

# **SAFFRON WALDEN MUSEUM / UTTLESFORD MUSEUM SERVICE**

ACCESS POLICY STATEMENT 2006 – 2011

## **ACCESS POLICY, PRESENT POSITION & FUTURE PLANS**

Uttlesford District Council  
Saffron Walden Museum Society

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this document is to update and expand the Saffron Walden Museum Access Policy and its related plans and practices. It is now necessary to consider all forms of barriers to access, both in the light of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), and in preparation for a grant application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for a new resource centre for collections, to be named the Heritage Quest Centre.

## **2. POLICY OBJECTIVES**

1. The Access Policy aims to fulfil the museum's mission to give: "a sense of place in the present and an inspiration for the future."
2. The key policy objective for access remains "to make the heritage of North West Essex accessible to all" including both residents of Uttlesford and visitors to the district. (Source: Access/Mission Statement 1995)
3. There is a commitment to providing a safe and welcoming environment that is user-friendly and 'barrier-free' as far as listed building status and financial resources allow.
4. The museum seeks to identify and overcome actual and perceived barriers to users of its services, whether physical, sensory, intellectual, social, cultural, financial or attitudinal in origin.
5. There is an assumption that all users of the museum service will be treated with equal respect and sensitivity, and that there should be a culture of social inclusion.
6. Access provision should be reviewed continuously. Improvements are to be built into the Forward Plan and Annual Service Plan as staffing and budgets permit.
7. The Access Policy should be revised at intervals of not more than five years.
8. The Access Policy has been adopted by Uttlesford District Council and Saffron Walden Museum Society in [TBC] 2006.

## **3. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES**

The Access Policy aims to provide equal opportunities for everyone to enjoy the Museum's collections, exhibitions, events and services regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, social background, religion or ability. This complies

with the Uttlesford District Council (UDC) Equal Opportunities Policy in all its facets, both in relation to visitors and to staff, including access to employment and to volunteer opportunities.

#### **4. DISABILITY**

It is assumed that improvements to access for disabled people are likely to be of benefit to all users.

The 'social model' of disability, rather than the 'medical model', is the Museum's accepted definition. This can be summarised: 'society' creates barriers to access that should be removed, rather than an individual's 'medical' condition preventing their access to services.

Within the present staff and group of 40+ volunteers, many of whom are retired, there are a number of people who would describe themselves as 'disabled'. Their experience includes limited mobility, strength and dexterity, impaired hearing and sight, and learning difficulties.

The present staff consists of 4 full-time + 8 part-time = 6.8 full-time-equivalent. One full-time staff member has a part-time support worker.

#### **5. TRAINING AND AWARENESS**

1. All UDC employees receive equal opportunities training.
2. Museum staff also attend disability equality and disability awareness seminars, such as 'Welcome All' run by the East Anglian Tourist Board.
3. Some staff have received training in deaf awareness and provision for visitors with visual impairment. The Visitor Services Officer has some knowledge of British Sign Language and finger spelling used by deaf and deaf-blind people.
4. The Museum is aware that building access must be matched by appropriate egress. All staff are trained in emergency evacuation.
5. Volunteers have received formal and/or informal training in disability etiquette and customer care.
6. The Museum is a long-standing member of MAGDA (Museums and Galleries Disability Association), which provides current thinking on access issues and best practice.

## **6. RESPONSIBILITY FOR ACCESS**

Access considerations are primarily the responsibility of the Curator, Visitor Services Officer and Education Officer, but all museum colleagues and volunteers are involved in maintaining and improving access.

This process is supported by all stakeholders and by both governing bodies: Uttlesford District Council and Saffron Walden Museum Society.

## **7. SAFEGUARDS**

Access provision has to be balanced against the need to preserve the integrity and security of the collections and buildings, which are safeguarded by policies and procedures Acquisition and Disposal, Collections Management, Conservation, and Health & Safety.

