Interpretation Guidelines

Providing accessible countryside interpretation

A Good Practice Guide to Disabled People’s Access to the Countryside
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Introduction

Countryside interpretation helps visitors understand and enjoy the countryside around them. Interpretation makes sense of new places to people who are not familiar with, or confident about, visiting the countryside.

Many disabled people find countryside interpretation difficult to understand. People often cannot understand the message if you use complicated written and spoken language, or small print or confusing colour contrasts.

These guidelines look at planning, designing and putting into practice good countryside interpretation. They focus on the needs of disabled people, and will help you produce interpretation which everyone can use.

General principles

Set your goals
Be clear about what you want to achieve and the message you want to put across. Plan your interpretation thoroughly. Time you spend on planning can save problems later on.

Find out who your audience is
Don’t think of disabled people as a special and separate audience. Providing interpretation for all may simply be a case of making small technical changes, such as increasing the print size on a leaflet the next time you print it.

Don’t try to interpret everything
Too much information can be confusing. You should leave some things unsaid. Give visitors the chance to explore the countryside on their own and find out some things for themselves.

Talking about things or experiences most people will already know about
Simple interpretation will make your message easier to understand. For example, describe the height of a tree by saying it’s the height of two double-decker buses!

Have linking themes running through all your interpretation
Provide the same, or similar, messages in more than one way. Visitors can choose how to use the interpretation.
Avoid technical terms
‘Coppicing*, ‘pollarding*, Latin plant names and so on will mean absolutely nothing to many visitors. If you do use them, explain them simply.

Use interpretation sparingly
The less said the better as long as it’s clear.

Appeal to all the senses using techniques which will get the message across
Allow visitors to explore the countryside in different ways, and get them to use all their senses. It tends to make a visit to the countryside more fun too!
The Planning Process

1. Setting your objectives
   Be clear as to why you want to use interpretation

2. Gathering information
   Find out about the site and your customers, including disabled people

3. Analysing your findings and producing a plan
   Decide what interpretation you want to use and where you want to use it. Choose the method which will work best for your audience, including disabled people.

4. Checking the results of the interpretation
   Check how effective your plan has been, and whether it works for everyone visiting your site

5. Working with your designer
   Give your designer all the information he or she needs. Involve the designer at every stage. Test out the design with disabled people before you produce the final product. You need to be sure it works for all visitors
1 Setting your objectives

Objectives may cover the following.

- **Enjoyment:**
  for example, to help people have fun getting close to nature.

- **Education:**
  for example, to make people more aware of conversation.

- **Management:**
  for example, to attract people away from sensitive areas.

Setting clear objectives will help you through the following planning stages.

2 Gathering information

Looking at your site

Each countryside site has its own special qualities. Decide which special areas you want to look at. Use interpretation to make sure more disabled people enjoy their visit.

Consider the following points

- Concentrate on features which everyone can get to.

- Improve the physical access to that area (for example, the paths and slopes).

- Take account of conservation interests.

- Find other features that you could interpret with the same effect.

- Interpret a different feature if it benefits more visitors.
Looking at your customers

Research will help you find out:

- why people visit the site;
- how long they stay;
- where they come from;
- how often they visit; and
- whether they prefer certain sorts of interpretation to others.

This will help you form a clearer picture of what they would like.

Working with disabled people

You should involve disabled people in your planning. Invite local disabled people to your site so you can talk to them. (See Networking Guidelines)

- Look at examples of site interpretation you already have and encourage people to criticise and make suggestions on possible improvements which you could make.
- Get people to experience the different areas, views or other features the site has to offer. Walk around the site and point out features of interest which they may otherwise miss.
- Try to put your own enthusiasm for your site or subject on hold. Make sure you give people the time they need to explore the site at their own pace and comment about the things they notice.
- Get people involved by inviting them to smell, touch, listen and look. Encourage them to ask questions.
- Listen carefully and record people’s comments. For example, you may hear someone say ‘I bet those trees could tell a tale or two...*. This is the sort of comment which may be worth exploring at the time. You can find out how they would like the tales to be told.
- Keep people on the track of looking at interpretation, rather than worrying about physical access. If necessary, arrange a separate visit to look at ways to improve physical access.
- Remember that the idea is to find the best way of interpreting your site. Try not to have fixed ideas about how you want to do it.
For people with mobility impairments you will need to consider the following

