

Accessibility



Key Issues

- 1. Scottish Ministers are committed to promoting equality of access to, and enjoyment of, the historic environment. This guidance is intended to encourage the provision of physical access for everyone in ways that also safeguard the character of historic buildings and places.**
- 2. Careful assessment and planning can allow consideration of access in the broader context of an understanding of a historic building or place and its long-term management requirements.**
- 3. It is particularly important to involve the users or potential users of historic buildings or places in planning access improvements.**
- 4. Where physical alterations are required, it is usually possible to achieve access improvements that are sensitive to the historic character of the building or place through high-quality design, management and maintenance.**
- 5. Local authorities give advice on the requirement for listed building consent, conservation area consent and other permissions.**

INTRODUCTION

This is one of a series of guidance notes on managing change in the historic environment. The series explains how to apply the policies contained in the *Scottish Historic Environment Policy* ([SHEP](#), PDF 312K) and *Scottish Planning Policy 23: Planning and the Historic Environment* ([SPP23](#), PDF 192K).

This note sets out the principles that apply to developments for improving physical access to the historic environment. It replaces the equivalent guidance in *The Memorandum of Guidance on Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas* (1998) and should be afforded equal weight in drawing up planning policies and determining applications relating to the historic environment.

Monuments scheduled under the Ancient Monuments & Archaeological Areas Act 1979 require scheduled monument consent for any works. Where a structure is both scheduled and listed, the scheduling controls have precedence. Separate advice is available from Historic Scotland's website: [Scheduled Monuments: Guidance for Owners, Occupiers & Land Managers](#) (PDF 718K).

BACKGROUND

Equality of access for all people is a fundamental aim of the Scottish Ministers' policy on the historic built environment ([SHEP](#)). The policy sets out an inclusive approach: people of all levels of physical, mental and sensory ability should have the opportunity to access, experience and enjoy the historic environment on an equal basis.

Access to the historic environment can be both physical and 'intellectual', in the sense of understanding, learning, researching and training. This guidance is primarily concerned with physical access. Further information on intellectual access is provided on Historic Scotland's website: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Improved accessibility can have numerous benefits for the historic environment, in particular its contribution to the use and viability of historic buildings and places. With careful thought and planning, improved physical access to most elements of the historic environment can usually be achieved through reasonable adjustments without harming the significance of the historic building or place.

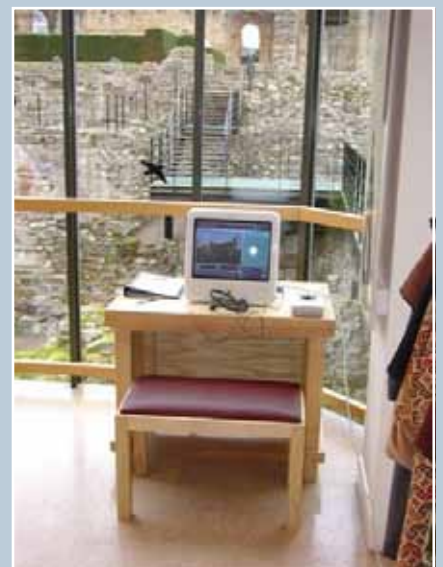
Ideally adjustments should seek to provide unassisted and dignified physical access for all.

Successful improvements to accessibility are usually based on:

- an understanding of the needs of users;
- an understanding of the character of the historic building or place and its significance;
- an assessment of the various improvement options;
- an access plan that takes account of the needs of users and the character and significance of the building/place;



New steps and ramp at the Castle Street Annexe of the Sheriff Court in Aberdeen. High-quality contemporary design and materials provide improved access for all users of the building.



Virtual access is provided to Jedburgh Abbey, Scottish Borders, from within the visitor centre.



A lift has been added to the Titan Crane in Clydebank to allow everyone to access and enjoy it.



A courtesy vehicle is provided at Edinburgh Castle to enable ease of access to the upper levels of the complex.

- high-quality design and materials;
- appropriate maintenance and review of facilities.

