and what your church is doing . Use appropriate signs and symbols.

Section 3 Access

*We have come together in the name of Christ
To offer our praise and thanksgiving
To hear and receive God's holy word
To pray for the needs of the world
And to seek the forgiveness of our sin
That by the power of the Holy Spirit
We may give ourselves to the service of God.
(from Common Worship)*

Without fuss

Ease of access to and movement around a church building concerns people with disabilities, many older people and those with prams or buggies. People with any disability should be able to enter and participate without fuss, without feeling that they are a special case. Developing a healthy relationship is crucial in addressing potentially difficult situations. For some the main barrier in getting to church may be low self-esteem or anxiety about becoming involved. A supporter or befriender may alleviate this. Despite the warmest of welcomes and the best of intentions, people can still feel exposed or excluded. Buildings, in a variety of ways disable, stopping people being part of the crowd, making them feel special, different, the odd one out, awkward or even a nuisance.

Stopped by a step

Architecturally, steps have become a dominant feature inside and outside our churches. A historic building, listed status, or expense may be a real issue, or it could be an excuse; it is tempting to make do for the few who need it. But what message does this send to people with disabilities? Some adaptations can cost very little, working with other agencies could reduce costs. Making buildings accessible helps everyone from the very young to older people enter God's house easily.

Buildings that welcome

When making provision for physical access it is important to follow guidelines which have been developed out of considerable experience. Failure to follow designs or measurements exactly can result in a facility

that is un-useable and therefore a waste of money. Hence any changes to your church building must be made in consultation with the Diocesan Advisory Committee (contact name and address in appendix A) External work to the church or its grounds may also require planning permission.

So what's the message?

We may think that because there are few people with disabilities in the congregation, there are few in the community. However 10-15 per cent of people in the parish are likely to be experiencing some form of long-term disabling condition at any one time. A staggering 85 per cent of us will experience such a condition during our lives. (How much effort would you be prepared to put into getting to your church?) People in the community may have seen the lack of provision and interpreted that as a lack of care or interest. If the church doesn't appear to care then does that suggest that God doesn't either? We have a Christian commitment to witness God's love and care to all. By complying with the Act we are working within that commitment.

Transport and parking

A transport or escort service for getting to church is an excellent witness to the community. This doesn't have to be a mini-bus, some church members may be happy to use their cars. Providing this is on a voluntary basis there should be no problem with insurance. Others may simply pick up a neighbour on the way.

Ideally 10 per cent of available parking nearest the main entrance should be clearly reserved for people with mobility impairments, most of whom will have parking stickers or car badges.

Getting in

Once people arrive at the church gate, there may be other unrecognised hazards such as uneven or cobbled pathways, overgrown grass or overhanging trees. These, along with fallen leaves, mossy stones, areas of poor light and narrow corners, can make access difficult if not dangerous.

Ideally, there should be a level access to the main doors of church buildings so that people with disabilities can enter in the same way as everyone else. If this is not possible main entrances should have a permanent ramp. Handling wheelchairs up or down steps is not a solution. Moreover handling a wheelchair is an intrusion into the users

personal space. Lifting wheelchairs is a skill, if not done correctly injury can be incurred by those lifting and the wheelchair user.

Taking part

Sensitivity needs to be shown in leading worship. Phrases such as ‘we stand to sing’ or ‘meekly kneeling on your knees’ can be excluding. Be aware that different people in different situations will interpret words and meanings differently. Whilst common sense and acceptance needs to be shown by those with disabilities as well as others, it is important for all people to be able to fully enter into worship. For example when people first make contact about baptisms weddings or funerals, they could be asked as a matter of routine whether any people attending have particular requirements so that if possible those specific needs can be catered for.

Ask wheelchair users where they would most like to sit during worship and meetings. Church pews can present a difficulty but it may be possible to remove part of some rows rather than whole rows in one place. Provide seating with plenty of leg room particularly for people with mobility restrictions.

Often people with disabilities or with mental health needs are expected to be passive recipients, there to be ‘cared for’ by others. An example of this kind could be when someone is prayed for or over rather than with. This kind of action doesn’t always reflect the togetherness in love that we are called to share as Christians.

If we are to benefit from everyone’s gifts as God intended it is important that the church is physically accessible. If it is impractical to provide ramps to all areas, consider moving the action to a place that is more accessible. Don’t be afraid to experiment! Seek the advice of the DAC and Liturgy group. (see appendix A)

Comfort stops

Older people and those with disabilities particularly feel the cold. Churches should be places of physical and human warmth. If your church does not have an adequate heating system you need to think about alternatives. Provide extra heating in areas where people with disabilities choose to sit, find out where the warmest parts of the church are, make those areas available to people with disabilities.

Church buildings are increasingly used during the week and require adequate lavatories. If you are planning to install a lavatory, but only have room for one, then the DDA requires that it must be suitable for a

wheelchair user and available for everyone. The room should also have a nappy changing area, accessible for a wheelchair user. Special shelves which fold away onto a wall are designed for this purpose. Ensure that the lavatory does not become a dumping ground for cleaning equipment. All the space will be required by wheelchair users.

If there are standard lavatories in the church then the DDA requires there to be one that is accessible for a wheelchair user conforming to the most recent building codes. Don't assume that your architect or builder is familiar with the guidelines, or will have received training in access for people with disabilities.

The current official guidelines and measurements for ensuring correct physical access to lavatories for all people are available from the DAC. It is essential that you contact them and seek advice for your situation. Every church is different, the advice given here is only a general guide.

A final reminder

Remember access means independent access. Good access is of limited value if, once inside a building people with disabilities feel excluded or unwanted. Physical access must go hand in hand with a welcoming attitude. The kind of welcome people receive greatly influences their decision to return.

What to do now

- Ask a wheelchair user and someone with a visual impairment whether they can access your church alone. If not what would make access easier and safer for them? Inviting local disability support groups to be involved shows your concern for the whole community.
- Invite a mixed group of people, younger and older, able-bodied, and people with different disabilities to complete the audit for your church.
- Look at the results and prioritise how you will approach any alterations.
- Seek the advice of your inspecting architect and the DAC.

A commitment

This booklet is designed to support your church in identifying the issues raised by the Act. Further diocesan support is offered through a series of seminars and training. A diocesan audit accompanies this book. Your church should now look at the audit. Invite a variety of people to complete sections and then prioritise how you will effect the changes that are necessary.

You are asked to send a copy of your priorities to Ven Patrick Evans. This will assist the steering group to plan further training.

Having considered the implications of this guide and completed the Diocesan Audit, we ask your P.C.C/D.C.C to adopt the following motion showing your commitment to an inclusive church and faith:

‘As part of our ongoing commitment to growing the kingdom, this church affirms its determination to adopt such attitudes, physical access and communication as will enable people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, people with mental health needs and carers feel welcome and included within this local Christian community.’

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Publications

Open to All Lichfield Diocesan Handbook

The Disability Discrimination Act

ISBN 0112710557

The Stationary Office

Widening the Eye of the Needle

ISBN 0715175890

Church House Publishing

Common Worship

ISBN 071512000X

Church House Publishing

Appendix A

For further support or advice contact

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