
State of Museum Access 2016

A survey of UK museum website access information for blind and partially sighted visitors



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Introduction

Museum access starts online

There are many examples across the UK of museums, galleries and heritage sites welcoming and providing good opportunities for blind and partially sighted and other disabled visitors to experience their venue and collections. There is evidence that museums in general are considered to have ‘good’ accessibility for disabled people, compared to other categories of public building.¹ However, as this report indicates, many museums appear to take no steps to welcome, or provide access information for disabled visitors, and in particular, blind and partially sighted people.

Following the social model of disability, a person is disabled through the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal basis with others due to physical, sensory, intellectual, attitudinal or other barriers. Therefore access – in the museum context – is the combined means by which the venue helps address such barriers, through information, resources and assistance.²

There are 11.9 million disabled people in the UK. That’s around 19% of the population, nearly 1 in 5 people.³ Around 2 million people in the UK have a visual impairment. That is 3% of the population, around 1 in 32 people. These figures will increase with population ageing, and by 2050 the number with a visual impairment will have doubled, to 4 million people.⁴

Together with disabled visitors from abroad, and families with young children who would also benefit, this represents a significant proportion of a museum’s potential visitors. Exclude them, and a museum risks losing the associated revenue and reputation that brings in more visitors. In some cases, the museum or heritage site may even be in breach of the Equality Act 2010.⁵

At VocalEyes, we believe that blind and partially sighted people should have the best opportunities to experience and enjoy art and heritage, equal to the rest of the population. We know that this belief is far from being realised. There is evidence of an ‘attendance gap’ at arts venues, museums and heritage sites between non-disabled people and disabled people.⁶

To investigate what might be contributing to this, we undertook a survey of the access information provided on the websites of 1700 UK museums,⁷ covering access to the venue (directions or description of how to get to the venue; welcoming disabled visitors and guide/assistance dogs) and access resources within the venue (Large Print (Arial 16pt or larger); tactile maps; braille; audio described tours and guides).

The audit was quantitative, recording the presence or absence of information, and did not judge the quality of that information, or the resources or programmes described within. Accessibility features of the websites, and other marketing materials and publications produced by the museums were also outside the scope of the audit.

It is possible that some of the museums surveyed have good or excellent access resources at their venue, but that they are not showcased on the website. This may particularly be the case among local authority museums, which we recognise can have little control over their websites and other digital communications. We fully back the call to councils to give museums more independence in engaging with online audiences, not least to ensure that disabled visitors are provided with access information.⁸

Taking an audience-centred approach, we have presented the findings on the premise that if information about access resources and programmes is not available online, then those resources and programmes may as well not exist. Lack of access information lowers people's confidence that barriers to access will be addressed at the venue itself, and often leads to non-visiting.

'Disabled audience's patterns of engagement are largely dictated by practical factors which, unaddressed, can become barriers. Negative experiences of these practical issues can create a vicious circle which further depresses demand.' Equality and diversity within the arts and cultural sector in England (Arts Council England, 2014)

A disabled person considering a visit to a museum may have been prompted to do so by a review, personal recommendation, leaflet or email, but they – or a companion – will almost certainly check the museum's website as part of their decision and planning process.⁹ In the absence of useful information many will not make the visit, and will feel excluded from the museum's target audience.¹⁰

To accompany this report we have published **Museum Access Information Guidelines**, to support museums in creating or improving their access information. If you work at a museum, check whether your website includes access information, and whether it is welcoming, accurate and up to date. Send the team responsible this report and the guidelines, and help close the attendance gap.

Matthew Cock
Chief Executive, VocalEyes

The Report

Access information

- 27% of UK museums have no access information on their website.
- A further 43% have access information, but do not mention provision of any type for blind and partially sighted people.
- This leaves only 3 in 10 museums that provide access information online for blind and partially sighted visitors.¹¹

