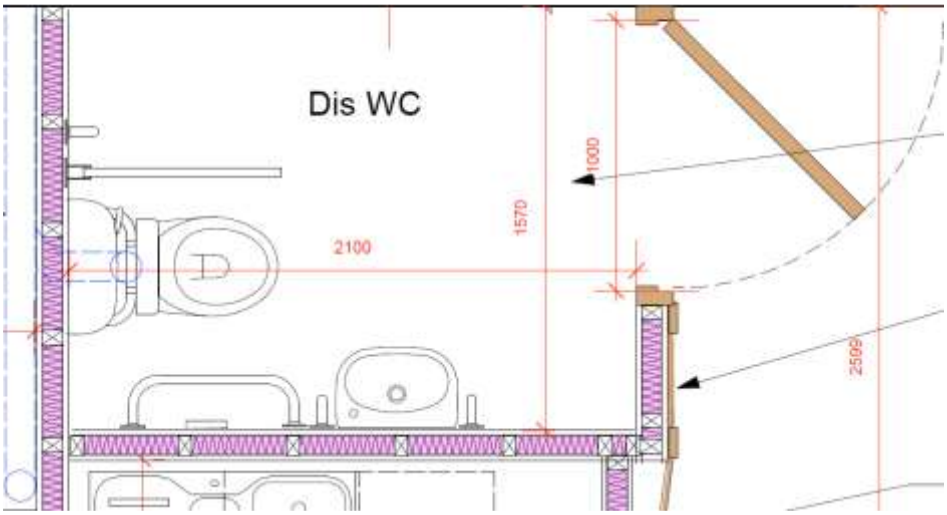
Accessibilty Guidance

THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND
DIOCESE OF DURHAM

This document is not intended to give full details on how to make your buildings accessible but will hopefully help you to identify areas that you can improve to make you building more accessible. If you wish to make any changes to your building to improve accessibility you should seek professional advice.

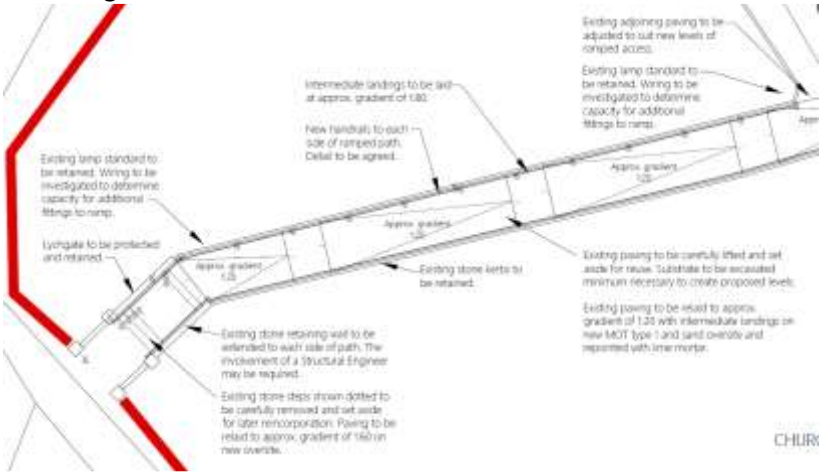
Accessible Toilets

The design of an accessible toilet should allow for a turning circle and a transfer space to allow the user to actually access the toilet. As convenient as the space next to the toilet seems for storing items, doing so will actually prevent a wheelchair user from using the toilet.
Accessible toilets should have appropriate handrails which comply with Building Regs, handwashing facilities, an emergency cord and a door that opens outwards. Whilst it is common to add baby changing facilities to accessible toilets it is important that the addition of these does not reduce the size of the space below the minimum required. The location of bins also needs to be considered carefully.
An example of the layout of an accessible toilet is shown below.



Outdoor Paths

If you are wanting to create an accessible path to your church building it is important that you consider the maximum gradients for the length of the path along with the position of landings. This is important as a self-propelled wheel chair user can only push themselves up a slope for a short period before they need to stop on level ground for a break.



We also need to remember that an accessible path is not just for wheel chair users, many people who are able to walk would struggle to walk up a long slope without taking a break. It is also important that appropriate handrails are in place for people to use particularly where steps are incorporated. The surface of a path is also an important consideration as many paths can become slippery in damp or wet conditions. In the example shown below the stone path needs to have a maintenance schedule in place to remove leaves and any moss build up which would make the path slippery.

