

Access Appraisal and Audit
for the
Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum,

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Executive Summary.

Access Appraisal and Audit.

Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum

This document reviews the current access situation related to the buildings which house the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum. The document has been written to provide a 'snap-shot' of the condition of the facility and to identify methods of improving access to the building and the usability of the building by all those people who visit or work in the building.

The review is based on best practice information and legislation current at the time of the report being written. Clearly an ongoing review process will be necessary taking into account changes in best practice and legislation. The document looks at access to and around the building as well as access within the building. Although the review is aimed at providing improved access for disabled people the benefits of improvements to the building will not be restricted to this group of users.

Information regarding suggested improvements has been provided in two formats. The tabular system identifies likely costs where they can be clearly identified and also links each option to a priority rating.

The provision of access to the services offered by the unit is a requirement that is covered by the Disability Discrimination Act. However improvements made to the building should not just be based on satisfying the requirements of the Act as there will be improvements to be obtained operationally from the improved 'usability' of the building.

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Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum.

Introduction

The aim of this document is to identify the current status of the building with regard to access for people with disabilities. The report will deal with the public areas of the building and the private storage and workshop areas separately, however, the use of the building will mean that members of the public will visit the non-public areas and staff will work in the public areas.

For the purposes of this document the definition of disability will be based on the broad definition held in the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Act defines disability as a physical and/or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse affect on a person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities in one or more of the following areas:

- mobility;
 - manual dexterity;
 - physical co-ordination;
 - continence;
 - ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects;
 - speech, hearing or eyesight;
 - memory or ability to concentrate, hear or understand;
- and
- perception of the risk of physical danger.

It is important to remember that this report can only be considered to be a 'snap-shot' of the current situation at the museum. The survey was carried out during a period where a major exhibition was being designed and constructed and whilst there were works being carried out on an adjacent commercial building which is situated on the corner of Clarence Street and Well Walk. These items have an impact on the ease of movement in and around the building.

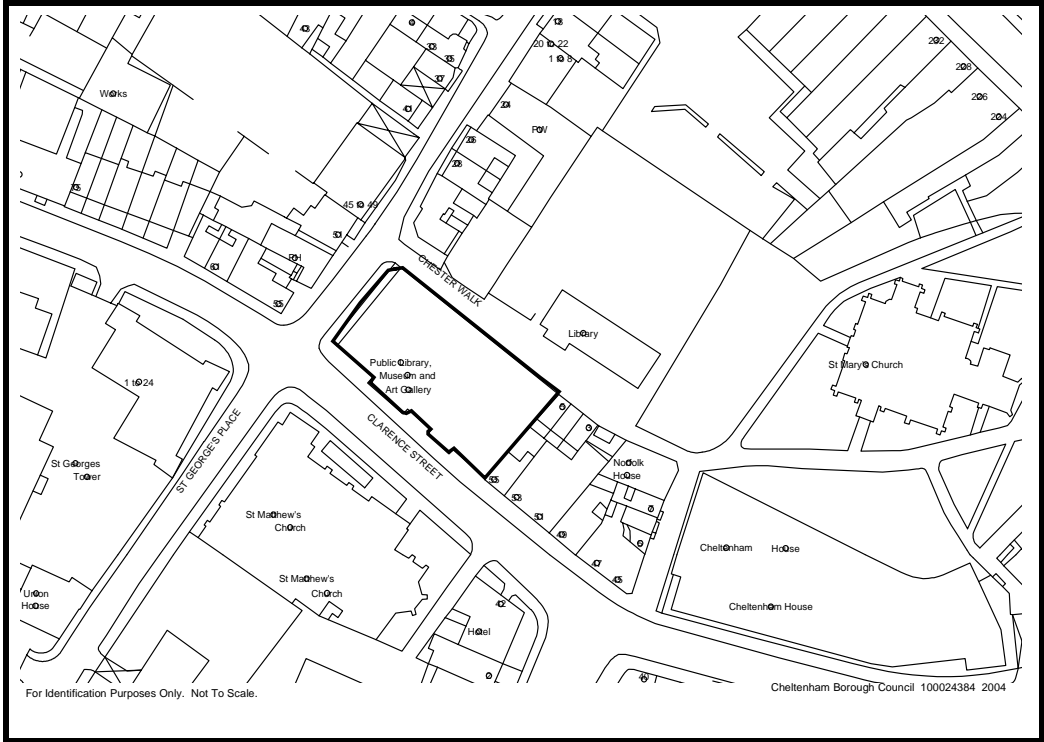
The report is based on current legislation and the best practice information available at the time of writing. For this reason there will be an ongoing requirement to monitor and adapt to changes in legislation and to react to changes in information relating to access issues.

