

A photograph of a person in a motorized wheelchair on a cobblestone street in a village. The wheelchair is grey and black with a purple seat and a green bag hanging from the handlebars. The street is paved with cobblestones and lined with traditional stone buildings. In the background, there are rolling green hills under a blue sky. The text 'Inclusive Volunteering in Museums:' is overlaid in large white font.

# Inclusive Volunteering in Museums:

Insights and Lessons Learned  
- A Reflection

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Should you have any questions about volunteering, please do not hesitate to contact Volunteer Centre Dorset on 01305 269214 or email [info@volunteeringdorset.org.uk](mailto:info@volunteeringdorset.org.uk)

“Act as if what you do makes a difference, it does.” - **William James**

# Introduction

## The Background

The “Inclusive Volunteering” Project was developed by Chloe Hixson, an Access Consultant with museum volunteering experience as well as lived experience of being a disabled person trying to work in the heritage sector. It was created in conjunction with Volunteer Centre Dorset, who are a charity operating across Dorset, with a passion for all things volunteering. Volunteer Centre Dorset helps volunteers find opportunities and organisations find volunteers and everything in between, including training, networking opportunities etc.



We knew that there were 30 accredited museums across Dorset that were either volunteer-led or use the services of volunteers. 23% of people of working age have some form of disability (according to the charity Scope), and yet disabled people make up only 4% of staff/volunteers in National Portfolio Organisations, according to the Arts Council. The heritage sector is therefore under-representing disabled people and has historically been unwelcoming.

The aim of the project was to identify barriers for disabled volunteers, by conducting access audits for partnering museums, and providing guidance on how to remove/reduce the impact of those barriers. This was because there was a clear lack of disabled volunteers and a heritage sector eager for more volunteers to operate successfully. Volunteer Centre Dorset was the perfect organisation to lead the project, as their remit is to promote and support volunteering across Dorset, and we wanted to match up a sector eager for volunteers (but struggling to be inclusive for disabled people) with a volunteer base that was looking for opportunities.

To date, the museums that have had access audits are Gold Hill Museum, Sherborne Museum, Blandford Town Museum, The Keep Military Museum, Portland Museum, and Purbeck Mining Museum. While the opportunity for an access audit for free was appealing to some, getting hold of museums to fill out the survey and thus be eligible for the access audit was challenging. The criteria changed last year when audits were offered to all museums, but still few museums took up the opportunity.

## Emerging Themes

Physical inaccessibility to a multi-level museum space is generally common. Four of the seven museums audited had multi-level accessibility issues. As many museums in Dorset are set in Listed Buildings, the ability to provide access to multiple floors is complicated. It is not impossible, as the Gold Hill Museum, Shire Hall Museum and Dorset Museum exemplify, however it does need funding (Shire Hall and Dorset both received large grants for refurbishment) and a nominated person who has the priority of championing this change. In a fully volunteer-led organisation, such as the Blandford Town Museum, it can be difficult to further this goal on an ongoing basis, as there are many other things that need attention, and there is likely to be a lack of volunteers willing to take up this cause.



It is also difficult for museums to know what they can and cannot do with a Listed Building, and Listed Building Officers can offer limited advice with regards to access. Museums could organise Historic Building training from the Centre for Accessible Environments for museums. They can also engage with other organisations or access consultants to carry out a tailored consultation.

While the inaccessibility issue continues, as there is no immediate fix for it, refreshing volunteer opportunities may be a better way to engage with more volunteers that cannot physically be on site. More community engagement-led roles that serve as a spotlight on community projects and interests would only benefit these museums.

Museums are in the right position to highlight and engage with the community on issues interesting them and bringing out collections that exemplify those interests. For example, local communities collecting COVID stories;

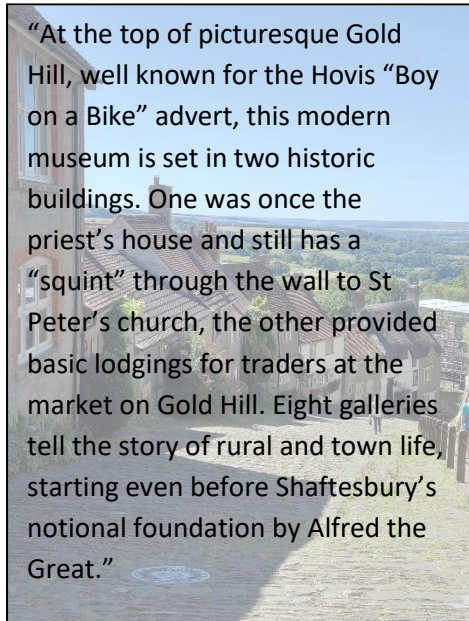
taking oral histories from people who want to talk about the community spirit during lockdowns, ways in which the communities stepped up (or did not) to help people that needed it is an example of collections other museums are engaging in. The museums are in a prime place to provide a platform or space for communities to share their experiences.