All museum staff may at times work with children, young people and vulnerable adults. Consequently all staff have had Criminal Records Bureau checks.

## **8. CONSULTATION AND MONITORING**

Access developments are made in consultation with stakeholders and service users, including specialist input from the Uttlesford Access Group, Saffron Sight, and Hearing Help (formerly Camtad.)

Visitor surveys help to identify access needs, and consistently show high levels of visitor satisfaction and return visits.

## **9. QUALITY OF LIFE**

The museum's Access Policy is underpinned by the Uttlesford District Council Quality of Life priorities:

- Protecting and enhancing the character of the district
- Promoting tourism, culture and leisure opportunities
- Improving access to value-for-money services
- Supporting life-long learning and opportunities for young people

## **10. BEST PRACTICE**

Best practice in access is sought in every aspect of the Museum's services. 'Universal design' (access for all) principles are applied as permanent galleries are upgraded and as temporary exhibitions are prepared.

The Museum has previously won a Gulbenkian award for Best Provision for Disabled Visitors, and received a similar award from the Uttlesford Access Group. The quality of the Museum's services has also been recognised by a Gulbenkian prize for Best Publication (a local history activity guide praised for its "holistic approach") and a Museum of the Year award for Best Museum of Social History (based on 'Feeling Good' – a hands-on exhibition designed for visually impaired visitors.)

## **11. BUILDINGS AND GROUNDS**

Saffron Walden Museum (1835) is a grade 2 listed building on two floors. Although the interior is welcoming and non-imposing, the frontage is rather formal. The Museum is approached by a 100-yard drive sloping uphill from the main gate and shared by cars and pedestrians. Within the enclosed grounds (approximately 2 acres) there is a small car parking area in front of the museum, a workshop used to store display cases, freezers and tools, and the ruins of Walden Castle. The meadow setting is safe and pleasant and suitable for picnics and outdoor events, but it is not level and there are no footpaths through the grass. Improved pedestrian access to the Museum and Castle is under consideration, with improved interpretation of the Castle site, as part of the long-term Forward Plan 2006.

Beside the entrance gates, also within the conservation area, there is a single storey converted school built in 1816. This houses the Museum's education room, conservation laboratory and a store for part of the social history reserve collections.

There is a separate off-site store in a small, isolated, council-owned warehouse, 3.5 miles from the Museum. It is used for larger items and for less sensitive reserve collections. This was a temporary expedient when previous storage premises had to be vacated at short notice in 1994/95.

It is not open to the public but can be visited by academic researchers accompanied by staff. The building has flooded three times in the last five years. As a store it is unsatisfactory in many aspects, including capacity, construction, security, environmental control, access and basic facilities.

## **12. ACCESS AUDITS**

- An access audit (excluding the off-site store) was carried out in 1995 by the Joint Mobility Unit. Recommendations were made for a phased programme of access improvements.
- A similar audit was conducted in 2005 by the UDC Building Surveyors department and the secretary of the Uttlesford Access Group. This checked for DDA compliance and wider access provision

- A joint VAQAS inspection (Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Service) is proposed with nearby Bridge End Garden when Tourism and Uttlesford Museum Service budgets allow.

### **13. ACCESS ASSETS**

1. Saffron Walden Museum is one of the oldest purpose-built public museums in the country. The site is a scheduled ancient monument with 12<sup>th</sup> century Norman castle ruins in the grounds.
2. This “friendly, family-size museum” seeks to offer an experience that is both enjoyable and educational.
3. The Museum’s remarkably fine and varied collections are its greatest strength with ‘something-for-everyone’ and for all ages.
4. As well as permanent displays there is a regular programme of special exhibitions and events to interest different audiences.
5. Objects are shown at appropriate heights, with a gradual upgrading towards non-academic, multi-layered interpretation.
6. There is a small staff with a wide range of expertise, and a commitment to access in its widest sense.
7. Thanks to a team of 30-40 welcome desk volunteers, the Museum is open 363 days a year.
8. The Museum provides a widely respected, popular and active education service for schools and public. Formal and informal life-long learning ranges from pre-school (Museum Minis) to pensioners (reminiscence boxes). Different pathways to learning are adopted to provide access to information for all levels of ability.
9. The Museum is popular with schools that have children with special needs and they are frequent visitors.

