

Creating Access Packs

One thing that organisations can do to be proactive about access is to make information easily available. That way, people can make their own judgments about whether something is going to be accessible for them, and if not, what would make it accessible.

Increasingly artists and venues are creating sections on their websites, or downloadable documents or packs, that give audiences information about accessibility - things like, what mobility aids are available onsite, information about BSL or braille exhibits, whether toilets are accessible etc. We're also starting to see more thought being put into what neurodivergent visitors might need to know - so things like sensory maps, or visual stories that explain step by step what a visit might look like.

Access for Artists

Currently most of these access packs are made for visitors to events, but there's no reason why they shouldn't also be made for employees, the artists you're working with or recruiting, or the participants in your programmes. This is all information that would assist a disabled or neurodivergent person coming to work with you.

You could share the pack as part of the employee on-boarding process, alongside employee handbooks etc., to indicate to new employees that you are open to making adjustments to support people's access needs.

What could you include in a Visitor Access Pack?

- **Information about navigating buildings, facilities and event spaces**
(Including photographs of entrances and relevant internal spaces, or maps where appropriate). This should include the location of quiet spaces, cafes,

toilets, accommodation etc.

- **Access services or facilities available onsite**

List any accessible facilities, services or equipment that you or the venue provides, e.g. disabled toilets; Changing Places toilets; lifts and ramped areas; quiet rooms; loanable wheelchairs or mobility scooters; hearing loops; sensory backpacks; ear defenders; Visual Stories; if braille, captioned, BSL or Easy Read information is available; whether your venue is listed on websites or apps like Welco.Me or AccessAble.

- **Sensory information**

Try and consider someone with difficulty with excess sensory stimuli. For example someone visiting a museum might want to know where there will be loud audio-visual content, or unpredictable noise (e.g. displays with buttons that create noise and movement); that there are noisy hand dryers in the toilets (and where the toilets without them are); that there is a café with the noise of loud coffee machines, and smells of food and drinks.

This information is sometimes produced in the format of a sensory map of the space.

- **Location and transport links**

This could be really useful for someone who is autistic - travelling can be difficult and photographs of the nearest bus stop, train station, car park and entrance can really ease any anxieties.

Be honest, and be specific. Statements like “we are fully accessible” are meaningless because people’s access needs are so varied. It is better to be explicit about what facilities you have, and up-front about any potential access barriers, because it allows people to make their own decisions about whether a venue will be accessible for them.

What about Artist Access Documents?

Access documents or packs for artists contain similar information to ones for audiences, but the focus is on the organisation's workspace and working culture rather

than the visitor experience. So in addition to the information you would include in a general pack, you could include:

- **Statement** that you care about access and welcome a conversation about people's access needs.

- **Sensory information**
Try to provide sensory information about the working environment. For example, will it be busy or noisy? Do you test the fire alarm at a certain time each week? Is there somewhere low-sensory people can go to ground themselves?

- **Opening times**
People might want to arrive early or visit prior to a meeting or event to familiarise themselves with the space before starting work.

- **Day-to-day running**
It's helpful to provide basic details about the day-to-day running of your organisation. For example, who will the artist work with? How can they communicate with colleagues (e.g. is it normal to email each other, or to go over and speak to one another)? It is also good to include a written record of the plan or timetable agreed for the project.

- **Location and transport links**
The same information provided to audiences would help artists, but also, if you plan to meet someone in person, a photograph of the meeting point can be very helpful.

- **Contact information for an access coordinator**

Make sure people can contact someone to ask access questions.

Your welcome pack should equip people with the knowledge they need to make their own decision about reasonable adjustments. It's very difficult to ask for reasonable adjustments if you have no idea what a space looks like or how an organisation works. An access pack will go a long way to making someone feel able to participate in your event or work with your organisation.

Visual Stories

These are sometimes confused with access documents, but Visual Stories are something quite specific. They are also referred to as Visual Storyboards, Social Narratives, or Neurodivergent Affirming Guides, and are also sometimes called Social Stories, which is a trademarked name that can only be used with permission.

