

Factsheet 2 – Access Audits

What is an access audit?

An access audit is a measure of how well an environment and method of service delivery meets the needs of its users. It is also a process through which potential barriers to access may be identified and recorded alongside suggested improvements in a way that enables people responsible for a site, building or service to move on to the next step of planning and implementing change.

An access audit is a means of:

- examining the accessibility of services and facilities
- identifying where physical barriers may compromise access to services by assessing the feature against predetermined criteria
- measuring the 'usability' of facilities within a building and the services being delivered in it

The basic principle of an access audit is to assess the accessibility of an environment, its facilities and any services delivered from it, taking into account all existing and prospective building users.

The journey sequence

When you commission an access audit, an access auditor or consultant will come and visit you and carry out a site survey. The audit should follow the 'journey sequence' of arrival, entrance, circulation, facilities and exit. By following the sequence that most users of the building take the auditor can consider the suitability of the environment, its features and any potential barriers.

It is preferable that the audit is carried out when the building is in use as this will give the auditor the best picture of how people actually access services and use the facilities. If you can provide plans of the building this will be of great help to the auditor, particularly if the building is large or complex.

There is no definitive list of physical features that may be covered by an access audit, although the list below will give you an idea of what categories may be typically covered:

- approach routes, setting-down points and parking
- entrance and reception
- communication systems, signage and wayfinding
- horizontal and vertical circulation (corridors, doors, lifts, stairs and so on)
- sanitary provision

- lighting and acoustics
- surface finishes and visual contrast
- means of escape
- building management

The audit should also examine non-physical access issues, for example websites, publicity materials, public transport links and building management issues.

The access auditor will bring a variety of equipment in order to take quantitative measurements. This will most probably include a measuring tape, gradient measure to measure gradients of surfaces, door pressure gauge to measure weights of doors, and sometimes a light meter. However, many issues relating to the built environment cannot be measurable using scientific instruments and an observational assessment is needed.

How do I find an access auditor or consultant?

To find an access auditor or consultant you can contact the National Register of Access Consultants (NRAC), which is an independent register of accredited access auditors and access consultants who meet professional standards and criteria established by a peer review system. It is the only UK-wide accreditation service for individuals who undertake access auditing and access consultancy.

The NRAC was established in 1999 as a project of the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE). It was initially funded

by central government and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). You can access the register of accredited access consultants and auditors on the website www.nrac.org.uk.

User consultation

One of the most effective ways of finding out about an environment or building is talking to regular users. This may include, staff, customers, patients, students and so on. Where the building being audited is a community-based premises the management committee, volunteers and representatives of user groups are likely to be able to contribute valuable information in relation to the use of the premises and any existing problems that have been encountered. Existing building occupants are often able to report on problems encountered by service users and on any adjustments that can readily be made.

The access audit report

After the site survey the auditor will produce an access audit report. The written report will document the findings of the access audit and may constitute supporting evidence in future cases of alleged discrimination under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA).

There are many different formats for audit reports and the use of one particular format will depend on the nature and type of site or building. The two most common report types are narrative and tabular reports.

Narrative reports are characterised by descriptive detailed text. The report style is typically lengthy and includes a clear

description of existing features of the premises, an explanation as to why particular features may present a potential barrier and detailed recommendations for potential improvements. This form of report is generally more readable than tabular reports.

Tabular reports comprise a series of tables used to set out and structure information. In this kind of report text and descriptions are generally briefer but should still be sufficiently detailed to provide usable information. Data can easily be inputted and extracted from a tabular report making it the most commonly used type of audit report.

Why carry out an access audit?

If you are providing a service to the general public you are likely to be classed as a service provider for the purpose of the DDA. It does not matter if you are in the private, public or voluntary sectors or whether the service is provided for free or in return for payment .

Service providers have duties under Part 3 of the DDA to overcome physical barriers to access. The *Code of Practice – Rights of Access, Goods, Facilities, Services and Premises* establishes the role of an access audit as key to the identification of potential barriers within the built environment.

Section 5.42 of the Code of Practice says that ‘service providers are more likely to be able to comply with their duty to make adjustments in relation to physical features if they arrange for an access audit of their premises to be

conducted and draw up an access plan or strategy. Acting on the results of such an evaluation may reduce the likelihood of legal claims against the service provider.’

Employers also have duties under Part 2 of the DDA to make reasonable adjustments to physical features of a building. Although the duties under Part 2 of the DDA relate to individual disabled employees, it is still advisable for you to consider the needs of a range of disabled people when planning an office refit or looking for new premises for example. The Code of Practice says that it is good practice for employers to have access audits carried out to identify any improvements that can be made to a building.

To think about when you commission an access audit

It is important that the fees, timescale, terms of engagement and scope of works are clarified at an early stage and clearly set out to record the agreement between you and the auditor.

Terms and conditions of appointment

For the benefit and protection of both you and the access auditor, the terms and conditions of appointment should be confirmed prior to the commencement of any commission. Terms and conditions should include both your and the auditor’s duties under the agreement, payment mechanisms, any particular requirements

relating to confidentiality and copyright and a mechanism by which the agreement can be terminated and suspended. Remember to also ensure that the auditor is covered by relevant professional indemnity insurance.

The Access Management Services 04 (AMS 04) supplement to the *RIBA Form of Appointment* is a good model to use. This can be ordered from RIBA Bookshops, www.ribabookshops.com.

The NRAC has produced model *Terms and conditions for the engagement of an access consultant or auditor* which can be used for the appointment of auditors and consultants who are or are not NRAC Members. This can be downloaded from www.nrac.org.uk.

Professional fees

Audit fees and any relevant expenses should be clearly established and agreed in writing before the auditor undertakes any work. Fees will relate to the project scope of works either provided by the client or agreed during discussions between the client and the auditor. You can apply for funding for this from the Bridge House Trust.

Scope of works/project brief

The scope of works should establish which sites or buildings are to be included in the audit. This may be particularly relevant if you for example only want the public facilities to be audited and not staff areas. This should also include what type of report you want and any requirements for information such as

priority ratings, categories and cost bands.

After the access audit

An access audit is the first stage in the process of identifying, planning and implementing change. An access audit should not be considered as achieving an end in itself but a means by which you can prepare an access plan or strategy to implement the adjustments.

The Code of Practice points out that conducting an access audit is part of a process that leads to the development of an access plan or strategy. Most importantly, however, is acting on the outcome of the access audit as it produces results that reduce the likelihood of claims of alleged discrimination.

Further reference

Access Audit Handbook, CAE/RIBA Enterprises, 2005. Can be ordered from the CAE website www.cae.org.uk

Code of Practice – Rights of Access, Goods Facilities, Services and Premises, DRC, 2002. Can be downloaded from the EHRC website www.equalityhumanrights.com

Code of Practice – Employment and Occupation, EHRC, 2002. Can be downloaded from the EHRC website www.equalityhumanrights.com