- Accessible routes (see Accessibility Standards) for guided walks or trails.
- Rest stops on the route which include seating and shelter should be set where there are features of interest, (see Information Sheet 3.1 and 4.8).
- The time people take to get around a trail.
- Where you place interpretation boards. Put them at a height and angle next to a path where they can be read easily, and do not block views or features of interest, (see information Sheet 4.5).
- How you design display materials to make sure people with poor hand control can take an active role, (see information Sheet 1.2).

For blind or partially sighted people you will need to consider the following

- Usually people who are blind or partially sighted will visit the countryside with people who can see. But they will still prefer to be able to find out about the place they are visiting by themselves.
- Techniques which use several senses (sight, sound, touch, smell and taste) are best.
- Use clear and wide-ranging descriptions.
- Use a mixture of methods. For example, think about producing an audio tape guide, and also a large-print leaflet with good colour contrast covering the same subject.
- For some people who are blind or partially sighted, Braille is essential.

For people who are deaf or hard of hearing you will need to consider the following

- Some visitors will consider English to be their second language after signing. Consider using sign language.
- Some people who are born deaf or hard of hearing may have less developed language and written communication skills than other visitors. It is important you use simple language to get your message across.
- Use ‘sympathetic hearing techniques*; (see page 20).
- Produce written texts to back up anything you talk about.
- Some people who are hard of hearing will find audio or video tapes difficult to use because they may not have a hearing aid that works with them.
For people with learning disabilities you will need to consider the following

- Adults with learning disabilities are not children so you should not speak to them as if they are.
- If you use written materials, make them as clear as possible, or use pictures and symbols rather than words.
- As with any visitor, some people with learning disabilities will prefer to explore the countryside on their own.
- Self-guided trails and written materials may be the most difficult methods for some people with learning disabilities to use. Person-to-person interpretation is easier for all people.

3 Analysing your findings and producing a plan

You will not be able to interpret everything on the site, so choose which themes or messages you want to put across. Your budget may also affect the facilities you can provide. A good plan and clear objectives will increase the chances of you getting funding.

Choose the right interpretation methods for the site and audience. For example, if the site has no visitor centre, it may be difficult to put in a taped trail as you will need people there to give out the tapes. The methods you choose will depend on what you want interpreted. Assess each technique carefully to see how well each one could work on site.

Choosing the most effective method means:

- being aware of some of the advantages or disadvantages of each method;
- knowing who might benefit from the use of one method instead of another; and
- understanding how to get the most out of the particular approach you choose.
Personal interpretation

'Personal interpretation' means something presented to people by other people. It includes the following.

- Guided walks
- Theatre
- Storytelling
- Music and dance
- Art

Advantages of using personal interpretation with disabled people

- You can adapt the interpretation and the message to the specific needs or interests of the audience.
- People can ask questions so you can repeat the information, perhaps using different or simpler terms and expressions.
- People can take part, and have a hands-on approach. This will help reinforce your message.
- Personal interpretation often uses all, or more than one, of the five senses and so is effective with everyone.
- Visitors don't need any previous knowledge of the countryside to take part.
Always consider the following

- Work out how much staff time and resources you need to prepare and carry out the interpretation.
- It is best to meet groups beforehand, though not always possible.
- Bring in paid professionals who have experience of working in the countryside, and with disabled people, if you don’t have these skills.
- Use ‘sympathetic hearing techniques’, and keep your language clear and simple.
- Provide sign language interpreters to support visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Provide written texts of the interpretation for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.
- Give more time for introductions to the group, and explanations about the task.
- The number of people in the group is very important. Some people need more time to be able to take part equally. If you are working with a mixed group some people will need more of your time and support than others.
- You should encourage personal assistants who come with groups or individuals to join in rather than watch.
- Make sure that you give any personal assistants the chance to understand the interpretation.
- Think about how accessible your site is before a walk. Choose a route everyone can use.
- Make sure that you include stopping points with seats to allow elderly people and people with mobility disabilities the chance to rest.
Earth education activities encourage visitors to explore their surroundings through different experiences which use sight, hearing, touch and smell.