Visual Stories are a way of introducing new situations, skills or activities in a safe way. They describe a situation or activity step by step, in simple language, with pictures. They are used to prepare people for experiences that might otherwise be intimidating, like a change in routine, a visit to a new place, or starting a new group. These should concretely explain what will happen, and aim to prepare autistic people and to take the anxiety out of an unknown and unfamiliar situation. They enable autistic people to feel safe and in control during a visit to a new place.

Ideally these should be tailored to each neurodivergent person who uses them, however that is not generally possible for organisations. It is helpful to make your visual story customisable, however, so that autistic people or their families can tailor them in advance of a trip.

Some questions to think about include:

- What context does someone need for this event?
- When and where will the event take place?

- When does it begin and end?
- What will happen at the event?
- Who will be there?
- What information does the person need to navigate around the space?
- What anxieties might someone have about visiting this place, or attending this event? Acknowledge people's anxieties rather than dismissing them, e.g. say "It's ok to feel anxious about new things" rather than "you won't be anxious about this" or "there is nothing to be anxious about".

Sensory packs

More museums and galleries are now offering sensory backpacks to support neurodivergent visitors. These typically contain things to reduce sensory overload (e.g. ear defenders, eye shades); fidget toys or objects to help with grounding; visual timetables to help people plan their day and reduce anxiety; and sensory maps to alert people to potential sensory overwhelm. In the past these packs have tended to be more child-focused, but ND adults would benefit from them too!

Sensory maps are maps of the exhibition space that highlight any particular sensory experiences that people might want to avoid – or seek out. It is important to mark where audio-visual content will be, if any of the exhibits make noise or move, where noisy or smelly places are (e.g. cafes, toilets), and where there will be high-contrast lighting. You should also mark quieter, low-sensory areas where visitors can go to recover.

Examples

Examples of Access Documents:

Access Guide for Sam Metz's Unpredictable Bodies Exhibition (written by Pamela Crowe)

This combines elements of an access pack and Visual Story.

<https://bit.ly/SamMetzSocialStory>

Attenborough Arts

<https://attenborougharts.com/accessibility/>

Glasgow Women's Library

<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/about-us/accessibility/>

The British Museum

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/visit/accessibility-museum>

Collections Trust

The Collections Trust runs a Museum Accreditation Scheme that includes the requirement to create an access plan. You might find some of the resources on their website helpful:

<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/accreditation/users-and-their-experiences/public-access/access-plan/>

Examples of Visual Stories:

Social Narrative: Independent Family Visit to The Metropolitan Museum of Art for Children on the Autism Spectrum

<https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/events/programs/progs-for-visitors-with-disabilities/social-narrative-children.pdf>

Museum of London Visual Story

<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/8515/3875/8306/lr-teacher-resources-visual-story.pdf>

International Children's Festival of the Arts Alberta, Canada (Video)

https://youtu.be/xZx_dDwqZq0

Examples of customisable visual timetables:

Visual schedule created by Door in the Wall Arts Access CIC for Edinburgh Fringe:

<https://edfringe.s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/uploads/docs/access/Colour+Visual+Schedule+Pack+for+home+printing.pdf>

The Met Museum

<https://www.metmuseum.org/-/media/files/events/programs/progs-for-visitors-with-disabilities/my-met-tour.pdf>

Singapore National Museum

<https://www.nhb.gov.sg/nationalmuseum/-/media/nms2017/documents/accessibility/a4-visual-schedule-web-version-27aug2019-fa.ashx?la=en>

Examples of Sensory Backpack projects:

Euan's Guide: What to put in a sensory backpack

<https://www.euansguide.com/campaigns/creating-a-sensory-backpack/>

Manchester Museum – list of objects in sensory backpack

<https://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/visit-us/access/>

National Maritime Museum Greenwich

https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/application/files/3515/5653/1408/EYT_EarlyYears_NationalMaritimeMuseum.pdf

Creating a Sensory Backpack at University of Dundee Museums

<https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/case-study/creating-a-sensory-backpack-at-university-of-dundee-museums/>