

Autism and Museums:

The Royal Air Force Museum - the Autism Access Award and its legacy

By Ellen Lee, Education Officer, The Royal Air Force Museum, UK



The Royal Air Force Museum London is one of two sites belonging to the U.K's only national museum that tells the story of the Royal Air Force through its people and collections. For visitors, we make our collections and the RAF story relevant and stimulating. For current and former RAF personnel and their families, we preserve, honour and share the stories of their service. For our nation, we help people to understand the impact of the RAF on the world.

As an Education Officer in the Access and Learning Department, I initially focused on accessibility from a learning perspective. Through leading on the application for the National Autistic Society's Autism Access Award, I have now begun looking at our access and inclusivity ethos across the museum as a whole.

Background to the Autism Access Award application

Following my attendance at the 2013 TES SEN Show, which takes place in October, I was approached by a National Autistic Society representative to gauge the Royal Air Force Museum's interest in piloting their Autism Access Award as they were looking to expand the accreditation into the Museum and Gallery sector.

The Autism Access Award is a best practice standard which demonstrates that an organisation is autism-friendly, and provides assurance to people with autism and their families and carers.

We started the application in January 2014. The process was very simple; there was a self-audit form that we filled in, listing examples of evidence, and looking at areas such as:

- customer service
- staff and volunteer training
- resources
- evaluation and feedback
- site accessibility.

We also included topics such as outreach, which we felt was an important part of the Museum's offer.

Throughout the process we had an adviser from the National Autistic Society who worked as our mentor. It was during this time that we identified the need to provide pre-visit information resources for visitors with autism. In addition, a teacher from a special needs school suggested an autism friendly trail, with check boxes to tick. I designed a trail for each of the halls with information on the aircraft to be found. Rather than having a picture of the whole aircraft I decided to use a selection of images that highlighted interesting parts of the aircraft, for example nose art. At the end of the pack I added a certificate for use if so wished. Both the pre-visit information sheet and the autism friendly trail are free to download from the accessibility page on the Museum's website

<http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/london/plan-your-day/accessibility.aspx>).



Our final assessment was with our adviser, where we provided copies of the evidence demonstrating our accessibility, along with a tour to show adjustments at the site. For the Royal Air Force Museum, this included a quiet room complete with dimmer switch, which we had dedicated for the use of visitors with autism and other disabilities should they require it.

Following the meeting, our adviser produced a report for the board who would decide if our application had been successful. In June 2014 the Royal Air Force Museum received the first Autism Access Award for the Museum and Gallery sector.

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/21072014-raf-museum-autism-award>)



The response

To say the response was amazing would be a bit of an understatement. From a Museum perspective we found that the publicity increased the number of visitors to our website. In addition I had a number of other museums, galleries and heritage sites contact me to enquire about our work with the National Autistic Society and with SEND in general. From August 2014 to March 2015 we had 3,152 hits/downloads on our autism section within our accessibility page of the website. We have also built links with Autism groups, including Ambitious about Autism, to provide work placements for students on the Autistic Spectrum, as well as opportunities for volunteers with autism. In addition to this we have seen an increase in the number of organisations booking the Museum spaces for corporate events, including the National Autistic Society who held their AGM and Family Day at the Museum.

From the general public's perspective it has been really great. We are seeing more visitors with autism (adults, children and family groups), feeling confident that they can come to the museum without fear of being judged or made to feel unwelcome.

Personally, this was highlighted during the summer holidays last year, when a young mother approached me. She had two children, one of whom had autism. The child was very distressed, and she asked me if there was anywhere quiet she could take him. I led her to the Quiet room and suggested that she could stay as long as she needed. I pointed out the dimmer switch and advised her that if she needed any help to ask for me. The look on her face said it all; she was so grateful, and told me it was nice to visit somewhere where the staff understood and did not just assume that her children were being naughty. It was a rewarding feeling to know that what we offer is not just tokenism, but is actually a tangible and valid provision that is really helpful to, and appreciated by, visitors with autism.

I have to say the whole experience has been brilliant, and I cannot really think of anything I would change. I have shared our experiences with other Museums through speaking at conferences and seminars and my advice for any Museum or Gallery who are considering undertaking a project such as the Autism Access Award is to go for it. The rewards far outweigh any challenges during the process, and certainly in our case the changes that we made were not that expensive, with much of the work being done in-house. I think one of the most important areas for improving accessibility is staff and volunteer awareness (an area which we, as a museum, are continually assessing). Having staff and volunteers understand and support the values of inclusivity makes all of the difference when it comes to putting new provisions into place, and is so important when interacting with visitors.

Legacy

The success of the Autism Access Award has inspired me to look for further ways of improving accessibility across the Museum. In January 2015 I led 'try on' sessions for visitors as part of the inaugural Disabled Access Day, a new initiative supported by Euan's Guide (<http://www.euansguide.com/>). Euan's Guide is a charity that runs a dedicated website where disabled people can write reviews on venues they have visited, such as museums and galleries, and which also gives organisations the opportunity to promote their accessibility. The aim of Disabled Access Day was to encourage people with disabilities to visit a venue they had not been to before. The day was well received and the feedback was very positive. We are looking forward to offering activities at next year's event.

(<http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/london/whats-going-on/news/disabled-access-day-an-update/>).

Other projects have included signing up to be a Blue Assist UK partner, which we joined in early 2015. Blue Assist provides a simple system which allows people with disabilities or other health issues to have the confidence and independence to go out and visit venues, safe in the knowledge that they can seek assistance should they need it. Venues interested in finding out more about Blue Assist can visit <http://www.blueassistuk.org.uk/Home/> .

I believe that building and maintaining working relationships with external organisations can be valuable to all parties as it can promote co-operative working. The sharing of knowledge, experiences and skills can increase understanding and confidence in staff, especially when it comes to developing resources and providing offers. This in turn is of benefit to visitors, especially those who may have had negative experiences of visiting locations in the past, or who are nervous at the thought of visiting somewhere new. It shows a desire by your organisation to learn from those who can advise best, as well as a commitment to making your venue as welcoming and accessible to everyone.

Access is a right, not a privilege, and so anything your organisation can do, no matter how small, is a step in the right direction to making collections accessible to all.

Further information

Ellen Lee

ellen.lee@rafmuseum.org

www.rafmuseum.org.uk/

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