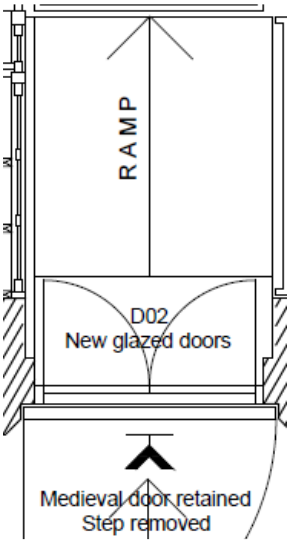
Entrances

The principle here is that everyone should enter through the same main entrance, it could be that it would be appropriate to change the main entrance for everyone if that was the best option.
If it is unfeasible for all to enter via the same doors it is important that the accessible entrance must not be of inferior quality. Would you expect to enter the church through an area where the cleaning equipment is kept?
It is also important to consider that once a wheelchair user is in the building, can they access all of the parts of the building that most people will need to enter?

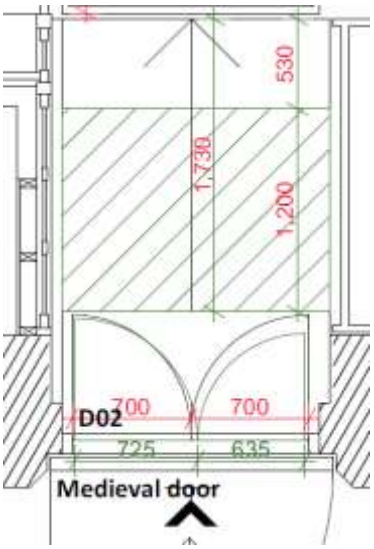
Doors

Doors are often an issue because even if they are technically wide enough for a wheelchair user the positioning of the door can make it almost impossible for a wheelchair user to access it, or you may find that access into the building is possible but getting out is more difficult. Take the following drawing (A) for example, you may be able to get through the doors and down the ramp on the way into the church but how would you open the doors at the top of the ramp without rolling back down.

(A)



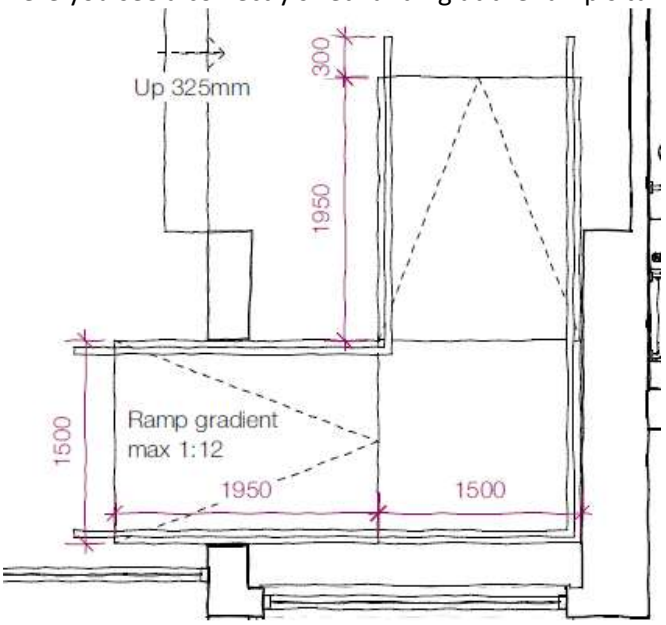
(B)



Each dooway should be at least 900mm in width. If one leaf of the doorway is less than 900mm then a push-button opener is needed. In order to allow an independent wheelchair user to exit the building a level landing is needed clear of the door leaf opening arcs, of at least the length of the wheelchair. See drawing (B) above.

Ramps & Slopes

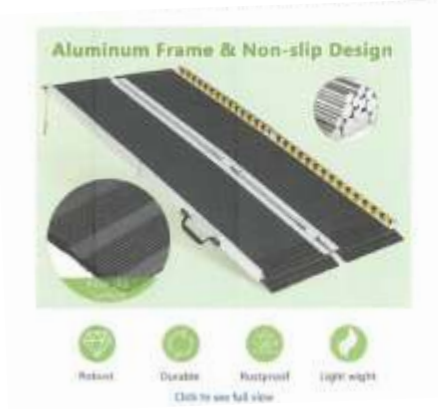
Architects know the correct gradients and we very rarely encounter non-compliant slopes in architect-designed ramps. Landings are important - with a turning circle of 1500mm – the wheelchair user has to be able to get onto and off the ramp without danger of slipping either way
Here you see a correctly sized landing at the ramp's turn.