### **14. PHYSICAL, SENSORY AND INTELLECTUAL ACCESS**

Within the constraints of a ‘heritage’ building, many barriers to access have been addressed in the last 20 years. This has mainly been financed by the ‘Great Hall Appeal, launched in 1985, plus grants, donations and fund-raising community events. Initially work concentrated on removing physical barriers for disabled visitors within the public spaces. All the displays can now be reached

by wheelchair users, apart from two small areas on raised platforms. Attention is now focussed on improving sensory and intellectual 'access for all'.

**Access facilities for visitors now include:**

1. Dedicated parking space for disabled visitors.
2. Ramps to the Museum front door and the schoolroom door.
3. New/improved handrails to entrances.
4. Two wheelchairs for visitor use.
5. Low level counter at the welcome desk.
6. Sound loops at the welcome desk, lecture area and school room.
7. Varied seating around the Museum for visitors to rest.
8. A refurbished lift and balcony in the Museum's 'Great Hall' created access to the first floor for less mobile visitors and for families with pushchairs.
9. EVAC chair for emergency egress or in case of lift failure.
10. Handrails to both sides of the main staircase.
11. Two stair-lifts to mezzanine floors.
12. Male and Female WCs and Unisex Accessible WC with baby-changing facilities. The adapted WC was re-sited and upgraded in 2005/2006.
13. Different learning styles are considered, as outlined in 'Inspiring Learning for All', to aid visitors' enjoyment of the collections.
14. There is an ongoing programme of re-labelling throughout the galleries to improve intellectual and sensory access. New labels and graphics are in large, clear print and in clear, non-academic language, with appropriate illustrations and diagrams to aid interpretation.
15. There are hand-held copies of labels where object labels are placed at a low height and/or where lighting levels are low for conservation requirements.

16. Colour contrasts and improved signage to assist 'navigation' around the Museum. However, consultation with Saffron Sight concluded that an audio guide would not be helpful in the complex layout of galleries.
17. Guide dogs, hearing dogs and Assistance dogs are welcome. There is a dogs' water bowl.
18. Open-access touchable objects in exhibitions wherever possible.
19. Items about the Museum in the Saffron Walden Talking Newspaper.

## **15. ACCESS TO INFORMATION**

The Museum's policy is to produce all its display texts and publicity material using clear language in easy to read formats.

1. There are short guides to the Museum in large print English and several languages for overseas visitors. Some have been produced by students at the local English Language school.
2. The Museum's website sits within the Uttlesford District Council (UDC) website. This is a 'first-generation' website and offers scope to be made more user-friendly. It has some access features such as scaleable text, automatic translation into foreign languages and Browsealoud.
3. The Museum pages aim is to make the text easy to understand with logical, easy-to-follow links. To comply with website accessibility guidelines it will be necessary to rebuild the UDC site.
4. The Museum is mindful of rapidly changing IT and mobile phone functions, which may revolutionise future access to information.

## **16. ACCESS BARRIERS**

While physical access within the Museum's public spaces is now considered to be 'good', the work-spaces present problems. Staff, volunteers and researchers face difficulties in access to and within offices, laboratory, workshop and stores, which are squeezed into 'inaccessible' areas of the buildings. The main reserve collections can only be reached by steep and narrow stairs.

The (temporary) off-site store presents particular access barriers. Collections are on two levels but there is no lift and there is poor emergency exit provision following flooding. Basic WC facilities are available only in the nearby Depot Offices during Depot working hours.



