



Disabled Access Post-Covid Lockdown – please don't forget us

Welcome to the new normal. We know that the Covid-19 pandemic is going to have massive impact on how venues work, even once lock down is lifted. I'd like to give you a few thoughts about how it will particularly impact your disabled visitors

Two groups:

- ▶ **Medically at Risk** Immunocompromised; Lung or heart diseases; “New” disabled
- ▶ **Other Disabilities** Learning disability, Autism; Blind or Deaf; Mobility impairments

In this context there are two groups of disabled people – those at particular risk of Covid-19 infection and associated complications; and those who are disabled but not at greater risk from Covid. However this second group may find the changes needed to control Covid will have negative impact. Those who are at high medical risk from Covid includes those whose immune system is affected, and those with lung or heart diseases. But it will also include people who previously would not have considered themselves as disabled – but who are now being disabled by their higher risk from Covid-19. This includes those who are over 70 years old, or with relatively mild health issues eg asthma, diabetes or high blood pressure.

Most disabled people will not be at greater risk from Covid-19 so you still need to consider the general access issues they will have when accessing your venue. Please do not use Covid as an excuse to defer access improvements.

However some disabled people will find social distancing a real challenge and we will discuss this later.



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Long term Access. For the disabled people that are medically at higher risk from Covid-19; they and their families will be trying to keep social contacts reduced for a lot longer period than the rest of the population – personally as someone at high risk (but not the highest) I expect to be mostly working virtually until there is a robust track and trace system and ideally a vaccine – which may be up to 2 years away. So going to a science centre or a museum is very low on my priority list – I would just feel so unsafe the whole time I was there that I wouldn't enjoy the day

Remote Access. However the shut down due to corona virus has led to massive changes. Social isolating has made virtual living the new normal. As a disabled person suddenly I can access the Louvre, the V&A, museums across the world. Even if I could have gotten into these buildings I would have struggled to find the energy and time to go and visit- and now its all just on my laptop – this is amazing. So when lock down lifts please continue to offer these online options. Livestream your visiting speaker events and allow questions to be posted online. You can charge if needed but please don't shut our worlds down again just as they were being opened up. Please continue to be innovative and excite every visitor online as well as in person.

The power of the Web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect. Tim Berners-Lee, W3C Director and inventor of the World Wide Web. Please check out the accessibility of your web site – the minimum standard to meet is W3C. If you can, check that your website is also accessible on phones as well as computers, can be read by automatic text readers. Does your website allow people to change the text size and contrast? Make sure your pictures have logos, your videos have closed captions (and ideally British Sign Language interpreters). Then your website will increase access rather than frustration.

Travel is challenging. Travel as a disabled person is challenging - then add in Covid and it becomes really hard. We are being advised against using public transport but many disabled people cannot drive so our transport options get



fewer and fewer. Many disabilities mean that specialist transportation. Some need additional assistance - often not socially distanced. So unfortunately even if a disabled person isn't at greater risk from Covid they still may not be able to travel to you.

Social distancing plus disability is often impossible. Many times disability means that social distancing is virtually impossible – if you need your wheelchair pushing, there is no way to do this and maintain 2 meters distance. Guiding someone who is blind can't be done in a socially distanced way. And guide dogs are trained to go straight to your front door ignoring any socially distanced queues. Face masks are a communication nightmare for those who lip read. Many people with learning disability or dementia will struggle to understand or adhere to social distancing rules.

Public toilets are scary. Public toilets – accessible or otherwise – are a real source of concern. The virus is present in faeces, so potentially an infection risk. That said a quick review of the literature does not identify any known cases. But it would be fair to apply a precautionary principle here. So protecting someone when using a public toilet is a huge challenge. You do need to ask people to close the loo seat before flushing (so reducing aerosols). And your cleaning regimen needs to be massively increased – the ideal is after each use (yes seriously). If possible consider installing touch free taps and flush sensors.

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So please keep your venue accessible both in the real and virtual worlds despite covid. Here are my contact details. If you'd like to discuss any of this in more detail please feel free to get in touch. Thanks to Winchester Science Centre and Planetarium for asking me to create this talk. Thank you for watching.



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