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Sight & Sound: Accessible Cinemas

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Annie Makoff sees what Britain's cinema chains are doing to make cinema visits more accessible to all

'Going to the pictures' used to be the event of the year for many families, particularly those who could afford it. The 1900s saw the rise of purpose-built cinemas, which showed short, silent films in black and white – mainly of domestic scenes that everyone could relate to, yet it was usually only the middle and upper classes that could afford the trips.

As the popularity of cinema grew throughout the 1940s and 50s, it became possible for a wider range of people to enjoy the experience. Today, going to the cinema isn't just for the affluent, but for everyone.

In 2010, the UK Film Council announced that box office takings in the UK and Ireland had exceeded £1bn for the first time. Despite many predicting the end of cinemas, thanks to the rise of technologically advanced home viewing set ups with huge screens and surround sound systems, it seems that the cinema remains as popular as ever. But for some people with disabilities, finding an accessible cinema can be a frustrating experience.

Although cinema chains across Britain are obliged to comply with the anti-disability discrimination measures currently enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act, the reality sometimes falls short of legal requirements. Some chains may pride themselves on their lift access and extra-wide aisles for wheelchairs, but provision for sensory impairments can be a different matter all together. And more often than not, the quality of access depends very much on the age of the cinema building itself.



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Is there adequate wheelchair access? Are there hearing loops? Are there spaces for wheelchairs that have a good view of the screen? Since the answers aren't always that easy to come by, we asked four major cinema operators to provide at-a-glance access guides for our readers (see chart opposite).

	Odeon	Vue	Cineworld	Picturehouse
Manual wheelchair access	Yes, in 109/113 cinemas	Yes	Yes, in 71/78 cinemas	Yes in 17/20 cinemas
Powered wheelchair access	Yes, 109/113 cinemas	Yes	Yes, 71/78 cinemas	Yes in 17/20 cinemas
Facilities for mobility impaired (e.g seats in foyer/ramps/lifts etc)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes in 17/20 cinemas
Accessible toilets	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, in 15/20 cinemas
Accessible parking	Varies	No	No	Varies
Powered scooters for hire	No	No	No	No
Hearing loop	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, in 18/20 cinemas
Subtitled performances	Yes	Yes	Yes	Certain cinemas and performances
Facilities for blind and visually impaired (e.g Braille, audio descriptions)	Yes	Yes	Only at certain cinemas	Varies
Assistance dogs allowed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The Social Network

To see how these provisions compared with people's actual experiences, we canvassed some opinion from disabled people via Twitter. It seems that while some cinemas are providing an excellent service, others are falling short of their promises – though often due to the individual cinema itself, rather than the chain as a whole.

Nicki Cockburn from Llandudno tweeted: "I don't go to the cinema much because they don't have many audio descriptive films. I've found that some cinemas get confused about provision for deaf and blind people, who obviously have totally different needs. I went once to Cineworld with my guide dog, because the website claimed the film was audio described, but it turned out to be subtitles!"

Martyn Sibley had a difference experience. "I have had very few problems with physical, attitudinal and organisational barriers at cinemas," he tweeted. "The staff at my local have always been helpful and I've always managed to see the film I wanted to see."

Another Twitter user, Lisa Egan said: "Access varies from cinema to cinema, often depending on the age of the building. The Odeon where I used to live was a brand new build and fully accessible, so sometimes it can be a bit of a postcode lottery."

Some cinema chains such as Picturehouse have been a lot more proactive in their access provision compared to their rivals. In partnership with the National Autistic Society (NAS), it holds regular autism-friendly screenings at selected sites throughout the UK in recognition of the fact that some people with autism find the experience too overwhelming. Low lighting is left on throughout, the volume is turned down and viewers can move about and take regular breaks if they want to.

Yet Liam Smith, who has autism, is disappointed with the range of films offered at these screenings. "I don't go to cinemas for the most part," he said. "I need subtitles to understand films and TV because I can't hear the speech over music. I find the contrast of dark rooms and bright screens difficult to cope with. There are autism-friendly film showings where I live, but they are all kids' films."



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In demand

As more cinemas 'wise up' to the need to be more accessible, it's hoped that there will be an increasingly greater choice of films at these special screenings. In fact, earlier this year, Odeon began hosting its own autism friendly screenings, which were initially piloted in 40 cinemas across the country last August.

Some Twitter users have even said they prefer to go the cinema despite the lack of access. Gary Olsen, who is deaf, is one of these people. Despite commenting that provision for deaf people in cinemas where he lives is "pretty poor," he believes it is important to continue going to keep up demand. He tweeted: "It's better to take advantage of the rare occurrences when cinemas do make their films accessible for deaf and hard of hearing people, otherwise cinemas will think we are not bothered and stop screening them all together."

Going in spite of access issues may not work for everyone, however. For those that would rather check what disability provisions are available before arriving at their local cinema, the website www.yourlocalcinema.com, aimed at people with sensory disabilities, provides a comprehensive list of the latest films on release with details of participating cinemas offering subtitles and audio descriptions.

Picturehouse specifically, appears to be the only cinema chain to provide reasonable access for hearing and visually impaired people, such as audio described lifts and tactile 'bumps' at stair rails to indicate the number of steps left, along with infrared and induction loops. Their website recommends making an advanced booking and informing staff of your disability before you go, to ensure that your needs are catered for. The chain also allows carers to go free.

The latter entitlement is one that others are starting to offer. Both Cineworld and Vue now accept a Cinema Exhibitor's Association Card, which entitles carers to go free at participating chains. It costs just £5.50 for a year and is eligible to anyone in receipt of DLA or Attendance Allowance.

While there is a long way to go, on the whole, things are improving. More cinemas are screening autismfriendly events, infrared and hearing loop facilities are now available at the majority of auditoria, and while there aren't yet as many audio-described and subtitled films as one might like, we're getting there. As with most things, it's about keeping up the demand and ensuring that our collective voice is heard, so that one day, going to the cinema really is a treat that everyone can enjoy.

Comments

About access

Welcome to Access magazine, the leading product guide for the disability health care sector. Each month, we aim to offer lifestyle guides, practical care advice, help with needs assessment and therapeutic ideas for improved quality of life from a range of occupational health experts, leading charity advisors and government agencies.

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