In all cases the level of assessment of a historic building/place and planning for access improvements should be appropriate to its function, complexity and interest.

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF USERS

The needs of users vary according to individual levels of physical or sensory ability and the nature of the historic building or place and how it is used.

An access audit is a good way of assessing how a building or place is used and identifying any existing barriers to access. Barriers to access may exist in a physical form, or in the way that the building is used or managed. An access audit should examine not just the entrance to the building, but also approaches, routes through the building, facilities and services, and emergency provisions and exits.

It is recommended that access audits are undertaken in consultation with users and local accessibility groups. The National Register of Access Consultants maintains a list of professional auditors and consultants with specialist expertise in assessing and improving access to historic buildings and places: www.nrac.org.uk.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTER OF THE HISTORIC BUILDING OR PLACE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

The character and significance of a historic building or place can be derived from a number of factors, from how it is planned and designed to its materials and cultural associations. It is important to establish the significance of the building or place as a whole and also the relative significance of its component parts.

A structured way of considering the character and significance of a historic place is through the use of a conservation statement or plan. A conservation statement seeks to identify the cultural and historic significance of the site, whilst a conservation plan also includes a strategy for the management and conservation of the site. Historic Scotland publishes a separate [A Guide to the Preparation of Conservation Plans](#) (PDF 76K).



Kirkcaldy, Fife. Ramped and stepped access was achieved in this busy pedestrian street by removing the original door and a window to create an internal lobby. Equality of access was achieved and the principal feature of the building's ground floor, the arcade of round-headed arches, was maintained.

ASSESSMENT OF ACCESSIBILITY IMPROVEMENT OPTIONS

Having established the needs of users, the existing accessibility, and the character/significance of the historic building or place, the options for improvement can be considered in terms of management and physical alterations. In considering the options, the aim is to achieve the best practical balance between the access requirements of all users and the

reasonable conservation needs of the building or place.

Management options might consider how circulation and use of the historic building or place can be rearranged to achieve improved access for everyone without major physical alterations.

Where physical barriers to easy access are identified, the impact on the character of the historic building/place of removing or altering the physical feature should be assessed using the hierarchy of 'reasonable adjustments' for service providers set out in Section 21(2) of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995). Adjustments to consider include:

1. **remove the feature.** If the feature is not an important part of the character of the historic building/place, the most straightforward course of action is likely to be removal. It may be necessary to assess the relative contribution of a historic feature, such as a staircase or narrow doorway, to the interest of the building/place against the benefits and costs that removal might involve.
2. **alter it so that it no longer has that effect.** Again the relative significance of the historic feature should be assessed before proposing alteration. In general additive rather than destructive alteration is likely to best protect the interest of the building/place. Where alteration is appropriate in principle, high-quality design and materials will help to integrate the new work with the historic fabric (see further design guidance below).
3. **provide a reasonable means of avoiding the feature.** In cases where a historic feature forms a key part of a building or place's character and removal or alteration would be damaging, it may be possible to provide alternative access in another location. Through management and/or design it is preferable to ensure that the alternative access is used by everyone.
4. **provide a reasonable alternative method of making the service in question available to disabled persons.** Where none of the above can be achieved as 'reasonable adjustments' and a service is provided from the building, alternative means of providing the service should be considered.

HIGH-QUALITY DESIGN AND MATERIALS

General

Alterations to access should normally be designed in a permanent manner, and where possible should allow independent movement for everyone to and within the historic building or place. Use of high-quality design and materials benefits all users and the long-term functioning of the building/place.

An inclusive approach to the design of access improvements is important to remove undue effort and separation, not just for wheelchair users.

It is recognised that full equality of access may not be achievable in every circumstance due to practical, technical, financial, conservation and/or other constraints. In these cases high-quality design and management



The Assembly Rooms, George Street, Edinburgh, where the pavement level has been raised at the main entrance to eliminate a threshold.



This platform lift provides alternative access from the pavement to the side entrance of General Register House in Edinburgh.