Additionally, lack of alternative formats for interpretation is still something that most museums experience. Blandford Town Museum is putting in Association of Independent Museums funding to provide their volunteers with Visual Awareness training, as well as creating a focus group of individuals with visual impairments to discuss what support they need that the museum can develop. This includes adding QR codes to displays so that visitors can engage with the interpretation panels and boosting their tactile offer. However, this isn't common for the sector, and does often require additional focus, time and potentially funding.

# Case Studies

## Case Study #1 – Gold Hill Museum

The most challenging case was that of Gold Hill Museum.



The accessibility within the museum is impressive; visitors and staff can access all floors of the museum, a rarity when it comes to museums in general (as illustrated by the audits), via a platform lift; the interpretation is at accessible heights, and they have alternative formats for their content. The inaccessibility of the museum comes from the approach; Gold Hill is well known for its cobblestone paving, which makes it hard for wheelchair tyres to grip and becomes slippery, as well as how steep the entire hill is. At the top, to use the step-free route, wheelchair users must travel down a side street which comes to a steep slope and wheelchair users must go back on themselves. The whole area is very unsafe for wheelchair users, and there are no handrails to support anyone who may be unstable on their feet. Any wheelchair users will not feel safe, as well as people with visual impairments.

However, this does not mean that disabled volunteers cannot engage with the museum. The recommendation is that the museum utilises external spaces to have volunteer gatherings and increases their remote volunteering offer. There are many areas that volunteers can develop within the heritage sector that does not require them to be physically on site. Heritage spaces are rapidly becoming spaces to push for cultural change. The National Museums Association is currently supporting museums “in tackling the climate and ecological crisis. We are working with museums to be bold and brave in raising awareness, championing change, and embedding climate action,”. Various new roles have recently been developed for volunteers within the partnering museums in the Wessex Museums Partnership, roles such as “Climate Change Volunteer”, “COVID in the Community Volunteer” and “Community Voices Volunteer”. These roles have been created to demonstrate that heritage work can be about engaging with the community on issues that are relevant within their communities, and that heritage involves a lot of varied roles.

Within these social engagement, issue-led roles, Gold Hill Museum could develop an accessibility group, which looks at working with the Council to improve physical access to Gold Hill. This could be a group that is supported by the trustees, who plans to action some change towards the inaccessibility of the hill. The inaccessibility is not something that is impossible to fix, as within the past ten years the Council has added new stairs to Gold Hill Museum’s side of the Town Hall.

It is recommended Gold Hill Museum develop their accessibility for people who are B/blind/Visually Impaired<sup>1</sup>, as unfortunately the entire museum is currently inaccessible for this community. There are no additional formats for visually impaired visitors, and only a small portion of the interpretation is accessible via touch.

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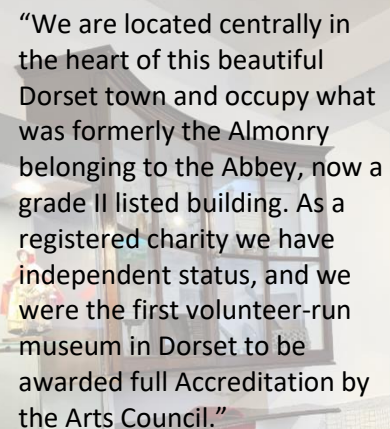
<sup>1</sup> Capitalisation of the “B” in Blind refers to the cultural identity of Blind people. While some prefer to have it capitalised, some do not, so both terms are used in this report to recognise that.

## Case Study #2 – Sherborne Museum

Sherborne Museum is another example of a museum that spans multiple levels with no lift to access the upper floors. In discussion with the director and through the access audit, we found that there are spaces where a platform lift could be installed – there is a room that is in one of the ground floor galleries that is the space of a platform lift. A feasibility study would be needed to find out if it is possible to put a lift here, but during the audit it was noted that there is potential for an internal platform lift, like the one in Gold Hill Museum. This case study exemplifies that while there is space for a lift, financial cost is still an issue.

As previously stated, while this is developing, the remote volunteering offer could be increased, although Sherborne Museum is looking for more Trustees and has specific roles it needs support with that could be done remotely. It is always important to ensure that, with remote volunteers, there is the opportunity to meet other volunteers during their time with the Museum, accessible volunteer coffee mornings, etc. In order to retain disabled volunteers, they must feel like that are a part of the volunteer community; invites to meet others in local coffee shops and other social events is important.

It would be great to see Sherborne Museum develop their alternative formats – such as large print guides, and audio interpretations for visually impaired or blind visitors. This would greatly improve their community engagement and encourage more volunteers to see they support people with visual and hearing impairments. It was impressive that they had an accessible WC, which was on the ground floor, as this is not always provided by museums (as evidence by the audits).