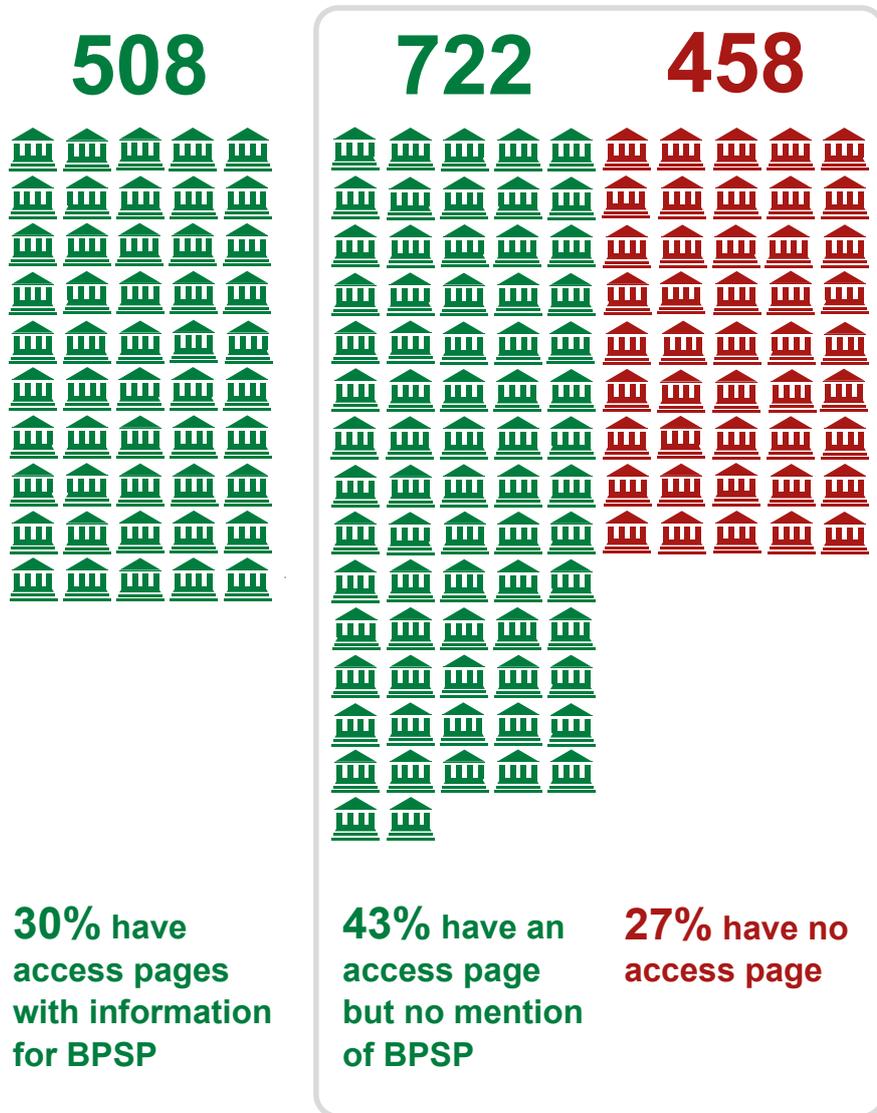
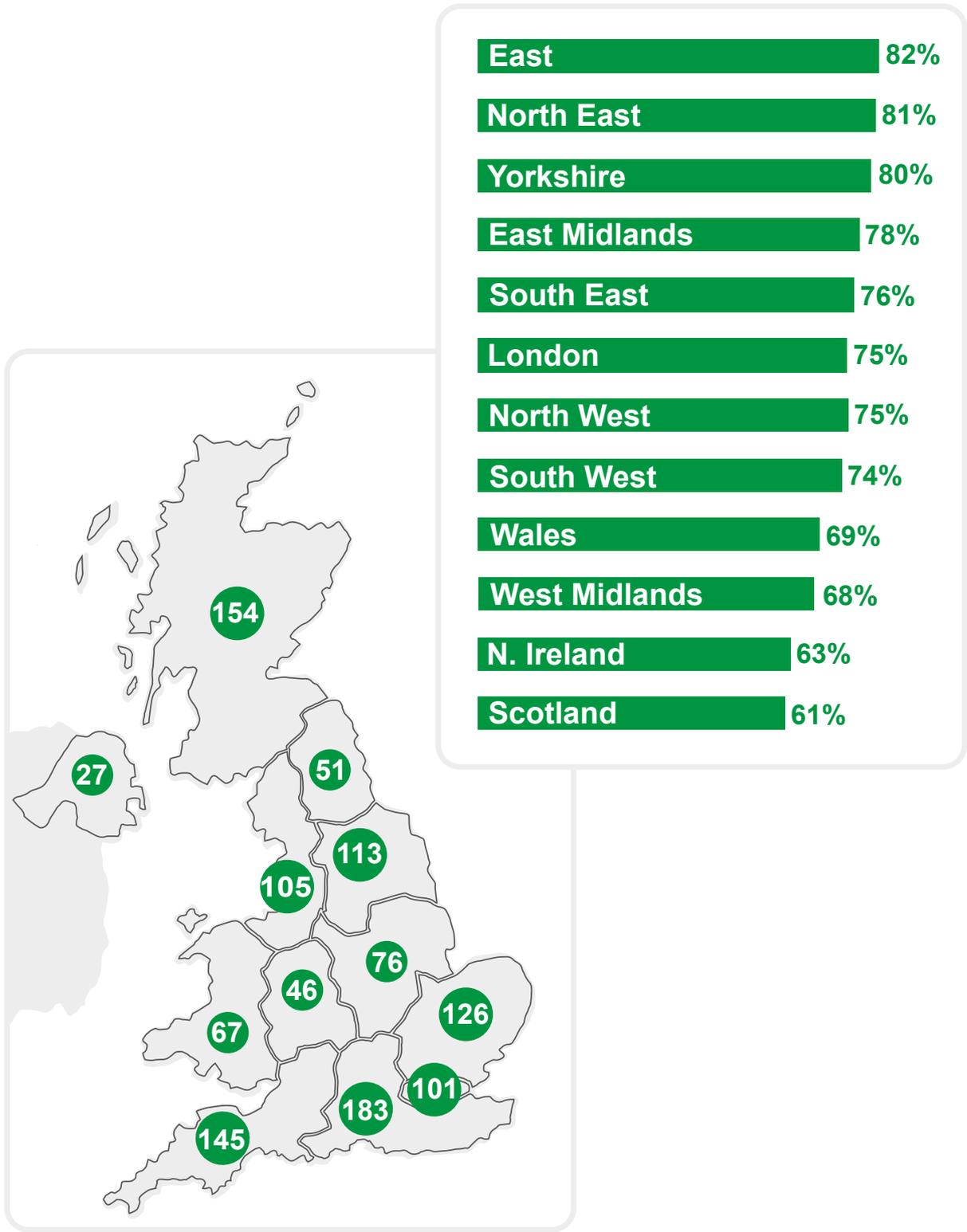