Linlithgow County Buildings, West Lothian. Attention is drawn to this ramp by the use of a variety of textures, carefully designed to complement the character of the building. © West Lothian Council.

should be used to accomplish the broadest possible degree of access within the constraints.

The symmetry of a historic building and the impact of access alterations on axial views that may be of townscape or landscape value are important considerations in designing improvements. The location and scale of a building and its setting may make relatively small adjustments to access possible without significant impact.

Special attention should be paid to designs affecting a repeated component of a larger group, such as a terrace of houses, and the incremental impact the alteration would have if used throughout the group. Where access improvements are planned to part of a building in multiple occupancy, consideration should be given to joint schemes for the whole building.

It may not be possible to meet the current Building Standards guidance in all cases, but usually a reasonable compromise can be achieved that will satisfy safety requirements, access improvements, and conservation needs. Some examples of good practice are illustrated in Part Two of Historic Scotland's [Guide to the Conversion of Traditional Buildings](#) (PDF 4.2Mb on the Scottish Building Standards website: www.sbsa.gov.uk).

Temporary means of overcoming an obstacle might be appropriate as an interim measure until a long-term solution is found.

The following topical guidance is not comprehensive, but provides an overview of the most common issues.

Approaches

Approaches to historic buildings from the street or from car parking, or routes to and within a historic site are essential to ensuring ease of access. Where historic surfaces present access difficulties in terms of finish, texture or colour, it is usually possible to adapt them sensitively using high-quality materials to create level slip-resistant surfaces in contrasting colour. For example access across setts and gravel drives/courts can be improved with carefully laid flagstone paths. Further detailed guidance is available in [Easy Access to Historic Landscapes](#) (2005) (PDF 1.5Mb from Historic Scotland's website).

Steps

External steps often form an important part of the setting of a historic building, or even part of the design of the building itself, particularly of classical buildings. It is normally desirable to retain as much of the character and historic fabric of the steps and associated railings as possible, but carefully designed access improvements are often achievable with minimal impact.

In many cases the addition of correctly positioned handrails of comfortable gripping profile can be of assistance to a significant number of users. In some circumstances it may be appropriate to match existing iron or timberwork details, but in some locations more contemporary designs may be preferable.



Buchanan Street, Glasgow, where a ramp constructed in a discreet location over the basement area enables easy access for all to this shop.

Where level access is required, there are several methods that can be considered. Depending on the number of steps, the available space, and the significance of the existing arrangement, it may be possible to provide carefully designed ramped access. For small changes in level this can sometimes be achieved by regrading of pavements or by creation of a short ramp to the side of, or over, the existing steps.

Larger or steeper changes in level require either a longer ramp or some form of mechanical fixture, such as a platform lift. In general such additions will need to be carefully designed and sited to take into account the character of the historic building.

The equipment and fixings required for external chair lifts can have a substantial visual impact, and should only be considered where less obtrusive measures cannot be accommodated.

In particularly sensitive sites, it might be necessary to consider the archaeological implications of the groundwork needed for mechanical plant or ramp construction.

For various reasons, including the special historic interest of steps and stepped entrances, some cases may require the consideration of alternative locations for the provision of level access. Such alternative access points should where possible be managed to form a route for use by everyone.

Doorways and doors

Where a doorway forms a significant part of the character of a historic building, and is narrower than current standards permit, it is usually less damaging to seek alternative access routes than to try to widen the doorway.

Electromagnetic hold-open devices can be useful in cases of limited manoeuvring space at the leading edge of a doorway, or where glazed vision panels would be damaging to the historic fabric and appearance of the door. It is often possible to re-hang doors or to add discreet aids or mechanical opening devices without damaging historic fabric or replacing historic door furniture. Where an automated approach is taken, consideration should be given to the location, ease of use and colour of the opening control.

Thresholds or other small changes in level up to 25mm can normally be made more accessible by bevelling the leading edge and marking with contrasting colour/texture. Ramps or raised floors over historic fabric can be helpful in easing larger level changes.