Location and general description of the building.

The Art Gallery and Museum is sited next to the library, a service with which it shares points of access. Both the Art Gallery and Museum and library are housed in a Victorian building although the element which the Art Gallery occupies was substantially rebuilt and extended in the 1980's. The museum also occupies three terraced Regency dwellings.



Site location



Approach routes and street furniture.

The building is positioned in the town centre; there are public transport stops on the High Street, the Promenade and adjacent to the front of the building. Some of the buses used in the town have facilities that accommodate wheelchair users as do some of the taxi vehicles. It should be noted that Cheltenham does not have an integrated transport system, therefore, there is no facility to provide accessible transport from areas other than the two park and ride car parks.

Access by car is not ideal. There is a privately run car park to the rear of the building, however, this facility has a mixed surface of tarmac and gravel which could prevent comfortable access for some people. To the front of the building is a busy town centre road, there is a defined loading bay and accessible parking bay but these would not provide a safe point for loading or unloading a private car.

Access around the building is reasonably good. There are drop kerbs, although some of these are of an inadequate design. There are a limited number of moveable items of street furniture; however these moveable items of furniture will always present a risk of collision. It can be noted that an 'A' board is provided directly adjacent to entrance.

Signage around the town is not good for people who are trying to locate the building; the signs are at a high level, are all in upper case and are hard to read, being gold lettering on a black background.



On the pedestrian route to the facility there are bollards which are painted black and gold, these units are common throughout the town centre and appear to contrast well with the paved street scene.

Access to the building.

There are two access points to the building. The main entrance is from Clarence Street and the other entrance is to the rear of the building.

The main entrance is formed as part of a new extension which was constructed during the late 1980's. A level entrance has been provided and the surface of the external element of the entrance area has been constructed using textured ceramic tile. The colour and texture identifies the close proximity of the entrance. The entrance wall itself is fully glazed with an etched band at about 1600mm above floor level. A brown coloured metal framing system has been used, due to the level of lighting internally; the frame was hard to see on the day that the appraisal was carried out.

Access to the main reception area is provided by a pair of doors. The doors are glazed, so there is a clear view of people entering and leaving the building. Unfortunately the door handles are not clearly visible and they are constructed of a cold metal which could be uncomfortable for some people to use. Generally the door handles are suitable for people with limited dexterity. However, the doors themselves are very heavy to open, a pull of more than 50N (Newtons) being required to open the door. Good practice guidance recommends a maximum force of 25N to 30N to open a door.



Access to the rear is provided for wheel-chair users; however, it is more common for wheel-chair users to access the building from the main entrance. The rear door provides access to both the library and museum via two ramps (see also corridor section).



As can be seen the door opens over a raised landing/ramp which has been formed in the roadway. This area has been raised by approximately 110mm which provides a level threshold but also means that the user could potentially have problems moving away from the door and clearly there is a risk from passing traffic.

The door is 900mm wide and has a single door handle at about 1100mm above ground level. The door was not opened therefore no measurement of the opening load or clear opening width could be made.

Controls, which are adjacent to the door at 1100mm above ground level, are provided to call staff from the museum, the library or the Outreach Collection Service. This facility was not tested but it would not be a comfortable system for some users. There is no indication of the facility at the main entrance.



Ramped approach to the rear of the building. Chester Walk.

Reception Area

The reception area is accessed through the main entrance but there is also access to the reception facility via the level approach in Chester Walk and then to the reception desk via a system of ramps.