The steepest permitted gradient is 1:12 – a rise of 1 unit for a horizontal distance of 12 units. This amounts to an angle of 4.67 degrees from the horizontal. The maximum length of the 1:12 gradient is 2m – then you need a landing, for the wheelchair user to be able to rest. The shallowest gradient is 1:20, with a max length of 10m before a landing. Shallower than this and it isn't a ramp any more.
It is important that you ensure paths comply with these gradients and lengths.

Permanent, semi-permanent or temporary?

A permanent, built ramp is the best solution but can be difficult to design and expensive. A semi-permanent ramp is as pictured below are sturdy, and installed with screws/bolts which can be removed later with tools.



A temporary ramp as pictured above right, is intended to be lowered into place by hand then collected up and stowed immediately after use. These non-permanent ramps are unlikely to comply with building regs specifications on gradients and lengths.

They do have a limited use where there is a longer-term plan, or in very specific locations where there is no other choice.

Stairlifts

A key barrier for many people is access to toilets, which are located on the first floor or up flight of stairs which are beyond the scope of a ramp. Stairlifts are a solution in some situations, however you need to consider some other points. Once someone has got to the top of the stairs, can they actually get to the toilet?

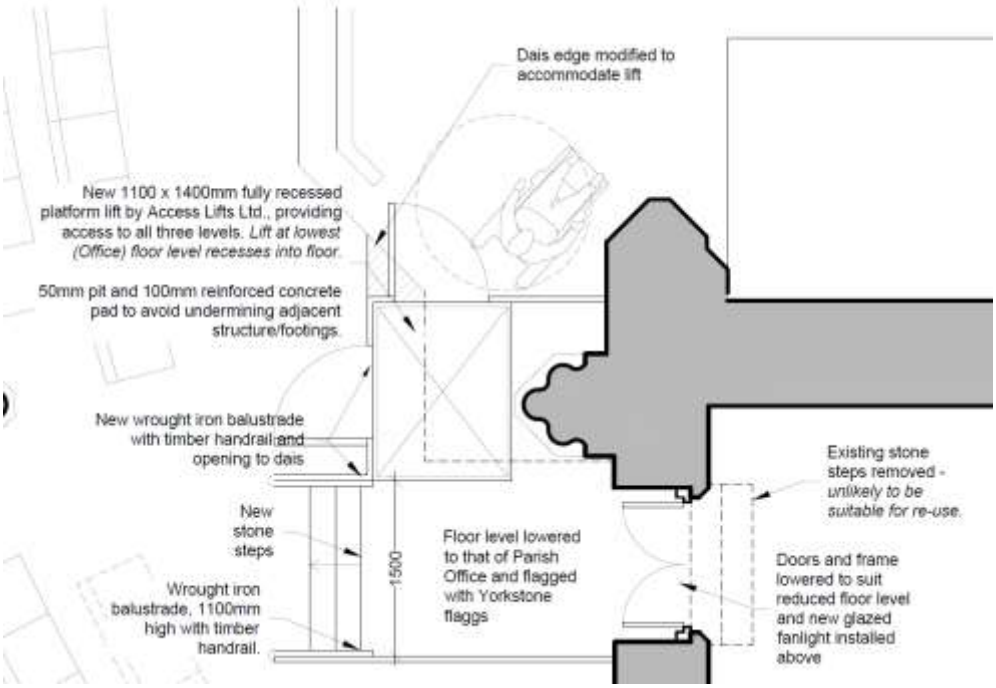
Many wheelchair users are able to move short distances out of their wheelchair so sourcing a wheelchair, walking sticks and crutches to be kept upstairs for use when leaving the stairlift.

If the space at the bottom of the stairs is used by lots of people then you may need to consider ensuring storage space available downstairs for users' own chairs/aids.

Another point to consider is how much space the stairlift will take on the stairs when not in use. Will it prevent others easily using the stairs.

Platform Lifts

The one pictured below is an open platform (not cabin)



Please note that level and clear entrance and exit areas are needed for lifts. Whilst there are minimum specifications in Doc M, these are being questioned as not perfect for modern powered chairs, or for wheelchair users with assistants (human or dog).

When considering a platform lift you need to take into account long-term maintenance costs of the lift compared with a ramp, however in many situations it may be the only solution available. If you are considering an external lift you need to consider the weathering of materials and vandalism which may increase maintenance costs.