You could use:

- earth walks;
- ‘discovery parties*;
- ‘immersing experiences,
- ‘natural awareness* exercises; and
- ‘solitude enhancing* activities.

If you need information about any of the above, contact The Institute for Earth Education.

- You will need bigger props for people with poor hand control and for some people with learning disabilities. If you are working with a mixed group, keep everyone’s props large to avoid drawing attention to some people.

- You can get training to gain the skills to lead effective earthwalks and programmes. You can get more details about earth walks, programmes or training direct from The Institute for Earth Education.

For more information contact:

The Institute for Earth Education,
P0 Box 91,
Tring,
Hertfordshire,
HP23 4RS
**Environmental art**

Visual arts, including drawing, painting, photography, ceramics, textiles and sculpture, make the countryside appeal to people’s hearts.

- People with little or no speech can take part.
- If you need a spoken explanation, also provide practical demonstrations.
- Many techniques you can use are simple. There will usually be different tasks so everyone can take part.
- Check on safety needs if the group will be using tools.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is a powerful technique used to conjure up the spirit of place for visitors. You can use storytelling on its own, or build it into a conservation day or other event.

- The story teller should consult with groups to find out the best ways to communicate with everyone. Adapt the style of presentation, length and detail of the story to meet the needs of the group.
- People who are blind or partially sighted may need more use of tone of voice, music and touch in order for the story to have an effect on them.
- Stories should be directly related to the site. Link the story to what people are likely to know already.
- Encourage people to take part as characters in the story.
Guided walks

Guided walks are very popular. They can give visitors the chance to meet people associated with the site or area, and to watch and have a go at traditional countryside practices.

- Many guided walks only need small adaptations to include disabled people.
- Guided walks give everyone the chance to ask questions, and to get to know the people and places better than they might if they visited the site on their own.
- You should publicise adapted walks as accessible, so you encourage disabled people to come along.

Music and dance

You can use music and dance to encourage people to explore the world around them and give them the chance to express their feelings about the countryside.

- Dance and music can include stillness, or draw on the idea of movement from within rather than moving the body or limbs. People with physical disabilities can play a full part.
- Music and dance is about rhythm, and does not have to depend on sight or sound. People who are blind or deaf can equally be involved.

Theatre

Professionals can run workshops or theatrical productions set in the countryside. Or the audience can help to develop a theme which they have chosen.

- Make sure that if different parts of the acts are set in different areas of a site, physically disabled people can move around easily to take part in the production.
- Provide resting points and seating for performances.
- Sign language will be valuable for people who are deaf or are hard of hearing.
- Spoken descriptions will be valuable for people who are blind.
Non-personal interpretation

*Non-personal interpretation* means visitors do not have to rely on someone else to present it. It includes some of the most common forms of interpretation such as:

- leaflets;
- self-guided trails;
- taped audio trails;
- interpretive boards; and
- information centre exhibits

Advantages of using non-personal interpretation with disabled people

- Visitors can use this kind of interpretation on their own.
- Some people prefer, or find it easier, to find out for themselves what a site’s about at their own pace.
- Some people with hearing or visual impairments will find written texts of a guided walk or a taped trail very valuable.
- It is usually cheaper to produce.
- You can reach more people. For example, interpretive boards can be used by most visitors, and you can produce as many leaflets as you want.

Always consider the following

- Provide the information in different ways. This could be in Braille, on cassette or, if there is a visitor centre, adding sub-titles or a narrative to a video or film.
- You need to strike a balance between providing interpretation and information. Let the interpretation concentrate on features of interest to look out for and enjoy during the trail, rather than being a guide which covers everything about the site.
- Plan and design carefully. Use basic language and as little text as possible.
Taped trails

Taped trails are a popular way to introduce visitors to walks and trails which are new to them.