The reception area has a relatively low level of lighting but benefits from the large amount natural light provided by the glazed entrance screen. On the day that the survey was carried out there was no apparent problems with shadows or glare. Although contrast between the entrance area floor and framing is good there is not the same level of contrast within the reception area.

The reception desk does not adequately provide for wheelchair users. The top surface of the desk is 1100mm above floor level with an area reduced to 900mm above floor level, however, there is no provision for people to move close to the desk without banging their knees. Access to the desk from the service side is also not suited to people in wheelchairs. There is no induction loop facility at the reception desk.

Signage is limited but what signage there is of a reasonable standard. Wayfinding signage is limited and information relating to the exhibits is very hard to read for anyone with poor eyesight or who may have to read from a seated position.

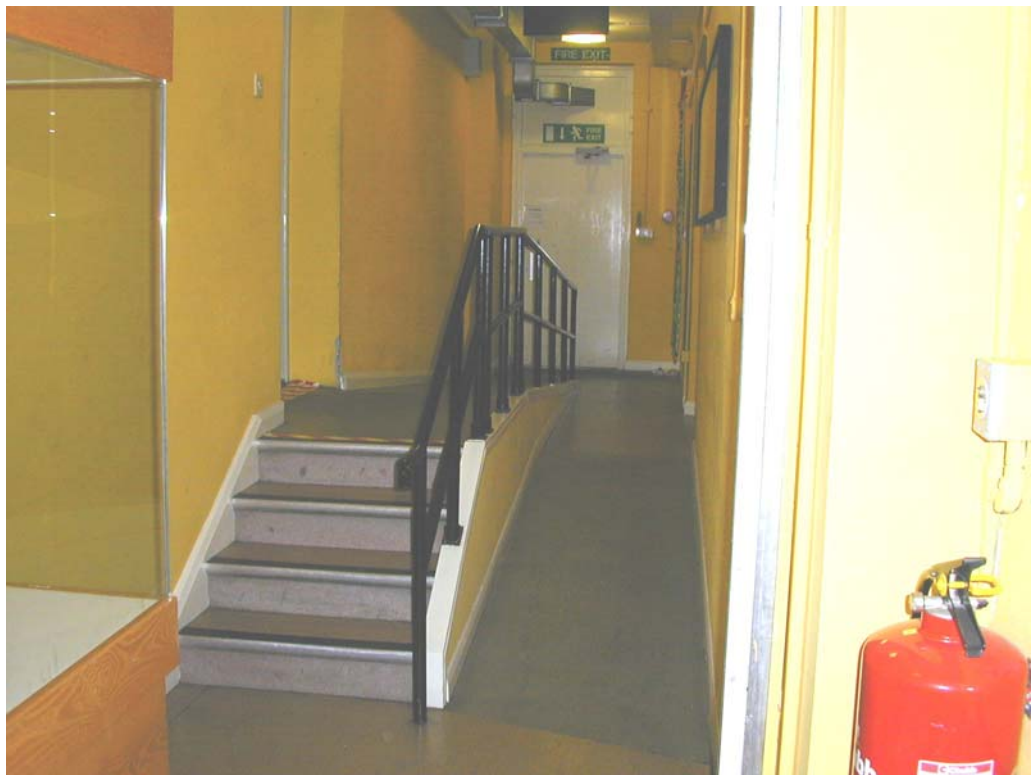
Within the reception area there is sufficient space to allow for easy movement and there are resting chairs provided. These chairs have a seating height of 450mm and are not provided with arms.



Movement around the building

As already stated this service occupies a Victorian building which was extended and refurbished in the 1980's. There are numerous level changes, most are minor and are accommodated within a sloping floor. The sloping element is identified by a colour change in the carpet; there is no tactile warning of the change.

Within the exhibition areas there is adequate room between exhibits to allow for easy movement. Unfortunately some exhibits, because of their design, project into the manoeuvring area. This could be a problem for some people with limited vision.



Access from the rear door to the reception area and other areas of the building is provided by a system of ramps. These ramps are 850mm wide but with a very limited turning area at the landing, this has caused problems for some users.

Generally the arrangement of wheelchair access to the rear and then the subsequent route through to the main exhibition area cannot be considered to be very satisfactory; however, the building does not provide a major opportunity for change with regard to this matter.

