

## Oxfordshire – the UK’s most accessible county?

The basis of any **successful accessibility strategy** is recognising that **access begins online** for the vast majority of people with access requirements. Providing **world class, trusted, objective access information** is the most effective way of **starting the journey towards access for all**. Signposting your welcome and commitment to inclusivity, independence and choice for disabled people.

**Imagine...** In today's society, it is generally accepted that **you can find information about what venues are open and when**, and even what I might be able to order when I am there. What is considerably **more difficult is to find out whether I can park my car, how I get to where I want to go, whether I can get through the entrance and if I can use the toilet**. These are of fundamental importance to a growing number of our population and, in working with AccessAble, **Oxford City Council has enabled this to be done accurately and consistently** across a significant proportion of the City Centre as well as to key community venues around the wider City area.

**Founded and developed by disabled people**, AccessAble views comprehensive accessibility information as key to ensuring that disabled people and their families do not face inequality. AccessAble produces Access Guides to places people want to go, both as local residents and visitors. **AccessAble now works with over 350 different organisations**, including 110 local authorities, 85 Universities and 60 Health Trusts across the UK and Ireland, having surveyed more than 125,000 different venues.

### The work undertaken to date

- The approach to develop a City-wide Access Guide was agreed and commissioned in May 2019 to survey and produce Access Guides to 300 venues across the City Centre
- Information to all venues is maintained through AccessAble's annual review programme, contacting each individual venue to identify changes and re-surveying where required.
- The Guides to the City sit alongside other local and national partners in Oxford – Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, Westgate Shopping Centre, Oxford Castle Quarter, Ashmolean, Next, M&S, Odeon, PictureHouse, OXSRAD, Skipton Building Society.
- Engagement events and a surveying workshop have been held with Council staff, Councillors and representatives from Healthwatch Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Transport and Access Group, Motor Neurone Disease Association, Age UK Oxfordshire and Oxford International Links.
- All 300 venues have been identified through a process of prioritisation alongside the Council.
- The Access Guide went 'live' in the summer of 2020.

### The Guides created

**Oxford City's Access Guide** supports the planning of any visit to a venue or space as they **describe each stage of that person's journey**: from the nearest car park, to the entrance and all the facilities and services available. The Access Guides **contain up to 1,000 pieces of information** and over 100 photos. **Every piece of data collected is factual (not a judgement or rating)**, crucially including measurements of key access features.

The AccessAble website and App are both **available for free**. They do not require the user to register or sign up, a particularly important feature – according to our user-engagement feedback – if someone has only recently acquired their condition.

The website and App enable the user to access an **Easy Read version** of any Detailed Access Guide for people with a Learning Disability. The Easy Read version focuses on the photographs and key details of a venue.

David Livermore – Director

Email: [David.livermore@AccessAble.co.uk](mailto:David.livermore@AccessAble.co.uk)

Users can also use the Access Symbols to **filter Access Guides by their own requirements**; so they can easily find the venues that are best suited for them. Furthermore, there is a search tool to look for key words within a Detailed Access Guide, such as ‘transfer space’, and save a guide to their favourites.

The website includes **Sign Language videos** for deaf or hearing-impaired people whose first language is BSL.

The AccessAble App is particularly **useful for wayfinding** when visiting somewhere for the first time. People can use it to check out the facilities in advance and then have that information with them when they arrive. The photographs give people reassurance, **lowering anxiety and giving confidence** that people are going in the right direction when navigating around.

There are **1.7 million people** who have used our Access Guides over the last 12 months alone. We have produced Access Guides to **150 Cities and Towns across the UK**. Our work with the Council has provided the **only pan-disability, detailed accessibility information in the City**, with over 300 venues and the High Street surveyed through trained surveyors using a dedicated accessibility template devised through engagement with more than 1,500 different groups and containing **more than 1,000 items of information** per venue.

“What I love about the AccessAble app and website is that it allows people, no matter what their disability, to be spontaneous - if you are in Oxford and you fancy going to the cinema, you can check whether you can access the venue just as easily as you can check what films are on. If you are choosing a restaurant, you can check the lighting levels and the hand rails in the toilet facilities just as easily as you check the menu. Adding Oxford to the AccessAble family shows that we are a city that welcomes everyone.”

Cllr Louise Upton, Oxford City Council

You can view the Oxford City Access Guide here; <https://www.accessable.co.uk/oxford>

## But what next...?

We match the Councils ambition, **for Oxford to understand, improve and be recognised for its accessibility to all**. We want to ensure that Oxford is able to share World class accessibility information that **sets a global standard that other cities aspire to**. We want to work in innovative ways with current and new partners to find a way to achieve those ambitions, so that **wherever you live or wherever you want to visit, you can get the information you need**.

We now have the opportunity to develop the programme further, building on the current Oxford City Guide to **create Guides across the County** – with a structure and process already in place, increasing the number of Guides and partners is straightforward and cost efficient. This would ensure that anyone living, working or visiting the County can do so independently through access to the highest standard of information available.

Using the Access Guides as a foundation – **the County has the opportunity to create a legacy of accessibility that surpasses all other areas** – to be a leader recognised for its inclusive approach.

David Livermore – Director

Email: [David.livermore@AccessAble.co.uk](mailto:David.livermore@AccessAble.co.uk)

The following three pillars set out a potential framework for an achievable vision

- **Inspire people to use our spaces**

**A comprehensive Guide to the whole County** – we would want to ensure that people feel inspired and empowered to make a decision about going to any part of the County. They are able to find the specific accessibility information they need to make that decision and can do so easily and with assurance that the information is accurate and up to date.

For this to happen we need to involve the wider partners across the County. Surveying and creating Access Guides for key venues and spaces across the County. This should provide a cross-section of all areas that we want to inspire people to make use of, whether that's making it a part of everyday life or to visit one of Oxford's many significant destinations.

- **Enable people to use our spaces**

**Improve insight and physical accessibility of spaces** - With the survey data created through our surveyors, we are able to provide the necessary insight into prioritising improvements from an independent and objective perspective, using building regulations, national best practice and intelligence gained through our engagement with more than 1,500 different disability groups across the UK. Reports are created for individual venues, but perhaps more significantly across an area, able to reflect the accessibility across a range of spaces in a City, Town, District, County, whilst also tracking that improvement on an annual basis. Our work in other areas looks to address some of these challenges before they happen – working with them to create an, 'Inclusive Design Guide' that sets out the principles and commitments of the organisation expected in the development of new spaces but also the refurbishment of existing venues.

- **Support people to use our spaces**

**Enhance the visitor experience** – Ensuring that staff in those venues are confident and comfortable in their engagement with disabled people, providing the all-important 'Welcome' we all want to feel when we visit a new place for the first time. A comprehensive, but easily accessible online training programme, specific to the 'Oxfordshire Welcome' and able to support staff through disability awareness could be undertaken for all businesses and organisations through a straightforward link and accessed online and through their phones or laptops.

**Celebration of achievement and promotion of accessibility** – From a mobile app, to window stickers in every venue with an Access Guide, QR codes, promotion to the 2 million current users of our Access Guides, through to targeted social media campaigns with our team of Access Champions and 50,000 social media followers – it is important that people are aware and celebrate all that has been achieved and can be achieved by the Council and its partners. We can use our experience working with national, regional and local partners across all sectors to amplify the work undertaken.