

Establishing an inclusive steering committee

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Let's start with some definitions:

Inclusion: *the belief that all people should feel that they are included, even if they lack some advantages*

Access: *the opportunity or right to experience or make use of something*

Background

In Gosport, in 2010, we set up our Inclusion Group which worked alongside our Heritage Open Days (HODs) steering committee. Up to a dozen people, drawn from a wide range of disability and background, came together to consider access and inclusion. We advised and supported event organisers in trying to make improvements which would benefit not only disabled people but ALL people wishing to be involved in a HOD's event. In Gosport this has been really successful.

No two areas will be the same so you'll have to tailor things to best suit your local needs but here are some tips from us on establishing and running an inclusive steering committee.

Why have an inclusive steering committee

- Helps you reach a widening audience
- Makes use of local skills
- Puts good practice at the heart of HODs planning and management
- Encourages awareness of legislation under the Equalities Act

Who could be involved

If possible, try to get a cross-section of ability, culture and age. It's not essential for everyone to have an interest in heritage but it's helpful if most do.

- Local disabled people
- Local people drawn from community/culture groups
- Local Authority Access Officer (*can be a key advisor, with knowledge of access across a broad area*)

Where will you find members

- Local access group or other disability forums
- Community groups
- Volunteer centre
- Articles in local newspaper or specific newsletters/magazines

How to structure

- Regular meetings to discuss matters of access and inclusion
- Sub-groups to work on specific tasks
- If a separate inclusion focused group, nominate one or two people who will report to and from the main HOD's committee

Meeting needs

First things first: look after your members. With people drawn from a cross-section of the community, they may have some specific needs. This will also be true of visitors to your HODs events.

- Communicate with members in a format suitable to the individual (*eg large font, hard copy, audio etc*)
- Arrange sensible meeting times and duration (*people with disabilities may take longer to get ready in the morning so don't start meetings too early. Some people may not have the ability to cope with overly long meetings*)
- Help with transport/travel costs (*some may need a travel buddy or wheelchair accessible transport to get to meetings*)
- Choose accessible meeting venues (*consider ramped access, comfy seating and environment, good lighting and acoustics, induction loop, accessible toilets, availability of refreshments etc*)
- Interpretation (*perhaps BSL or other language interpretation*)
- Plan comfort breaks (*people with disabilities may need more of these*)
- ASK what people need and then try to provide it. Explain what you can and can't provide so people can make informed decisions (*eg if a BSL interpreter can't be funded, perhaps a deaf member may be able to bring their own supporter to sign for them*)

Matching skills

People may bring a wide range of skills to the table beyond their specific knowledge of a disability or culture. Make the most of these.

- Create a 'Skills Bank' by asking people to declare knowledge or expertise they are willing to offer up (*you may find skills with admin, IT, marketing or community networking etc that can be put to good use*)
- Share knowledge of disability/culture and specific needs amongst the group so that you all learn about more than your own field of experience (*your Access Officer can really help with this*)

What can an inclusive steering committee be doing

- Providing awareness training for event organisers
- Identifying or developing tool kits and documents that will help event organisers
- Arranging 'access audits' of an event venue or tour route (*to highlight good features and suggest how improvement could be made*)
- Producing information and notices for events (*perhaps in large print, Easy Read, Braille, foreign language translation, descriptive text, etc*)
- Advising on features which might be added to events to make them more attractive (*eg to family groups or people with learning difficulties*)
- Gathering local links/information/services which may be useful to organisers (*eg mobility equipment providers, translation services, access toolkits, free community papers, community transport, community organisations and clubs*)
- Advising on good practice in marketing and promotion (*using a range of formats and media, and by encouraging event organisers to describe their event well and include helpful information*)

How will you know if it's being effective?

You might see the effect in:

- Event organisers being more aware of equality law and how it relates to them
- Recognition of how small and inexpensive changes can make big differences to visitors
- Event organisers undertaking larger access projects for which they may need to source funding
- The style/content of some events changing (*perhaps to include object handling, activities for children, more sensory features like sound and smell*)
- Resources at event sites increasing (*maybe some seating, audio descriptions, tactile displays, large print and clear signage*)
- A wider range of visitors attending your events (*perhaps more young people on a tour which has traditionally attracted older visitors*)

- Increased satisfaction at events (*especially from under-represented groups who might previously have found events difficult to attend, understand or enjoy*)
- Wider funding opportunities (*your inclusive policy may open doors to more pots of money*)

Conclusion

If you get the right mix of people in your inclusion group and on your inclusive steering committee then they'll be your 'experts', advising on overcoming barriers to engagement and widening out your audience at HOD's events to truly include all sectors of your community.