Where solid doors present a risk of collision for users, there are a number of options that can be considered to reduce the impact of alterations on the historic fabric:

- consider a controlled release for propping open an internal door (where this is acceptable for fire protection purposes)
- if creating a 'vision panel', remove and glaze a single door panel rather than cutting through the structural elements of the door;



The need for user assistance, regular mechanical maintenance and obtrusive fixtures limits the suitability of external chair lifts in many locations.



A short, free-standing ramp at Dunkeld Cathedral allows access over the nave threshold without fixtures or disturbance to the underlying archaeology.



The door into Linlithgow's County Buildings opens automatically, and also has a manually operated push pad. © West Lothian Council.



The Hunterian Museum, Glasgow University, completed circa 1870 to designs by Sir George Gilbert Scott. A contemporary glazed lift has been inserted to enable access to the upper gallery of the main exhibition space.



Glass treads with a textured finish are laid over the worn stone stairs in the Old School building at New Lanark. The wear on the treads is part of the significance of the school because it records many years of use by the children.



A new lift tower in complementary style was added to the East Mill at Stanley Mills, Perth and Kinross, as part of its conversion to residential accommodation.

- if there are external storm doors, with glazed doors behind, explore having the storm doors open when the building is open, or controlled automatically;
- consider forming a new inner door if appropriate; or
- as a last resort, remove the door and store it, replacing it with a sensitively designed alternative.

Floor Surfaces

Repair or alteration of uneven historic floors to provide a level surface is usually possible. Where floor surfaces are fragile or slippery, a surface covering or carpet may be appropriate to avoid risk to vulnerable walkers and to protect the finish.

Stairs and landings

Much of the guidance on external steps applies to internal staircases. Staircases are often the most significant feature of a historic interior. Additional handrails of appropriate quality and design can normally be installed in a manner that does not diminish the special interest of the stair. In many cases contrasting tactile nosings can be applied easily to stair treads and landings to improve their visibility. Where this is not possible, carpeting or contrast lighting can help to distinguish stair heights and depths.

Internal lifts should either be well incorporated within the detailed design of a historic interior or be a clear modern intervention that respects it. Where possible they should be located in secondary areas, or in parts of the building that have already been altered in the past. The plan or decorative detail of principal rooms should not be damaged in the provision of lift access. Platform-passenger lifts can be suitable for changes in level up to 4m. With careful design they can be accommodated discreetly and are usually suitable for a wide range of users. Emergency exits and fire refuges should be considered in conjunction with lift provision.

Stair lifts can have a significant impact on the character of a historic staircase and normally require the user to be assisted: they should generally be used as a last resort in situations where other access improvement measures are not practical. Careful consideration should be given to their location, design and detailing to minimise their effect.

Extensions and additions

A proposed new extension to a historic building or new building in a historic place should be explored as an opportunity to improve access throughout the site.

A significant alteration, such as a lift or stair tower, may be appropriate where an addition is proposed that maintains the integrity of a historic feature or adds a contemporary layer of interest. Further guidance is available in this series on the extension of historic buildings.

Lighting

Good lighting in and around a historic building can help to ensure safe and easy access. Effective lighting schemes that avoid sudden changes in level or glare, but identify potential hazards, are generally easy to accommodate within a historic building.

Signage

Signage is usually best considered as part of an integrated communication scheme that guides all users to and around a historic building. Braille and tactile signage combined with clear colour contrast and appropriate fonts is likely to be of assistance to the widest range of users. Care needs to be taken to ensure that signage is positioned and sized both for utility and also for sensitivity to the character and fabric of the historic building or place. Signage is usually subject to relatively frequent change, so fixtures should be used sparingly with reversibility in mind. In some cases free-standing signage may be the most appropriate.

MAINTENANCE AND REVIEW

The cost of long-term maintenance of access improvements, particularly mechanical equipment, should be taken into account at the planning stage. For safe operation, mechanical equipment needs regular checking and servicing. Where non-historic equipment has become redundant or obsolete, it should be removed or replaced.