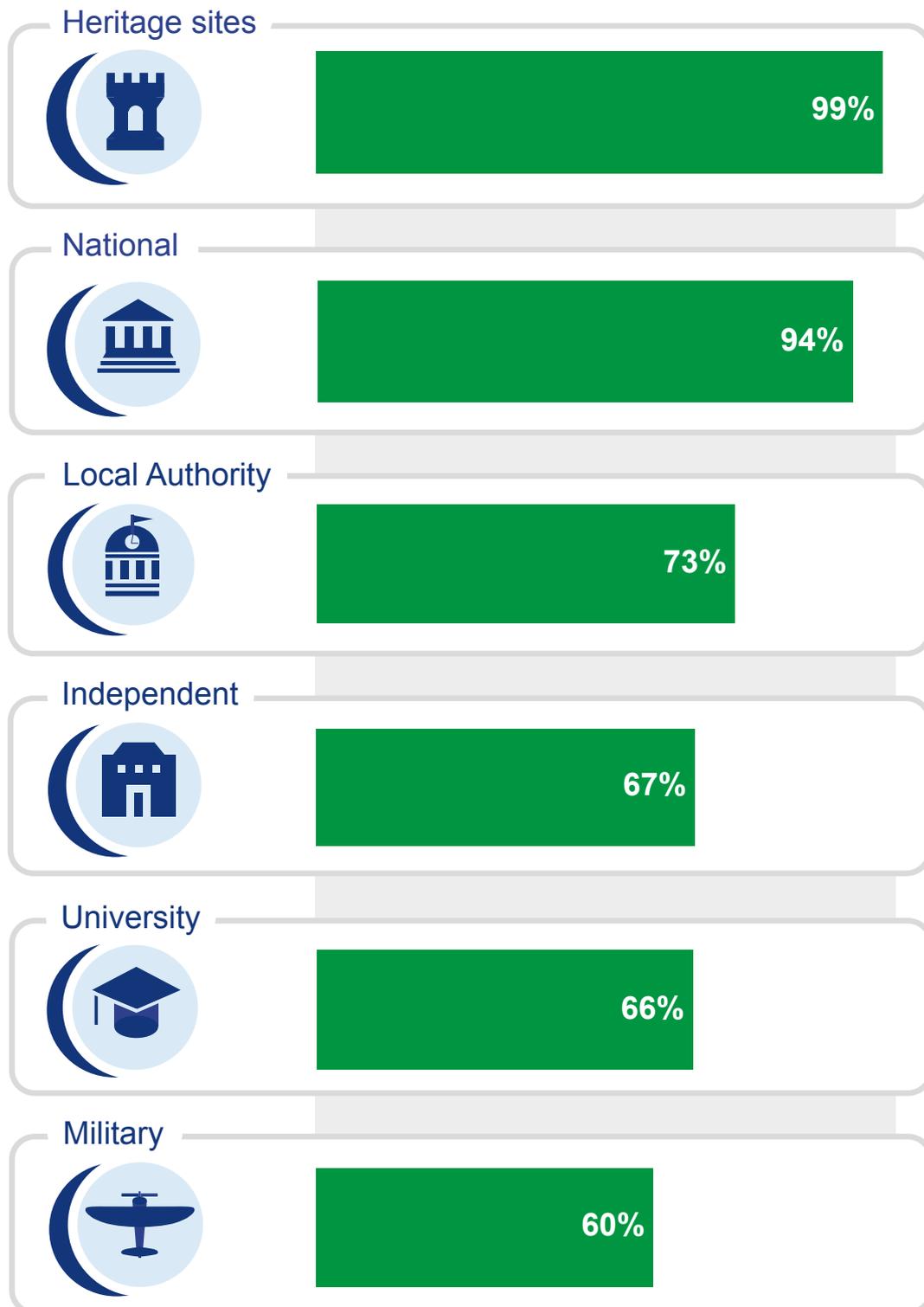