Door ways within the building are generally on magnetic hold open devices and provide adequate room for manoeuvre. The door way to the café is hard to open but is fitted with vision panels. A meeting room is provided at first floor level and the door to this facility is heavy to open and does not have a vision panel. Some doorways do not have vision panels, although these are in the minority. The example below is substantially glazed but with opaque glass, however, this doorway is of special interest and is an art exhibit within the building.



Stairs

Within the building there are various flights of stair, these are original units and have a rise of 175mm with a going of 280mm. Wooden handrails are provided to both sides of the stair which is 1400mm wide, the handrail being 800mm above the nosing level. Smaller flights have the following dimensions rise 140mm, going 280mm and the stair being 900mm wide. The stairs are all carpeted in the same floor covering as used on the floor, however, the nosing is identified with plastic fittings.



The stairs are a feature of the building but they do present an obstacle to people moving around the building. The decoration of this element of the building will mean that some people may have problems identifying the stair, however, there are sufficient visual and tactile queues to assist most people to avoid the problem.

Lifts

The lift is the only means by which people with extreme limitations to their movement can obtain access to the upper floors. The lift is very old and does not follow the design suggestions in BS 8300. The car is 860mm wide and 1580mm long.



The lift is not available for independent use by any visitor to the museum and so some of the limitations of the units design are reduced. Signage to the facility is also not good but the way that the service is provided also reduces the impact of this problem.

Toilet facilities

An accessible toilet has been provided at first floor level but this facility also suffers from being old and poorly designed, particularly with regard to the detailing of the room. The doorway is inward opening; the coat hook is too high to be used from a seated position; the mirror is 1400mm above floor level and washbasin is too high above the floor level at 830mm. There was no colour contrast which could be a problem for people with limited eyesight.

On the day that I visited the facility, work was in progress to box in some of the plumbing fittings. However, the room did not appear to be suitable for use as an accessible WC.

Signage to this facility is also poor, route maps are not clear and would be hard for some people to see and comprehend.



Non public parts of the building.

Within the terrace there are a number of the original dwelling units that have been used as workshop and storage facilities. These areas have numerous changes in level and access between floors is by the original domestic stairways. This area cannot be considered to be accessible and so the management team for the facility have adjusted the service to account for this problem.

Any person who wants to see an item from storage can either be escorted to the storage point or, if this would be a problem for the person, the item can be identified and taken to an accessible viewing location.

This could also, potentially, present problems to employees. Once again the management team are aware of the problem and are willing to take reasonable actions to adjust the environment to accommodate current or future employees

Conclusion

This is a building which has many complex issues linked into the purpose for which it is currently used. The service is free to any person who wishes to visit the building; therefore, management of the facility is always going to be a problem, particularly with regard to the safe evacuation of the building.

The features within the building will also impact on the level of accessibility that the building can achieve. The management team are well aware of this problem and realise that the only practical solution for many of the deficiencies will be to adjust the way that the service is provided.

This building will always need to rely on the members of staff to ensure that an acceptable level of service and accessibility is achieved.

Recommendations

1. Door opening mechanism to be reviewed with regard to the amount of effort required to open the door. If possible adjust the door to open more easily. This applies particularly to the main entrance, the café door and the meeting room door.
2. Improve signage particularly the style and positioning of signs which identify the position of the accessible WC facility.
3. Up-grade accessible toilet facility to conform to current good practice.
4. Provide induction loop for use in the reception area.
5. Review system of access to the building.
 - Review operation and design of lift
 - Review and adjust access route from the rear of the building.
6. Consider the provision of systems that would allow people with poor hearing or eyesight to use the facility. Large print signage or preferably the use of audio tapes linked to exhibit points.
7. Review the design of the reception desk facility.

8. As part of the planned maintenance programme consider adjusting decorations and floor coverings so that there is better contrast within the colour scheme.
9. Consider systems which could improve management of the building, particularly with regard to evacuation.
10. Consider options available that would allow improved access to the storage and workshop areas.
11. Consider providing rest areas around the exhibition area, the chairs to be of a height and design that would allow people of limited mobility to use the facility.