

What Are the Experiences of Disabled People in the Heritage Sector in 2025? – Executive Summary

Results and recommendations from research conducted by Direct Access as part of the Historic England Disability Access to Heritage project.

Historic England has developed the Disability Access to Heritage project to identify and tackle the barriers to heritage for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people, with the aim of enabling better jobs and careers, volunteering opportunities, and visitor and participation experiences.

The first phase of this project is research, developing an evidence base of the experiences of disabled people who are currently engaged in heritage, as well as those who have left the sector or are not currently engaging with heritage. This evidence helps Historic England and the wider heritage sector target its resources and capacity at overcoming the barriers identified.

This research was conducted by [Direct Access](#), a specialist disabled-led organisation that provides consultancy services on accessibility nationally and internationally.

You can find the results of this research in the [PDF survey report](#).

A copy of this summary web page is also available in PDF format for ease of downloading and sharing, along with an [Easy Read version of this summary](#).

Background

As part of our Inclusive Opportunities strategic objective, Historic England is developing work to ensure heritage is accessible for disabled people, whether that be through jobs and careers, volunteering, or visiting and participating. In 2024, the Disability Access to Heritage project was launched.

Although data covering the entire heritage sector is not available, the evidence we have from individual organisations, government surveys, and previous research highlights that there are significant barriers in place for d/Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people in heritage.

For example, in the UK workforce, 23% of working age adults are disabled. 5 million disabled people are in work, [but the employment rate for disabled people is only 53%, compared to 82% of non-disabled people](#). We know from the [2024 Historic](#)

[England Heritage Sector Workforce Survey Pilot](#) that 20% of respondents identified as disabled, which is close to the national level. However, these disabled people had a much lower rate of permanent, full-time work compared to non-disabled respondents.

For people visiting heritage sites, there are a number of barriers that mean they do not have a good experience or cannot access the sites at all. These range from the locations and structure of many historic places, such as steep staircases and uneven pathways, to a lack of consistency in the access and site information provided on websites or other sources before someone visits.

Historic England's aim in the Disability Access to Heritage project is to tackle these and other barriers and support the heritage sector in doing the same. We want to build knowledge and understanding of disability and accessibility across the sector, enabling organisations to value, welcome, and include disabled people effectively and equitably.

This project will be the first to look at the issue of disability inclusion and access on a sector-wide basis, and the first to set recommendations for actions for the sector to implement.

What did the researchers ask?

Direct Access approached the research with a survey and a series of focus groups. Both of these methods were designed to blend open and closed questions, find out the demographics of those taking part, and capture details of their experiences working in and visiting heritage sites.

The survey asked questions aimed at drawing out lived experiences and to develop an understanding of how barriers may affect their engagement with heritage, including:

- Is your line manager aware of your access needs?
- What accessibility policies and procedures are in place?
- Can you give some examples of heritage sites you have found to be good access?

The survey was open from 5 December 2024 to 5 February 2025, receiving 208 responses in total.

The 3 focus groups took place in January 2025, with a total of 9 participants.

These focus groups concentrated on positive and challenging experiences in the heritage sector. They went into more detail on individual experiences, including elements of best practice and ways the sector could make improvements.

What were the headlines?

Of the 208 respondents to the survey:

- 20% of respondents working in the heritage sector left because of health or disability
- 74% of respondents working in the heritage sector said their line manager was aware of their access needs, but only 34.6% of these respondents had been offered a workplace assessment, and only 6.53% use Access to Work
- 50% of respondents working in the heritage sector say they have not received any disability-related training; of those respondents who had left the sector, this was much higher at 83.33%
- Of the respondents who visited heritage sites, 41.38% said that there were reasons that stopped them visiting, which included having doubts about accessibility due to lack of information, being only accessible by car, and the busyness of places making them unsuitable for wheelchairs to use

Common feedback to questions around visitor experience included:

- A lack of good quality or complete pre-visit and access information is a common reason for disabled people not being able to access a site
- Interpretation needs to be offered in a range of formats as standard, such as BSL interpretation, large print guides, and captioning
- Training on how to use accessibility features such as platform lifts and moveable ramps needs to be across all staff and volunteers so there is always someone available who can safely use it
- There is a lack of training for front-of-house staff and volunteers on welcoming d/Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent visitors, leading to poor experiences and sometimes cancelled visits

Recommendations?

Direct Access used their research and their expertise in access consultancy to make the following recommendations:

- **Access to Work** should be promoted by employers in the heritage sector to support and make accommodations for their disabled staff such as any specialist equipment or assistive technology required. [Find out more on GOV.UK](#)
- **Training** needs to be embedded, both in terms of employers and people welcoming visitors onto heritage sites, to ensure that disabled people are treated with dignity, respect, and fairness
- **Consultation groups** of disabled people would be an excellent asset to heritage organisations, to inform their work and provide feedback on their accessibility and inclusion

- **Quiet times** would be a welcome addition to visitor sites, which would improve the experience of many people, including those with hearing impairments, wheelchair users, neurodivergent people, and people with visual impairments
- **Access guides** need to be high quality, well written, clear, well-illustrated with good photos, and provided in different formats