Figure A : Number and proportion of UK museums with access information (by nation / region) [see table A page 17](#)



**Figure B : Proportion of UK Museums with access information
(by type) [see table B page 17](#)**



Providing a welcome

The access information provided on museum websites ranges from a few lines of text to detailed information in multiple formats relevant to a wide range of people.

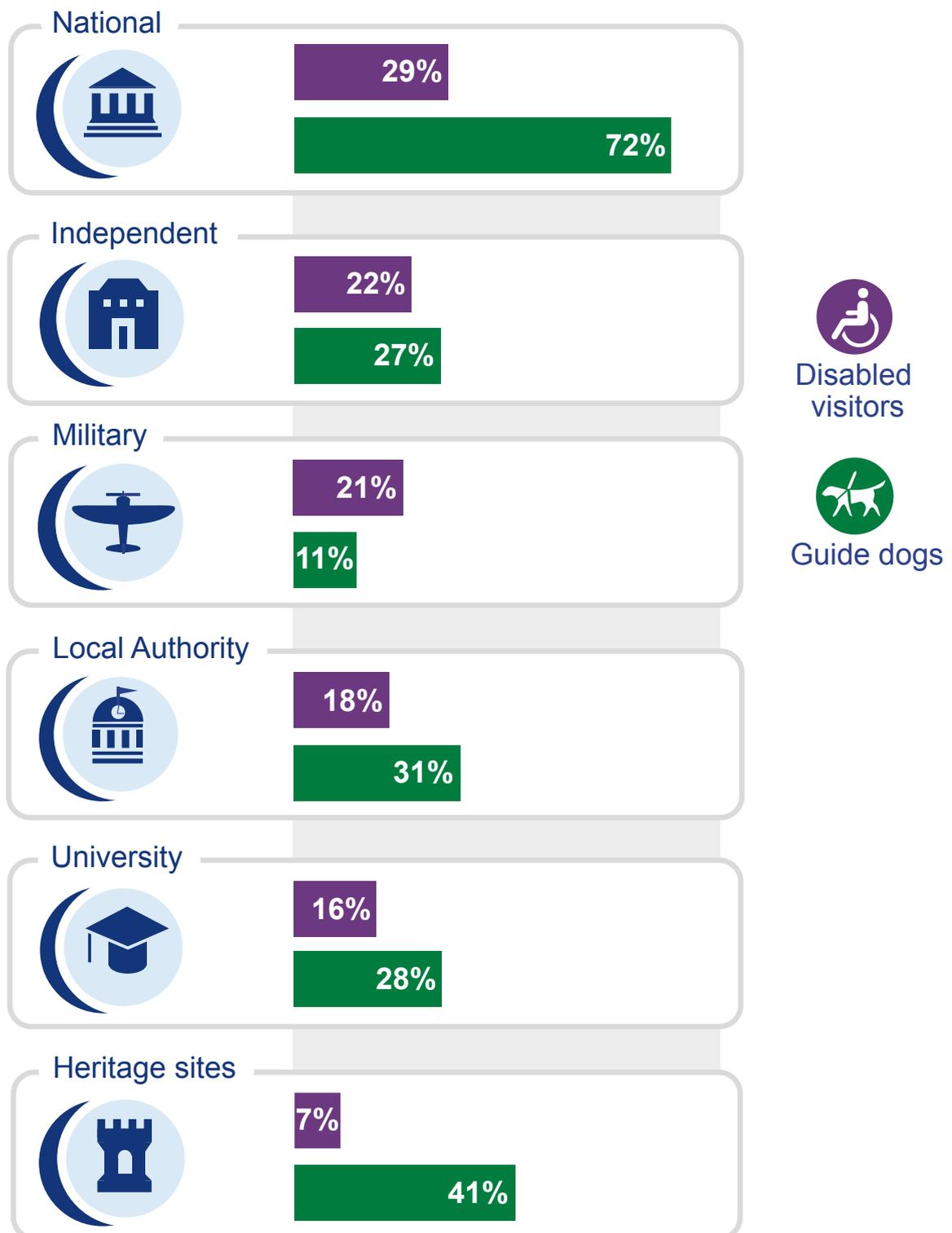
Many museum websites simply included stock phrases, such as ‘Our museum is fully accessible’ or ‘Guide dogs are welcome’. Many museums which welcomed guide dogs did not provide additional information that would be useful for blind and partially sighted visitors themselves. For every guide dog owner in the UK, there are around 75 people registered blind or partially sighted who do not have a guide dog.¹⁰

We also recorded the presence or absence of a welcome to disabled people. Many museum access pages are written in formal and quasi-legalistic terminology, headed ‘Access Statement’ or ‘Access Policy’. An access statement or policy is part of an internal process; the organisation talking to itself. As we recommend in our Guidelines, access information for visitors should include an opening statement of welcome to disabled visitors; this sends a clear positive message that the organisation is considering people and not simply the barriers that their venue presents and their potential liability for them.

Our survey revealed that while 35% of UK museum websites welcome guide dogs, only 18% made a statement welcoming disabled people.

These figures make for disappointing reading. Of course, both should be far higher, but the comparison highlights the lack of focus on disabled people themselves.

Figure C : Proportion of UK museums that welcome disabled visitors and guide dogs on their website (by type) [see table C page 18](#)



Access contact

An important part of providing access to a museum is supporting individual visitors who may have specific questions, or need to ask for personal assistance during their visit. In the Guidelines that accompany this report we recommend that, alongside comprehensive access information, museums should provide a dedicated point of contact for access-related queries and bookings.

5% of museum websites provided a named access contact or access@ email address.

Directions and orientation

Details of how to get to the venue from the nearest public transport stations and stops are invaluable, e.g. stations, bus stops etc., are invaluable to blind and partially sighted people planning an independent visit. Our Guidelines cover the writing of descriptive directions from transport links right up to the information desk. A description of the venue, both the façade and general layout of the galleries and facilities, is very useful for blind and partially sighted visitors; to help with the journey there, and general orientation.

30% of museum websites provided some directions or description of their venue within their access information, though the majority of these are written specifically with wheelchair users in mind.