- Taped trails will not appeal to, or be practical for, all visitors. But audio tape is an important way of providing information to blind and partially sighted people.
- Provide clear instructions on how to use the tape so that visitors get the most out of the visit.
- Permanent markers on the ground, which link to listening points on the tape, tell people they are at a stopping point.
- Improve stopping points with sight and sound experiences. Try to encourage people to touch and listen, as well as look.
- Produce tapes to a high standard. It is important to make sure that all sound effects are consistent and do not fade or change.
- A poorly-produced tape is as difficult to understand as bad handwriting.
- Use a low-frequency tone on the tape to say when the tape should be switched off.
- Design the tape so that there is no overlap between listening to the tape and walking the trail. It could be dangerous to expect a visitor to do both at the same time.
- Buy personal stereos which have a rewind button on the machine to give people a chance to repeat things if they missed it first time round. This will be especially useful for people who are hard of hearing.
- Provide portable induction loops. This will make sure people who are hard of hearing, and who have the ‘T’ switch on their hearing aids, can hear the tape clearly.
- Some personal stereos have two earphone sockets which will allow a blind or partially sighted person and a sighted guide to listen to the tape together.
If possible, offer to loan tapes out to people who are blind or deaf before they visit the site so they can get a feel for the site before their visit.

Make sure that the design includes the need for steady, paced speech. Do not overdub sounds, it will result in sounds being lost to people who are hard of hearing. Be careful how you use female voices (these are sometimes too high pitched to be heard clearly). Changes in tone of voice or sound effect are hard for some people who are hard of hearing to adjust to quickly.

Leaflets and written material

Leaflets are the most common tool currently used by countryside managers to tell people about their site.

- Leaflets let people take in details at their own pace, and can be taken home and passed on to others.
- Leaflets should not try to cover everything about the site.
- You can easily and cheaply translate the text into Braille or other languages. You can send Braille items for blind people in the post free of charge.
- Use print sizes and colours which people who are partially sighted can use. (see Information Sheets 4.2 and 4.4).
- Provide written texts for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, who may otherwise miss out on the message you are putting over.
- Using large print makes leaflets easier for everyone to read.
- Use a heavy paper when you design leaflets so people with poor hand control, or people who need one hand free, can turn the pages easily.
- Using written materials will be no use for some people with learning disabilities. Make sure that what you write is clear and concise. Do not use technical and complicated language.
Interpretive boards

Interpretative boards are a common and important resource for many countryside sites.

- Design the boards so visitors can feel them or even listen to them.
- Tactile boards (boards which you can feel) are especially effective for people who are blind or partially sighted. They are often also the best way of describing new or difficult concepts to all visitors.
- All new boards should be accessible to wheelchair users, (see Information Sheets 2.2 and 4.5).
- Make sure that visitors can reach the board. For a person who is partially sighted this may be particularly important so they can get close enough to read the text, (see Information Sheet 4.5).

Visitor Centre exhibits

In visitor centres, the exhibits and visitors are sheltered if there is bad weather.

- Make sure that displays and exhibits are easy for wheelchair users to reach. This is especially important if visitors are encouraged to take part by using levers, pushing buttons or other controls, (see Information Sheet 1.2).
- Plan where to put your exhibits. Consider your visitors, their viewing distances and angles of view, (see Information Sheet 4.5).
- Any controls should be easy to work with one hand, without the need for tight twisting or grasping. The controls should not need finger control or strength.
- Make sure that your exhibits can be touched. Do not put them behind reflective surfaces, or in lighting which may create glare.
- Put barriers around free-standing or wall-mounted exhibits so that people who are blind or partially sighted can feel them with their canes.
- Have rounded rather than sharp edges on all possible obstructions.

- Hanging signs or exhibits should be at least 1200mm from the floor.

- Exhibits can show people, who are blind or partially sighted, the size and proportions of animals, birds or objects which they might not otherwise get close to.

- Make sure that any text, photographs and colour you use are appropriate for people who are partially sighted. (See Information Sheets 4.2 and 4.4.)

- Place Braille text flat, not at an angle.

- Audio induction loops fitted to exhibits will help people who have the 'T' switch on their hearing aids. Display the appropriate symbol in your visitor centre. (See Information Sheet 4.1.)