“We are located centrally in the heart of this beautiful Dorset town and occupy what was formerly the Almonry belonging to the Abbey, now a grade II listed building. As a registered charity we have independent status, and we were the first volunteer-run museum in Dorset to be awarded full Accreditation by the Arts Council.”

## Case Study #3 – Blandford Town Museum

“Caring for the past, informing the future. Making the prehistory, history, and cultural life of our community accessible to all, enriching the lives of residents, visitors and generations to come.”

Blandford Town Museum is also across two floors, and unfortunately their office space is inaccessible for wheelchair users. However, their volunteering offer fully utilises the entire ground floor space, as volunteers are not specifically encouraged to work in the office, as the space is small. For Blandford Town Museum, it is recommended that an external lift could be attached to the side of the building, as there is no space large enough

to accommodate an internal platform lift without losing office or storage space. Blandford Town Museum is looking for an additional site, so that could potentially be a more inclusive space.

As previously stated, they are applying for funding to improve their offer for visually impaired visitors and volunteers because of the findings of the Inclusive Volunteering project. Their project involves working with the local community to form a focus group of visually impaired volunteers, and consulting with them on what they need from the museum to be more accessible. This project, if it receives funding, will put Blandford Town Museum in a better position to make actual change towards becoming a more inclusive space. It would be good to see more museums engage in this type of work, as this could encourage volunteers.

## Insights and Lessons Learned



After conducting these audits, numerous themes and commonplace issues came through. Except for Gold Hill Museum, most museums had options of workspaces that could be used for volunteer work. If the volunteer had a physical disability, for example, there were other spaces within the museum that could be used. However, in a volunteer-led museum, where working in traditional museum roles (such as archives and collections) was required, these spaces were not accessible. Everyone being willing to help is a requirement; being there to support and collect objects needed is

important but to be constantly asking for help can be viewed by disabled people as their presence being a nuisance. Attitudes in these cases can make or break a volunteering opportunity for the disabled person. If a disabled volunteer is being treated differently already, these kinds of microaggressions from other volunteers will make the individual feel unwanted or feel like a burden.

This falls hand in hand with training, as even the museums that did engage with the training sessions had preconceived stereotypes or experiences with disabled people that came out during the audits. Additionally, a diverse range of volunteering roles could be used to bring in disabled volunteers who may not be able to immediately access some parts of a museum.

### Training

It became clear that while the training we did conduct was invaluable for the museums that participated, more training would have been helpful, as evidenced by the surveys and audits. In the audits, Chloe Hixson identified the areas that museums needed additional training for; all the museums audited expressed the need for more training, and it was advised to contact Volunteer Centre Dorset for this.

Ideally, it would be beneficial to offer an overarching museum-wide training session, with follow ups and even one training session/a series with each museum specifically. This should be done in person, as it was clear that some museums had previous experience with disabled people, or preconceived ideas and expectations of disabled people (and even of inclusion) that did not align with the experience the volunteer had. It is important to provide training but is also equally important to ensure that training is followed up with one-to-one support, to identify any unconscious biases, and that the training leads to individuals critically examining how they treat disabled people, subconsciously or otherwise.

Some of the museums expressed concerns they had about working with disabled volunteers because of a previous experience that they had with a disabled volunteer or staff member, and it would be important to have a discussion with them about those experiences; for example, it would be vital for the benefit of the museum and disabled volunteer to ensure that expectations matched, to avoid getting into a situation that was difficult for both volunteer and museum.

### **Volunteering roles and their diversity**

An important aspect of the project that we came across was improvements needing to be made to the range of volunteering roles available. Traditional archive work or collections work may not benefit disabled volunteers, as the archive may be inaccessible or the museum itself may not have accessible workspace on site. In this way, a range of diverse volunteering roles, which could be conducted remotely would be helpful. Volunteering roles do need to be varied and interesting for volunteers, and with disabled volunteers this provides a fantastic opportunity to be creative with the work the volunteer does. These roles should be discussed with the volunteer, and they should be encouraged to conduct work that they are passionate about. For example, a disabled volunteer may want to spearhead a campaign to make the museum more accessible (a potential role for someone at Gold Hill Museum), or they may want to work remotely on the newsletter (as at Sherborne Museum).

### **Lessons Learned**

If the project is to be re-created by other counties or organisations, potentially what would have worked more effectively would have been to use a sample of museums, between five and ten, to use as a pilot. Picking out a smaller group of museums to focus on may have been more effective in the long-term. Instead of trying to convince all 30 museums to fill out the survey, arrange the audits, and meet with the consultant, it might have been worth devoting more consistent time and energy into the ones that did respond first. For example, Sherborne, Gold Hill, Blandford Town Museum all responded to the survey very quickly, and it would have been more effective to engage deeper and more meaningfully with the museums that viewed the project as an opportunity.