Resources for blind and partially sighted people

We recorded whether each website offered information about services or resources support a blind and partially sighted person's visit to the museum, and particularly for accessing objects and gallery interpretation.

- 31% of museums that welcomed guide dogs offered additional support for guide dog owners, such as provision of water / bowls or a spending area.
- 18% of museum websites mentioned Large Print labels / guides.
- 9% of museum websites mentioned braille labels / guides.
- 10% of museum websites mentioned live AD tours / handling sessions.
- 6% of museum websites mentioned recorded AD guides.*

* Audio Description (AD) is the verbal description of the visual elements of art, architecture or media. In a museum context, this may be delivered live, by a trained audio description guide, or recorded and made available through a hand-held device or online.

Figure D(1) : Resources for blind and partially sighted visitors
 (by nation / region) [see table D page 18](#)

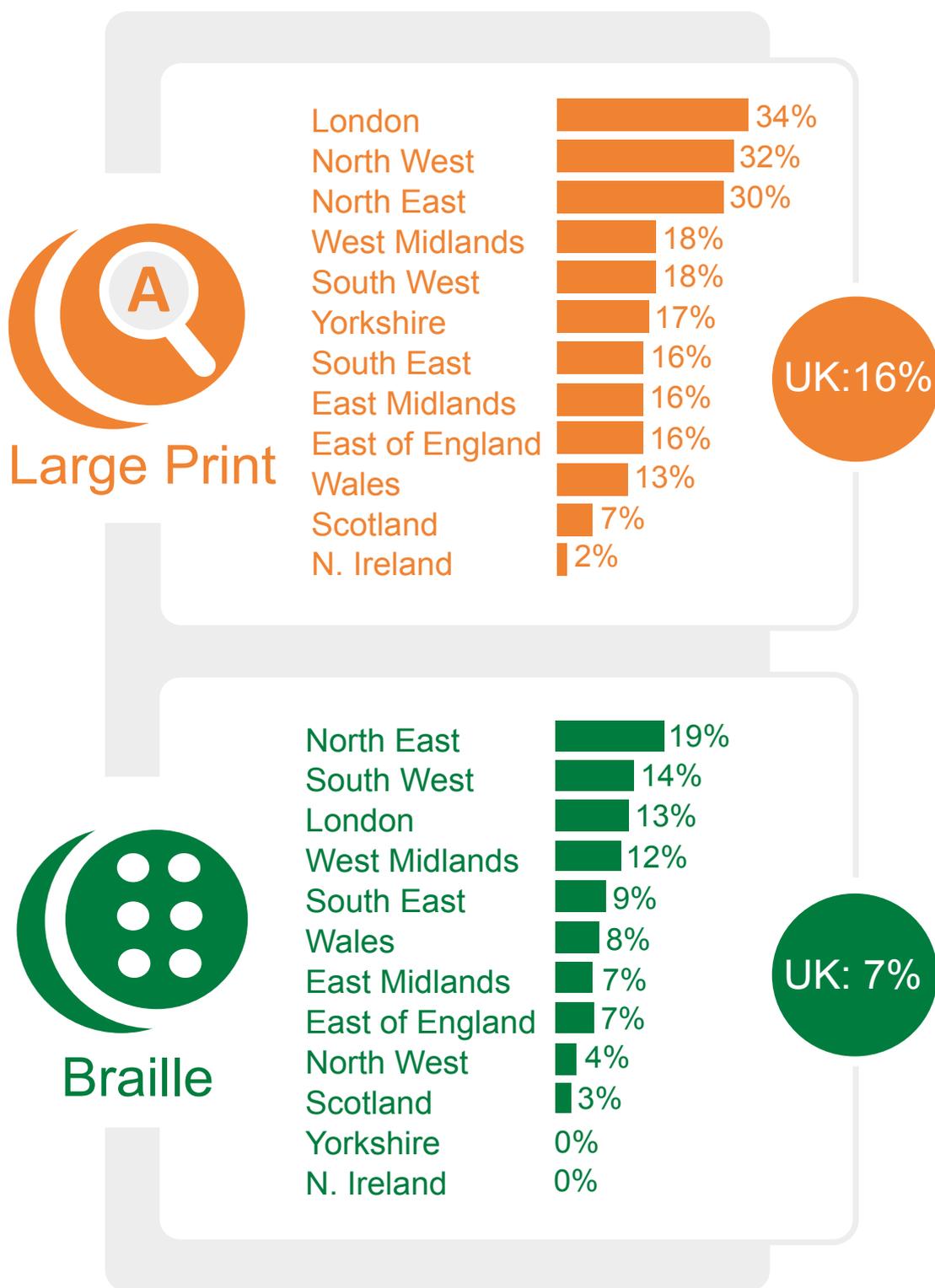


Figure D(2) : Resources for blind and partially sighted visitors
 (by nation / region) [see table D page 18](#)

