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Relating to those with disabilities, what does it mean for your church?

What is the Equality Act?

The Equality Act came into effect on the 1st October 2010 replacing most of the Disability Discrimination Act.

It combines a number of pieces of legislation relating to discrimination such as age, race, sexuality, gender,

disability, etc. and makes it unlawful to discriminate against disabled persons in connection with employment, the provision of goods, facilities and services, or the management of premises.

Why is the Act necessary?

Previous law on disability concentrated on employment issues rather than the broader issues of discrimination.

By making discrimination unlawful the Act aims at full inclusion of disabled persons in society.

Does it affect churches?

Yes. Duties under the Act are placed on 'service providers', which include churches and the service they provide for worship and wider activities either in the church or a church hall.

The Act applies to all church premises including clergy housing. The Equality Act 2010 bans unfair treatment and helps achieve equal opportunities in the work place and wider society.

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Is this just about wheelchair users?

No. The Act is about making activities accessible to everyone and covers many forms of disability such as hearing and visual impairment, reduced mobility, manual dexterity and learning disability.

So what do churches have to do?

Service providers have to take reasonable steps to change practice, policy, or procedure which makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for a disabled person to make use of its services.

Use of premises by a disabled person must be anticipated and not left until the situation arises.

It is important that all people are included in the provision of the service. For churches this could include considering access to the church, parts of the interior, use of WCs, noticeboards, churchyards and paths etc.

Service providers have a duty to have considered which physical features of a building inhibit use of services by disabled persons and should take reasonable adjustments to alter or remove a feature,

provide a way of avoiding it or provide a reasonable alternative method of making the service available.

There is also a duty to take reasonable steps to provide auxiliary aids, things that will enable better use of a service by disabled persons.

For example induction loops for hearing-aid users, handrails, or large-print service sheets.

Does the Equality Act over-ride planning legislation and the need for a faculty process?

No. You still need a faculty, or other consent, for works in the usual way. Likewise planning approval and building regulations will also be required where necessary.

Access Appraisals:

To identify what needs action, begin by undertaking an access appraisal which assesses various factors:

- Service-provision: What services do we provide and how and where do we provide them?
- Accessibility: What are the barriers to people wishing to use our services?

- Significance: How is the church (along with its fittings and furnishings) significant?
- Experience: What do disabled persons in the congregation or community feel would best respond to their needs?

Having considered and balanced these factors a list of priorities for action can be compiled forming an Access Plan.

Further information and help with assessing access:

Widening the Eye of the Needle published by the Church Buildings Council and available from Church House Bookshop priced at £16.99 (31 Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BN or Tel: 020 7799 4064) - <http://www.chbookshop.co.uk>

Documents and leaflets, audits and training available from Through the Roof (PO Box 353, Epsom KT18 5WS or Tel: 01372 749955) - <http://www.throughtheroof.org>





The Diocese of London has a model access audit form which can be downloaded here

<http://www.london.anglican.org/kb/provision-for-people-with-disabilities>

Access Statements:

An Access Statement provides information on the suitability of your buildings for people with a wide range of disabilities.

It is good practice to produce an access statement and to make it readily available so that visitors know what to expect.

Costs:

Lack of funds is not an excuse not to begin addressing access.

Having drawn up an Access Plan, it may be possible to phase works to a timetable taking into account finances and other objectives.

Meanwhile, actions of minimal expense can be achieved such as providing large print copies of service sheets and the reception of visitors at the door at times of service.

Welcoming disabled people:

It is important to think through what you are providing for disabled visitors.

Useful contacts:

- Centre for Accessible Environments
- Church Buildings Council, Church House, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3AZ
- Diocesan Office and Diocesan Advisory Committees - Some dioceses have disability officers
- Local Council for Voluntary Service or Community Council in your area
- Local Authority Access Officer
- Ministry among Deaf and Disabled People, Church House, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3AZ

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