## **17. SOLUTIONS**

It is intended that many of the behind-the-scenes barriers will be overcome by the proposed Heritage Quest Centre (HQC). In this new centre 'best practice' in access, layout and design will be literally built in.

As a result the HQC will improve both access to and care of the collections as well as providing a base for an outreach programme to new audiences. The project also provides for the appointment for 3 years of a Collections Officer, whose role will include creating searchable computer databases. Thus the HQC will also greatly improve access to the reserve collections particularly for students, researchers and special interest groups.

## **18. SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND FINANCIAL ACCESS FACTORS**

1. Population data for Uttlesford district reveals a largely affluent community, but there are pockets of deprivation, especially in rural areas with historically low agricultural incomes.
2. There are significant numbers of residents of retirement age.
3. The Museum entrance charges (since 1989) are: Adults £1; Discounts 50p; Children 18 and under Free; Annual season tickets £3 / £1.50.
4. These charges are considered to be modest and good value for money by visitors, and there are high satisfaction and return visit rates.
5. However, entry charges are seen as a deterrent to would-be visitors, including those on low incomes, and to traditional 'non-visitors' with low expectations of museums in general.
6. To address these actual and perceived barriers the Museum offers a number of free events and 'heritage' days, 2-for-1 promotions, and family holiday activities at no additional cost.
7. The charging policy is reconsidered by the council at intervals.
8. A preference for a return to free entry is balanced against a requirement for income generation.
9. School visits for taught sessions with the Education Officer are competitively priced at £2 per child (free for teachers and other accompanying adults.)

10. It is the policy of the Museum's small shop to offer a variety of low cost items affordable by children in school parties, who form the majority of the shop's customers.

## **19. YOUNG PEOPLE**

A high proportion of young people leave the Uttlesford area to pursue higher education. Among those who remain in the district there are limited opportunities for employment. It is planned to engage a small number of 'hard to employ' young people in the collections packing and moving stages of the Heritage Quest Centre (HQC) project.

Young people are not an easy audience to attract to museums, but recent successes have included: 'Snakes and Spiders' handling sessions, a Napoleonic Wars encampment in the grounds, North American Indian dancers and storyteller, and David Beckham's football boots on display in the 'Shoe Show'. The Heritage Quest Centre project has identified young people (16-29) as a target audience (see 21 below).

## **20. DIVERSITY**

Historically there has been little evidence of cultural diversity within the local community, although the position is changing markedly as the area develops. For example, a new Polish club is planned. Black and minority ethnic groups are under-represented in the local population. The Museum uses its fine ethnographic collections to raise cultural awareness, such as the exhibition 'Silk, Cotton, Fur: The Fabric of Chinese Family Life' in 2005/6.

## **21. AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT**

The Museum received an Audience Development grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2004 as a preliminary to the Heritage Quest Centre (HQC) application. Consultants were appointed who consolidated new and existing visitor and non-visitor information. Future focus will be concentrated on:

- **Family learners**
- **Young people 16-29 years old**
- **Rural communities**

The marketing plan aims to make the best use of a limited budget. The mix of permanent displays, regular special exhibitions and events, coupled with the charging structure, aims to maximise visitor numbers and satisfaction, and to attract new audiences.

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There is an existing loyal core of family visitors, which grows as more family-friendly elements are introduced into the Museum's programme e.g.: additional days of holiday activities and pre-school age sessions.

Young people are usually considered as hard-to-reach 'non-traditional' visitors. However, this group includes a number of 'intending' visitors who are 'time-poor' but well disposed to the Museum.

Some identified barriers to access lay beyond the Museum's powers to influence, such as poor public transport in rural areas. However, alternative means of service provision may be found in future to address such barriers.

It is intended that the Heritage Quest Centre project will appoint an Outreach Officer for 3 years to extend Museum provision to non-traditional visitors, including taking the Museum service out into the community and into outlying non-traditional venues.

*Maureen Evans, Visitor Services, Saffron Walden Museum, April 2006*