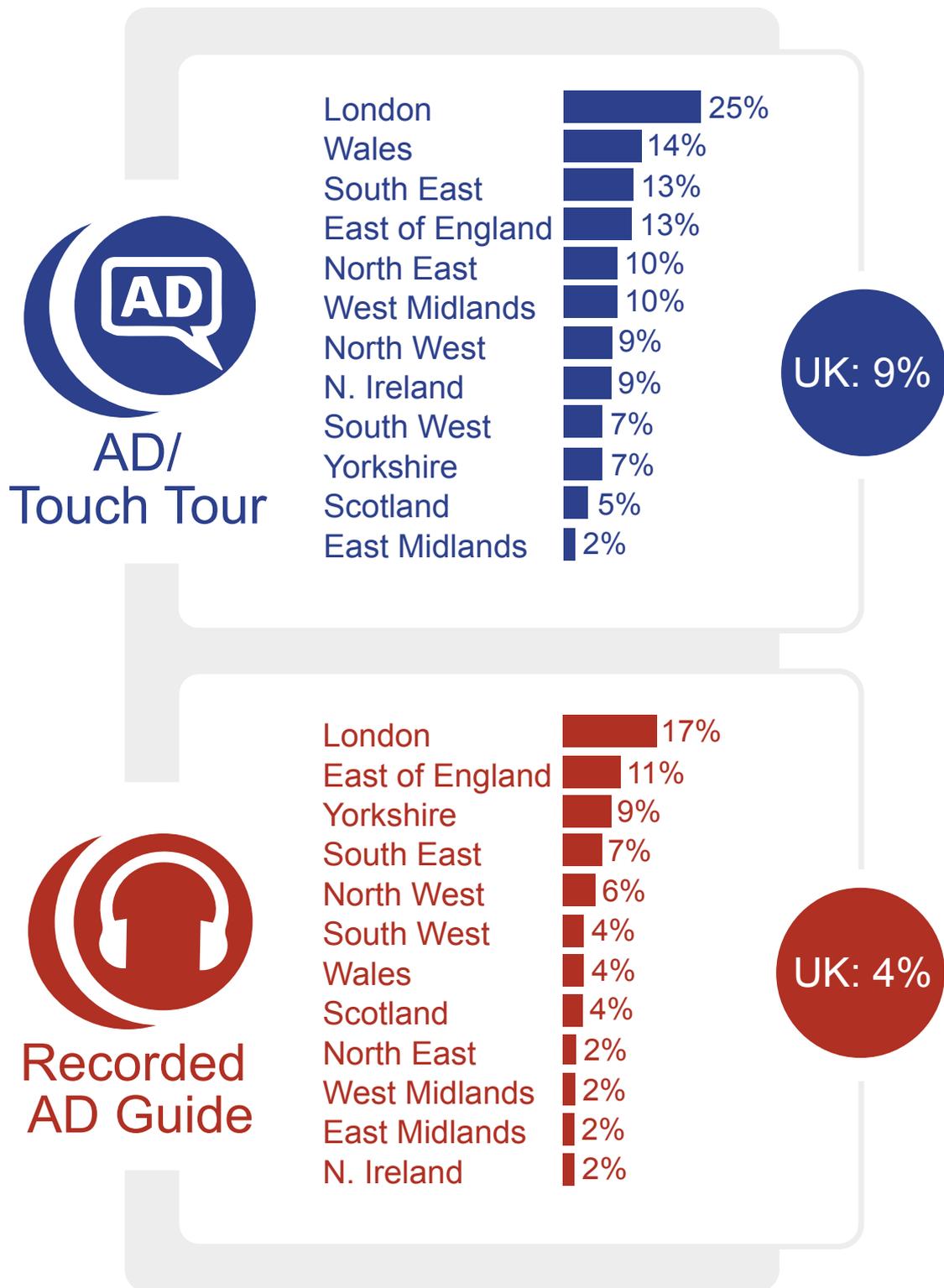
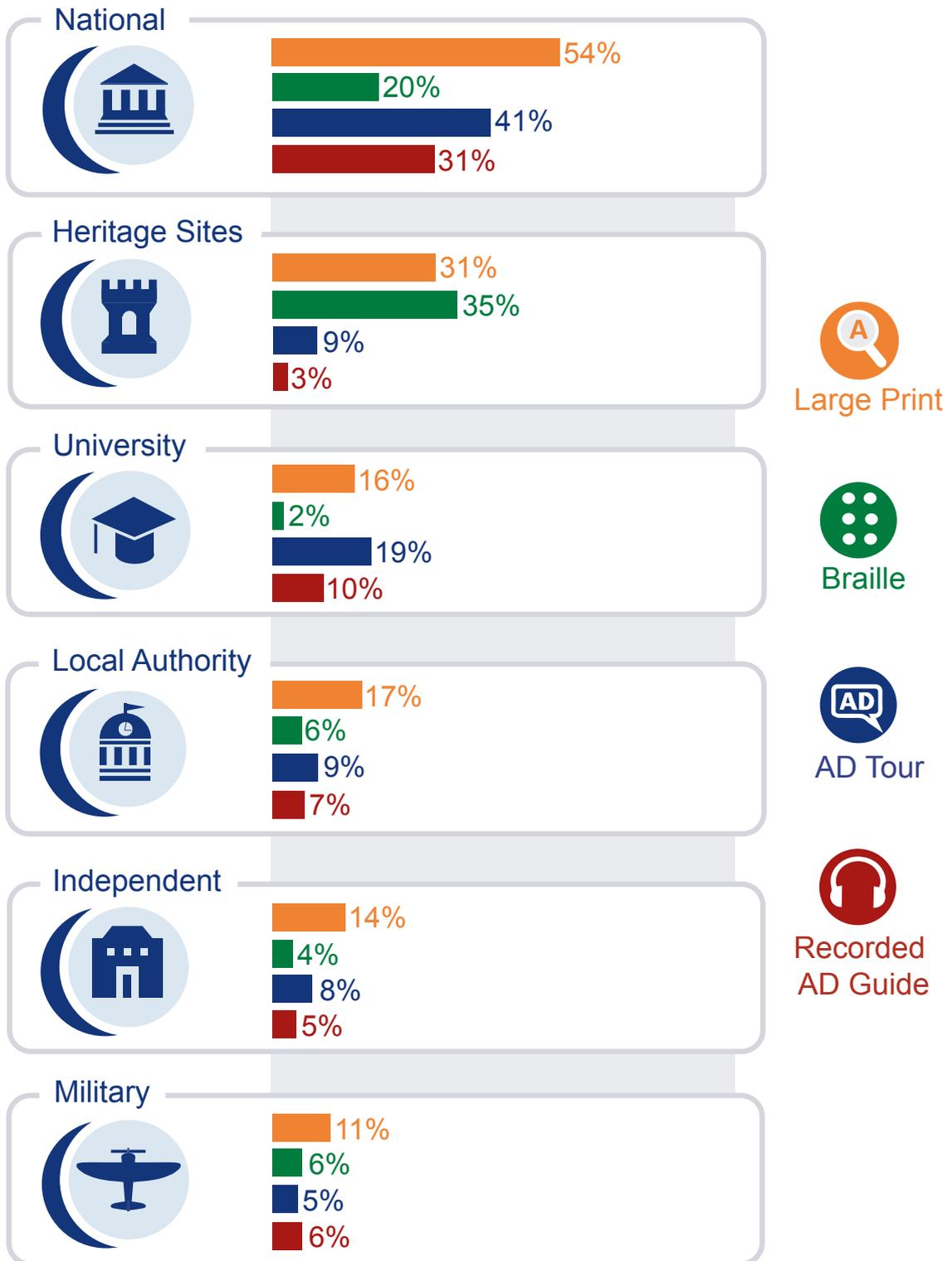