- You can use mirrors to show people places and things they cannot get to.
Other methods

Other methods for people who are blind or partially sighted include Braille, large print and cassette. For people who are deaf or hard of hearing consider captioning on films and videos, ‘Sympathetic Hearing* and signing. If you can supply other methods, remember to tell your visitors.

Braille

- Braille is reading through touch. Not everyone who is blind can read Braille, but Braille readers often prefer Braille to taped cassettes. For some people who are deaf and blind, Braille is essential for communication.
- Proof-read Braille materials before giving them to the public.
- Describe any significant illustrations, views or maps with Braille.
- Grade 1 Braille is used by children and those who are learning Braille. It is also useful if the Braille reader does not have English as their first language. Grade 2 Braille needs less space than Grade 1 braille and can be quicker to read. Contact the Royal National institute for the Blind for advice on which to use.
- There are professional Braille producers throughout the UK.

For more information contact:

**The United Kingdom Association of Braille Producers**  
RNIB  
P0 Box 173  
Peterborough PE2 6W5  
Phone: 01733 370777

Sympathetic Hearing Scheme

The 'Sympathetic Hearing Scheme is run by the British Association of the Hard of Hearing. It trains organisations to communicate more effectively with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- The scheme gives people who are deaf or hard of hearing a card which they show when they need help.
- If you have contact with the public, you should ask for training through the scheme.

You can get more information from:  
**The Sympathetic Hearing Scheme,**  
7-11 Armstrong Road, London W3 7JL,  
Phone: 0208 742 9043
Sign language interpretation

- It can be difficult for sign language interpreters to translate slang, local terms and technical words. Avoid using these if possible.

- It is good practice to have a member of staff trained as a sign language interpreter to help visitors in visitor centres, or on guided walks and at events.

For more information about signing contact:

**RNID**
105 Gower Street
London WC1E 6AH
Phone: 0207 387 8033
Technical Interpretation

If it is not possible to make part of a site easy to get at, or if you need to keep all visitors at a distance from a particular area, use technical interpretation. Video, film, audio narrations, programmes, or a combination of these, can provide exciting and different experiences. Technical interpretation includes ‘closed-circuit TV’, ‘interactive videos’, ‘CD ROM’ and ‘virtual reality’.

Advantages of using technical Interpretation with disabled people

- Technical methods can provide views of places, animals, birds and seasons which many people would not be able to enjoy otherwise.
- It can provide visual and sound effects for people who are deaf or blind.
- Many visitors will find scenes and actions very exciting. Many disabled people may find this more accessible.
- If the programme is interactive, it allows the visitor to decide on the direction to follow.

You should consider the following:

You should not use technical methods instead of the real experience of being in the countryside.

- Narration should be clear, and must be louder than any background music or sound effects. Use trained commentators for all audio recordings if possible.
- Make sure all controls for audio-visual displays are easy to get at for wheelchair users and people with poor hand control. (See Information Sheet 1.2.)
- When video facilities are designed for a large audience. Make sure that the seating plan includes areas for wheelchair users among the general audience, not apart from everyone else.
- Avoid reflections on screens, which may cause difficulties for people who are partially sighted. (See Information Sheet 4.5.)
- Subtitles and text (captioning) mean people who are deaf or hard of hearing will be able to benefit from films and videos.
- Use large print and colour contrast on the screen. (See Information Sheet 4.3 or contact RNIB.)
Programmes with sign language will help people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

If there are no subtitles, provide large-print scripts of all productions for people who are blind or partially sighted. These are best done as summaries, as it is difficult to follow a programme and read at the same time.

You must produce technical methods to a high standard.

Audio productions should have a clear sound quality. In particular make sure that recordings are free from echoes or other noises.

**Slide shows**

- If you are presenting a slide show, make sure you describe each slide in detail for any people who are blind or partially sighted.

**Closed-circuit television**

- You can use this for live broadcasts of events. For example, the RSPB have used close-circuit TV displays to give visitors information about nesting birds, as well as keeping people at a distance from nests which could otherwise be disturbed.