In the case of either a platform lift or stairlift you need to consider what happens in a power cut or if the lift develops a fault when someone is at the higher level. You will need to consider the costs of an **evacuation chair** and **essential evac chair training** for staff and volunteers.

Car Parking

Providing access into the building is great but if a person is arriving by car do you have a suitable space for them to park in that is actually accessible. Is the surface of the carpark suitable for a wheelchair and is it free of potholes? Are disabled parking spaces marked with suitable space around the vehicle to allow access? Once the person is out of their vehicle, they need to be able to get to the church, so you need to consider the access routes and check that gates are of a suitable with and easy to open as well as ensuring that no kerbs need to be negotiated on the route.

Lighting

Not all accessibility needs are related to people with limited mobility. Those with a visual impairment will struggle to access the church and engage in the worship or event if the lighting is not appropriate for their needs. Outside, you need to consider how paths and car parks are lit so that safe access can be made.

Internal lighting is very important and consider if different spaces need different strengths of lighting. Which direction do the lights shine, it is very difficult to make out facial gestures of a service leader if they are back lit. This could be a significant issue for someone with a hearing impairment which means that they rely on lip reading to supplement their hearing.

Consider candle-lit services, atmosphere isn't always everything!

If you are using lighting effects, avoid flashing lighting as this can cause issues with neurodiversity.

Audio Solutions

Hearing-aid loops are a useful addition, but it is important that people know that you have one and which parts of the building that the loop covers. If you have one fitted consider a testing mechanism – having a loop is no good if the sound technicians cannot check it is working

Not all modern hearing aids have a loop setting and some hearing aids from high-street audiology suppliers rely on Bluetooth capacity rather than induction loops. Currently all NHS aids do have loop capacity

Captioning and subtitling can be a useful solution for some people if screens are available. But be careful of the capacity of automatic captioning which can result in errors, profanity and unintentional humour.

It may be possible to obtain tablets to lend out to individual congregants who would benefit from this provision.

For further advice consult RNID (advisory charity) and Connevans (supplier).

Visual Solutions

Ensure that you do large print copies on every print run of materials that are given out or used during the service. Obtain large print books where books are used as part of the worship.

Around the building ensure that there is well designed signage which doesn't have too much information and is in a large enough, sans serif font.

Use contrast markings on edges of doors, stairs and ramps, as well as toilet fittings, handles, taps. If you have glass doors or glazed panels around the building add "Manifestations" on the glass so that they can be seen.

Check the compatibility website and emailed materials for Screen-reader software.

Consider braille signage where appropriate.

For further information consult RNIB and TorchTrust (charities)

Neurodivergence

Neurodivergence affects a huge number of people in our communities, however there is no such things as typically neurodivergent person and like other accessibility needs we need to try and provide resources and facilities that will allow them to access worship and events. Some things that you may want to consider are having noise-cancelling headsets to loan for those who struggle with lots of noise. You may want to consider creating a sensory room, quiet spaces or spaces for release of energy, but the extent to which spaces like this are developed will depend on the needs of those regularly attending the church and the space that you have available.

We mentioned lighting in an earlier section but fluorescent lights can be challenging for some neurodivergent people.

Whilst it is sometimes appropriate to be impulsive, many people will struggle with this. When possible, ensure that advanced information of events are published giving details of what will happen, where, how and for how long.

Getting it right!

Don't just assume that putting a ramp in a certain place will make it easier for someone to access the building or providing noise cancelling headphones will make it better for all neuro divergent people to engage with the worship.

Unless you have a disability, you will not know what it is like to live with that disability. Therefore, despite all of the points made above the best people to speak to are those people who struggle with accessibility in one form or another on a daily basis.

One thing that you can do is do the journey yourself? From the start of a person's engagement with the church all the way through everything an able-bodied, neurotypical person would expect to be able to engage with in the church building. .Avoids the risk of majoring on "ramps, loos and loops"

You may want to complete a written audit so that you have a document that you can refer back to in the future as you make your building and worship more accessible. Templates on Barrier-Free Belonging Barrier-Free Belonging | The Church of England or you could contact our Diocesan Disability Advisor.

Alternatively, you could pay for a professional audit if you would like someone independent to review your accessibility. The key thing is that you have a long-term plan

Finance is often presented as a reason for not making accessibility improvements!

However, remember the Equality Act! Our Mission! And our calling to our communities!