Figure E : Resources for blind and partially sighted visitors
 (by museum type) *see table E page 19*



Tables

A: UK Museums with access information on the website (by nation / region)

| UK nation / region | Museums | % of total |
|--------------------|---------|------------|
| Scotland | 154 | 61% |
| Northern Ireland | 27 | 63% |
| West Midlands | 46 | 68% |
| Wales | 67 | 69% |
| South West | 145 | 74% |
| North West | 105 | 75% |
| London | 101 | 75% |
| South East | 183 | 76% |
| East Midlands | 76 | 78% |
| Yorkshire | 113 | 80% |
| North East | 51 | 81% |
| East | 126 | 82% |

B: UK Museums with access information on the website (by type)

| Type | Museums | % of total |
|------------------|---------|------------|
| Heritage sites | 195 | 99% |
| National Museums | 51 | 94% |
| Local Authority | 381 | 73% |
| Independent | 523 | 67% |
| University | 55 | 66% |
| Military | 38 | 60% |

C: Proportion of UK museums that welcome disabled visitors and guide dogs on their website (by type)

| Type | Disabled visitors | Guide dogs |
|-----------------|-------------------|------------|
| National | 29% | 72% |
| Independent | 22% | 27% |
| Military | 21% | 11% |
| Local Authority | 18% | 31% |
| University | 16% | 28% |
| Heritage sites | 7% | 41% |

D: Resources for blind and partially sighted visitors (by nation / region)

| UK nation / region | Large Print | Braille | AD tour | Recorded AD Guide |
|--------------------|-------------|---------|---------|-------------------|
| London | 34% | 13% | 25% | 17% |
| North West | 32% | 4% | 9% | 6% |
| North East | 30% | 19% | 10% | 2% |
| West Midlands | 20% | 12% | 10% | 2% |
| South West | 18% | 14% | 7% | 4% |
| Yorkshire | 18% | 7% | 7% | 9% |
| South East | 17% | 9% | 13% | 7% |
| East Midlands | 16% | 7% | 2% | 2% |
| East of England | 16% | 7% | 13% | 11% |
| Wales | 13% | 8% | 14% | 4% |
| Scotland | 7% | 3% | 5% | 4% |
| Northern Ireland | 2% | 9% | 9% | 2% |

E: Resources for blind and partially sighted visitors (by type)

| Type | Large Print | Braille | AD tour | Recorded AD Guide |
|-----------------|-------------|---------|---------|-------------------|
| National | 54% | 20% | 41% | 31% |
| Heritage | 31% | 35% | 9% | 3% |
| Local authority | 17% | 6% | 9% | 7% |
| Independent | 14% | 4% | 8% | 5% |
| University | 16% | 2% | 19% | 10% |
| Military | 11% | 6% | 5% | 6% |

Key findings and summary statistics

1. UK Museums provide insufficient access information online for disabled people, particularly blind and partially sighted people.