**Handsets**

- These are hand-held tour guide sound systems about the size of a mobile phone. Some systems have built-in induction loops for people with hearing aids. They allow you to stop whenever you want and receive information indoors and out.

**Video**

- People are used to seeing videos and you can use them to bring features of a site to visitors in a lively way. You can set them up to run all the time, or they can be switched on by a visitor entering the area where it is set up.
Audio description

- This is extra description for videos or TV that fits into the gaps between other speech. It describes body language, scenery, action, facial expressions, - anything that helps people follow what they cannot see.

- Personal headsets give people the chance to get information which meets their needs. For example, this could be in a foreign language or audio description.

Captioning

- This provides subtitles or text on, or next to, the screen all the time so people don’t have to ask.

Closed captioning

- This is hidden subtitles which only specific users can see. It is useful if there is a large audience or where the main image would be spoiled by captions on top of it. People who are deaf or hard of hearing need to know to ask for this facility.
4 Working with your designer

Preparing the design brief

Produce a brief for any new design, from leaflets to audio-visual materials. This will help you avoid the misunderstandings, disappointment or frustration when something doesn’t come out as you wanted. Provide a written brief for your designer, explain why they need to meet particular technical specifications.

- Use a designer who has a flexible approach, is willing to learn from disabled people, and to let people test out draft designs.
- Make sure that you see samples of their work before you commit yourself to working with them.
- Get the designer to meet you on site to give them a feel for the place.
- Give the designer examples of what you want, or definitely don’t want, as a final outcome.
- Give your designer a copy of comments taken from people involved in site visits.

The design brief should include the following.

- **The objective and theme of the project**
  The message you want to put across.

- **Description of the project**
  For example, producing with help from disabled people, a 3D interpretive board which everyone can use, including people who are blind or partially sighted.

- **The intended market**
  Any target group will include disabled people who will want to take part. Your designer may not know about the needs of certain disability groups. Give your designer as much supporting information as possible.
How often and for what they will be used
This may affect the type of materials you use and the place you choose to put the interpretation. For example, it will be used every day by people visiting a site on their own, or it is for an organised event or performance which visitors will watch.

Life expectancy
Take into account whether the information may change. With written materials information may change between print runs.

Test examples
Say that you need a draft copy to try out with the disabled people who worked with you during the earlier planning stages.

Meeting deadlines
Don’t forget to refer back to the user groups before you agree the final proof with the designer. That way you make sure you end up with a high-quality product. You must build in time for evaluation or changes.

Recognising people's involvement
Include the logo of any disability group who helped with the design. This can go a long way to reassuring other disabled people that your site really is accessible.
5 Review and evaluate

Testing out the draft design

Try out your new facilities with different groups while they are still at the draft stages, as well as when they are finished. To keep your costs down you can photocopy a leaflet or make a cardboard cut out of an interpretive board. For personal techniques, such as a guided walk, get a group along for a ‘dry run’. This will give you a chance to get comments and make final changes before the real thing. Testing out facilities with users can avoid expensive mistakes being made.

Why review and evaluate?

- You want to avoid expensive mistakes in the design stage.
- You want the final product to meet your original objectives. Continue to check what you are doing to make sure you are still on track.
- You want your facility to be accessible to everyone.

Final Evaluation

You can evaluate your design by:

- watching visitors using a facility;
- asking people to fill in a questionnaire after a countryside visit
- carrying out a structured interview; and
- asking for feedback at a later date.

You need to consider the following:

- Not everyone will be willing to respond immediately. In group situations, quieter people may not be confident about making comments or criticisms.
- Questionnaires may not be appropriate for people who are blind or partially sighted and people with learning disabilities who find writing difficult. Make it as easy as possible for people to fill in your questionnaire. Questions should be short and easy to understand.
- Although it takes quite a lot of time, one-on-one interviewing may be more appropriate.
If you are working with a group, it may be easier to get feedback through the group leader or personal assistant. You could do this at a later date, once people have had a chance to think about their visit and what they enjoyed.

Be careful not to ask leading questions. Putting words into people’s mouths will not give you a true picture of how you could improve what’s on offer.

Now all you have to do is get on with it..............................................Good luck!