

Case Study

West Shed Museum – The Princess Royal Class Locomotive Trust Open to All: Accessibility Programme

Introduction

Much of PRCLT's participation in Museum Development Midlands training during 2025 was initially driven by its wider Accreditation review, particularly around improving how the museum supports visitors and volunteers. Attendance at Dementia Awareness training was focused on supporting a long-standing volunteer team, many of whom have been involved since West Shed was established in 1996. The training highlighted practical ways to improve accessibility, from adapting communication approaches to making small environmental changes, helping create visits that are more welcoming, inclusive, and easier to navigate.

The Open to All Audit became a more reflective process than anticipated, prompting trustees and volunteers to consider how different people experience the museum. It identified previously overlooked barriers and informed both the Access Plan and Future Plan, while also shaping day-to-day decisions. As a result, accessibility is now more embedded across interpretation, signage, volunteer support, and future investment, with small changes recognised as having a significant impact on visitor confidence and experience.

West Shed Museum, based in Ripley, Derbyshire, is an Accredited museum operated by The Princess Royal Class Locomotive Trust (PRCLT). The museum is centred around the preservation, restoration, and interpretation of Britain's railway heritage, with a particular focus on steam locomotives and engineering history.

Museum Development Midlands provided both practical and developmental support. They ensured the PRCLT could participate in the Open to All Accessibility Audit programme, giving us access to specialist expertise and structured assessment tools that would otherwise have been difficult for a small volunteer-led museum to access.

“Having programmes like Open to All, alongside regular in-person and online training, is essential for small volunteer-led museums like West Shed.”



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Impact

The training and audit process have helped embed accessibility and inclusion into discussions across the organisation. Trustees and volunteers are now considering visitor needs more consistently when planning projects, reviewing interpretation and making decisions about future investment.

The work has prompted a review of areas that had previously been regarded as standard practice, including signage, interpretation and visitor navigation. By considering how different audiences experience the museum, we have identified opportunities to make the site more welcoming and accessible to a wider range of people.

On a practical level, the training has also influenced volunteer support. We have introduced more regular check-ins with volunteers who may require additional assistance and have increased awareness among front-of-house volunteers of how to support visitors with differing needs. This has improved confidence among volunteers and helped create a more inclusive and supportive environment for everyone using the museum.

“They have helped us understand our visitors and volunteers better, recognise both our strengths and shortcomings, and given us practical ideas and support to make meaningful improvements rather than simply identifying problems.”

What's Next

The PRCLT has incorporated the findings into both its Future Plan and Access Plan for the next five-year period. The next steps are to secure grant funding to install hearing induction loops, improve signage and interpretation, and upgrade accessible toilet facilities to ensure they are fit for the purpose they were originally intended for.

Longer-term projects have also been influenced by the findings, including a lift upgrade as part of the Library Extension Project. Existing projects have been adapted to improve accessibility, such as Terminus Park, where the pathway design has been revised to provide gradients more suitable for wheelchair users. Plans for the car park have also included discussions around the provision of marked accessible parking spaces.

