

GUIDANCE NOTES ON CHURCHES AND ACCESSIBILITY

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 ("the Act") established the principle of access as a civil right to all buildings, including churches and church halls. The Act imposes a legal duty upon service providers (of which the Church is one) to make reasonable adjustments in the way they provide their services so that disabled persons can receive the benefit of those services as can able bodied people. By 2004 the full provisions of the Act will have been brought into force.

The Act defines disability as an impairment affecting the ability of the person concerned to carry out normal day to day activities in one 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, learn or understand
- * perception of the risk of physical danger

These conditions will affect:-

- * elderly people
- * those of excessively large or small stature
- * children
- * pregnant women
- * parents and others in charge of small children, especially those using pushchairs
- * those who are temporarily injured
- * those who are sick or ill
- * those who are emotionally distressed or unstable.

The challenge which confronts those responsible for churches, their ancillary buildings and churchyards is to reshape the environments while maintaining the spirituality which gave rise to them in the first place. The process will require compromise and sensitivity but only by making churches as accessible as possible can there be a real prospect of achieving the inclusion of people with disabilities in congregations.

Part III of the Act imposes duties on service providers not to discriminate against disabled people and many of the key provisions are due to be brought into force in October 1999.

From October 1999 service providers (ie your PCC) must begin to take reasonable steps to:-

- * change practices, policies or procedures which make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use a service (ie facility)

- * overcome physical features which make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use the service, by providing the service by a reasonable alternative method
- * provide auxiliary aides or services which would make it easier for, or enable disabled people to use a service.

From 2004 the Church as a service provider will have to take reasonable steps to remove, alter or provide reasonable means of avoiding physical features that make it impossible or unreasonably difficult for disabled people to use its services. Reasonable steps are likely to involve altering the physical fabric of the building and it is therefore important to start identifying **NOW** what physical features will have to be dealt with. Please note however that a Code of Practice and regulations are due to be produced which will define the extent of legal duties under the Act. *

It is suggested that **an Accessibility Audit** of the church and its surroundings is carried out in consultation with the churchwardens and clergy. A proforma document for carrying out the audit is available from the Diocesan Registry . The objectives in carrying out the audit should include:-

- * understanding how the church, its ancillary buildings and churchyard can best function bearing in mind the needs of people with disabilities
- * agreeing operational access policies for them
- * establishing the priorities, procedures and programme for carrying out the works required
- * identifying the availability of resources including finance
- * developing procedures for maintaining accessibility safety and security including during periods of construction
- * developing procedures for subsequently maintaining the highest possible levels of accessibility upon completion of the works.

Having undertaken the audit **an Accessibility Plan** should be drawn up. The key issues to be addressed within the Plan will be the location and mode of entry to the building, circulation within it and escape from it. Other important issues include facility provision (eg lavatories), signs, lighting, staff awareness training, safety, security and communications.

English Heritage guidance proposes that a comprehensive assessment should:-

- * identify the existing physical and communication barriers to access (Accessibility Audit)
- * examine the access needs of users (Accessibility Audit)
- * assess the impact of these on features of historic architectural or archaeological interest and/or their setting
- * devise solutions which reconcile access and conservation needs (Accessibility Plan)

English Heritage propose that in devising an Accessibility Plan for an historic property the key conservation principle should be minimum intervention in the historic fabric so that:-

- * measures which avoid or minimise the need for alteration should be considered first
- * alterations which adversely affect a property's special character should be avoided
- * alterations should form part of a long term strategy for use
- * alterations should be reversible wherever possible.

Parishes are reminded that the Accessibility Plan should be drawn up in consultation with their church architect/surveyor and that the need for a faculty should be considered.

For more details refer to "Widening the Eye of the Needle: Access to Church Buildings for People with Disabilities" published for the Council for the Care of Churches by Church House Publishing: £10.95 second edition

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* The Code of Practice is now published and can be found on the website www.drc-gb.org

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