- 27% of UK museums provide no information online for disabled visitors planning a visit.
- 43% of UK museums give access information, but no provision for blind and partially sighted people.
- Only 18% of UK museums state on their website that they welcome disabled visitors.
- Only 30% of UK museums provide information on their website that would be useful for a blind or partially-sighted person planning a visit.
- Only 5% are taking advantage of websites that provide detailed access audits such as [DisabledGo.com](https://www.disabledgo.com) and [Euans' Guide](https://www.euans.com).

2. UK museums are failing to provide access for blind and partially sighted people to their venues, exhibitions and galleries.

- 30% of UK museums have some form of direction or description of their venue within their access information, though the majority of these are written specifically with wheelchair users in mind.
- 35% of UK museums state on their website that they welcome guide dogs.
- 18% of UK museums mention large print guides labels or panels on their website.
- 9% of UK museums mention braille versions of labels or panels on their website.
- 10% of UK museums publicise live audio-described tours / handling sessions for blind and partially sighted visitors on their website.
- 6% of UK museums publicise a recorded audio-descriptive guide for blind and partially sighted visitors on their website.

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Matthew Cock

Researchers

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Graphic design: fiskur.co.uk

Notes

1. In the 2015 Access Survey carried out for Disabled Access Day and Euan's Guide, museums and art galleries scored equal first with hospitals and healthcare, when respondents were asked which of 13 categories would they rate as having 'poor' or 'good' accessibility. 17% of respondents rated museums and art galleries as 'poor' and 59% as 'good', compared to 22% and 55% for cinemas and theatres, and 29% and 26% for concert halls and live music venues. disabledaccessday.com/media/20290/2015-theaccesssurveyresults.pdf.
2. For more on the social model of disability, see scope.org.uk/about-us/our-brand/social-model-of-disability.
3. Papworth Trust, Disability in the United Kingdom 2016 Facts and Figures. papworthtrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/Disability%20Facts%20and%20Figures%202016.pdf.
4. rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics.
5. According to government figures published in August 2014, the household income of disabled people, the so-called 'purple pound', is around £212 billion a year. [gov.uk/government/news/high-street-could-be-boosted-by-212-billion-purple-pound-by-attracting-disabled-people-and-their-families](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/high-street-could-be-boosted-by-212-billion-purple-pound-by-attracting-disabled-people-and-their-families). The Equality Act 2010 states that service providers, including museums and heritage sites, have a duty to make reasonable adjustments, i.e. positive steps to remove barriers a person may face because of their disability.

These may result in a change to a physical feature or extra aids or services.

The Citizens Advice Service provides a useful guide [citizensadvice.org.uk/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/duty-to-make-reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-people/](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/duty-to-make-reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-people/)

6. “Disabled people (including those with a long term limiting illness) had significantly lower levels of engagement for the following compared with non-disabled people: Visiting a heritage site: 66.5% compared to 75.2% for non-disabled people; Visiting a museum or gallery: 44.5% attended compared to 55.2% for non-disabled people; Engagement with the arts: 72.4% engaged compared to 79.1% for non-disabled people”.

DCMS Taking Part (2014–15, Quarter 1 Report). [gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360009/Taking_Part_2014_15_Quarter_1_Report.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/360009/Taking_Part_2014_15_Quarter_1_Report.pdf).

7. All museums registered in the Accreditation Scheme managed between Arts Council England, the Welsh Government, Museums Galleries Scotland and the Northern Ireland Museums Council. ([artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme-0](https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-museums/accreditation-scheme-0)).
8. Museums Association, 'Councils urged to give museums more freedom online' 19 October 2016. [museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/19102016-councils-urged-to-give-museums-freedom-online](https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/19102016-councils-urged-to-give-museums-freedom-online).
9. 82% of respondents to the 2015 Access Survey carried out for Disabled Access Day and Euan’s Guide ([disabledaccessday.com/media/20290/2015-theaccesssurveyresults.pdf](https://www.disabledaccessday.com/media/20290/2015-theaccesssurveyresults.pdf)) said that they used a venue’s website when finding out the information they needed to plan a visit.

10. The 2015 Access Survey carried out for Disabled Access Day and Euan's Guide (ibid.) supports this, with 95% of respondents stating that they had tried to find disabled access information about a venue before visiting it, 54% stating that they avoided going to new places if they could not find relevant access information.

A survey carried out by Attitude is Everything (attitudeiseverything.org.uk) of Deaf and disabled people in the North East in 2015 backs this up: 60% of respondents said that they had been put off considering events they would otherwise have loved to have gone to because of a lack of access information.

11. Museum websites do better than music venue and festival websites, 35% of which have no access information, according to Attitude is Everything's State of Access Report 2016.
12. According to the Guide Dogs for the Blind Association. Guide Dogs Fact file, guidedogs.org.uk/aboutus/guide-dogs-organisation/facts, there are 4,800 guide dog owners. According to the RNIB (rnib.org.uk/knowledge-and-research-hub/key-information-and-statistics) there are around 360,000 registered blind and partially sighted people in the UK.

Who are VocalEyes?

VocalEyes is a UK charity dedicated to increasing opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to experience and enjoy art and culture, at theatres, museums, galleries and heritage sites and the finest of historical and contemporary architecture.

We support the museum and heritage sector with research, advice, consultancy, training and audio description for tours, audioguides and apps. Please contact us if you want to find out more about how we can help your venue.

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