The provision of access should be continually monitored as user patterns may alter and technology may render previously insurmountable obstacles obsolete.

DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENTS

Supporting design and access statements are recommended for inclusion with all relevant listed building consent applications. A design and access statement is a document setting out the design principles and concepts that have been applied to the development and explaining how issues relating to access for disabled people have been dealt with.

LISTED BUILDING CONSENT

Listed building consent is required for any work to a listed building which affects its character. The local authority determines the need for consent.

Where listed building consent is required, an application must be made to the local authority. It should include accurate scale drawings showing both the existing and proposed wall and associated features in context. It is always helpful to provide detailed technical information and photographs. There is no fee for submitting a listed building consent application.



Visitor signage in the car park at Linlithgow Sheriff Court, clearly marking the route to the accessible entrance. © West Lothian Council.



An accessible entrance to the City Chambers, Glasgow, part of a well-considered access arrangement that takes in both physical and management aspects of approaches, entrances, and moving around the building. The pavement has been adjusted to lessen the gradient of the ramp. Different colours are used to demarcate the ramp, and the texture creates a non-slip surface. Railings are provided for support. The doors operate from a large push control, and there is a speakerphone for assistance if necessary. Signage indicates the accessible entrance and continues throughout the interior of the building. An access guide is available online, or at the building, for blind or visually impaired visitors. Loan wheelchairs are also available.

Other selected Historic Scotland publications and links

[Technical Advice Note 7: Access to the Built Heritage](#) (1996) (available for purchase from Historic Scotland)

[A Guide to the Preparation of Conservation Plans](#) (2000) (PDF 76K)

[Guide to the Conversion of Traditional Buildings](#) (Scottish Building Standards website)

For the full range of Inform Guides, Practitioner Guides, Technical Advice Notes and Research Reports please see the Publications section of the Historic Scotland website.

Other selected publications and links

Scottish Government, [Planning Advice Note 78: Inclusive Design](#) (2006) (Scottish Government web page)

English Heritage, [Easy Access to Historic Buildings](#) (2004) (PDF 1.5Mb from English Heritage's website)

English Heritage, [Easy Access to Historic Landscapes](#) (2005) (PDF 1.5Mb from Historic Scotland's website)

Other contacts and links

National Register of Access Consultants

70 South Lambeth Road
LONDON
SW8 1RL

Tel: 020 7735 7845

Fax: 020 7840 5811

SMS: 07921 700 089

Email: info@nrac.org.uk

Web: www.nrac.org.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Details of all individual scheduled monuments, listed buildings, designated gardens and designed landscapes, and designated wrecks can be obtained from Historic Scotland (see contact details below) or at: www.pastmap.org.uk. Details of listed buildings can also be obtained from the relevant local authority for the area.

Advice on the requirement for listed building consent, conservation area consent, building warrants, and other permissions/consents should be sought from local authorities.

Historic Scotland Inspectorate
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
EDINBURGH
EH9 1SH

Tel: 0131 668 8981 or 8717 Fax: 0131 668 8765

E-mail: hs.inspectorate@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Web: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Information and guidance on discrimination and human rights issues is available from:

Equality & Human Rights Commission Helpline Scotland
Freepost RRLL-GYLB-UJTA
The Optima Building
58 Robertson Street
GLASGOW
G2 8DU

Helpline tel: 0845 604 5510 or Helpline fax: 0845 604 5530

Helpline textphone: 0845 604 5520

E-mail: scotland@equalityhumanrights.com

Web: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Text: Crown copyright, Historic Scotland, 2009.

Images: Crown copyright, Historic Scotland, unless otherwise credited.

www.historicscotlandimages.gov.uk

Cover images

The portico of the Museum of Modern Art, Glasgow, where part of the plinth has been cut away to create ramped access in place of steps.

Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery, Glasgow. New high-quality handrails add both artistic interest and functional practicality to one of the main staircases.

Accessible entrance to the Perth Road Library, Dundee.