In some cases, the museums said they would like to have the audit before their next trustee meeting, and those could have been made a priority. We could have gone even further with those museums; offered to come and discuss the findings at their trustee meetings, discuss options and next steps thoroughly with those museums already engaging. This could have led to more tactile change with those museums and led to other opportunities such as peer-to-peer support, and even pairing up museums for mentoring.

Conducting a pilot study of a smaller group of museums would also have tackled the institutional resistance we faced; many museums did not respond to the survey calls, or the access audit offers, but the pilot would have created evidence as to the value of the project, which would have enticed more museums to engage.

### **Institutional resistance**

The primary cause of the institutional resistance comes from physical inaccessibility. Many museums were eager to learn more about how to support volunteers with mental health issues, Neurodiverse volunteers, and volunteers with non-apparent disabilities, which is great to see. However, many museums fear that if they make improvements to accessibility in any way, they will be expected to fix all inaccessibility issues, and they do not have the funds to fix physical barriers. This is also compounded by not wanting to alter any physical barriers in case they do it “wrong”.

Many museums did not respond to the project at all, despite Chloe Hixson speaking at the Dorset Museums Association on multiple occasions to encourage participation. One museum stated they were not interested, another that they did not have the capacity, and these museums it should be noted were known to not engage with the South West Museums Development group or the Dorset Museums Association. In these cases, this resistance could have been because they may feel they will be challenged or criticised, or asked to do things they will not be able to carry out. While we did use the term “audit” for the accessibility audits because the audits were used as an incentive to



encourage filling out the survey and engaging with the project, using a different word could be useful for potential future projects. Despite the negative connotation, many museums did see it as a benefit. In this way, a smaller pilot project within Dorset might have helped tackle some institutional resistance.

It is important to recognise, additionally, that improving physical access to museums (which was identified as the top barrier in the survey responses) has been a long-term problem. The Equality Act (2010) has now been in place for over ten years, so the challenge of physical access has not appeared overnight. This has been a long-term challenge for museums, but this has become even harder for museums because of the cost-of-living crisis, and lack of financial support. There is no real funding to improve access to heritage spaces; this is because museums are expected to fund this themselves, by ring fencing money etc. The problem is that the support to achieve physical accessibility is lacking; museums, which are often in Listed Buildings, can struggle to find ways to improve physical access, and if access is not prioritised from a top-down, ring-fenced strategy there is no one to continue to further this priority along. In this way, having a smaller cohort of museums to engage with in more depth could have addressed this issue more effectively.

### Impact of COVID



Museums, especially volunteer-run museums, will have felt the impacts of COVID on their volunteers, their financial constraints, and their scope of engagement, so engaging with the project so close to the pandemic, may have felt another obstacle.

As well as the initial impact of museums having to close during the lockdowns, the longer-term impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt, particularly when it comes to volunteers. During the first lockdown, all individuals over the age of 70 were told they were vulnerable and had to shield, then being told only a few months later that they are no longer vulnerable and are ok to leave the house again. This has had an impact on the confidence of a lot of people and we have seen that many have chosen not to return to their pre-pandemic volunteering roles. In 2019/20 31% of people in the 65-74 age group volunteered at least once a month, this dropped to 22% in 2020/21 (stats from NCVO)

In addition to volunteers not feeling confident in returning to their volunteering roles, organisations have also felt hesitate about volunteers returning to their pre-pandemic duties. A lot of this is due to the messages in the news and social media that clinically extremely vulnerable individuals are more prone to catching Covid-19. Work needs to be done to help build confidence for both the volunteers and museums.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

The simple facts that have come out of this project are that museums want to be accessible, but funding is a big concern. Secondly, that museums don't know how to push accessibility as a cause within the Listed Building regulations. Finally, there is a fear of doing the wrong thing (and spending lots of money doing it), and volunteer-led museums struggle to have the capacity to further solutions on a consistent basis. Museums want to bring in more disabled volunteers, some view the prospect of disabled volunteers as the opportunity to bring in new voices, however, the institutional fear or uncertainty (especially within a COVID world), makes it more complicated.

The focus of the project has been on working on improving physical accessibility, because the surveys we conducted with the museums indicated that they viewed physical accessibility as their main barrier. Additionally, it is the more expensive problem to fix; physical inaccessibility requires more funding, more intervention and support from the local authorities.

While the funding for this project has come to an end, the learning that it has come out of the project will be carried on through Volunteer Centre Dorset and the engaged museums. Volunteer Centre Dorset is continuing to provide support, and their remit for engagement provides a lot of opportunities.

