

Entertainment

London offers an enormously diverse range of entertainment opportunities, including concerts of all kinds, theatre (both mainstream and fringe), cinema and comedy.

In previous editions of the guide we included an extensive section describing access to the various venues - including arts centres, cinemas and theatres.

Because fairly reliable information is now available elsewhere, we are only providing appropriate contacts, and a list (immediately below) of places where there are multiple venues with good access, and generally, nearby BB parking.

The O2 Arena is described in the chapter on *Places of interest*.

Because the book has grown so much, we are including descriptions on our website at www.accessinlondon.org of the access to:

- the various South Bank venues;
- the Barbican Centre;
- Kings Place;
- Stratford (with the Theatre Royal, the Stratford Circus arts venue and the Stratford East Picturehouse);
- the Royal Opera House;
- the London Coliseum; and,
- the Royal Albert Hall.

Most of these meet the criteria above.

Gaining access to entertainment has become considerably easier over the years, although there's still room for improvement.

The DDA is something of a mixed blessing - mainly good, as it encourages people to do all kinds of things they would otherwise not have done, but it can be bad if it encourages the attitude "Well, we've met the required 'standard' (often poorly understood or explained)".

Widening the perception of 'access' to include provisions for those with hearing and visual impairments, and for those with learning difficulties is also a mixed blessing. The needs of those with a variety of disabilities are, of course, of great importance. There is the need for loops or infra-red systems for hearing impaired people, and of BSL and other special performances. However, the inclusion of information on websites across all disabilities and the parallel extension of the training for 'Access information providers', means that much of the information is posted by someone who probably has no detailed understanding of what is involved. Even the people who answer a phone enquiry may/will have limited experience, and will be working from a 'script' on their computer screen. Most will, of course, be as helpful as they can.

A number of venues have *Access Membership Schemes* for booking ‘accessible’ spaces or seats, and people will need to negotiate directly with the individual venues if they want to join.

A relatively common concession in the price of entry is to include a free companion seat, as in many situations the disabled spectator is unable to get there/get in without a companion and facilitator. An example of this is the **Cinema Exhibitors Association Card**. It’s a photocard renewed annually which (under certain conditions) gets your companion in free.

Contact the CEA at:

The Card Network, Network House, St Ives Way, Sandycroft, CH5 2QS

Tel: 0845 123-1292 *Textphone:* 0845 123-1297

website: www.ceacard.co.uk

The biggest ongoing challenge in relation to access to entertainment in central London is probably to do with parking and the transport system, together with the fact that some of the oldest venues were built long before ‘access’ was an issue.

Particularly for chair users, most venue managers now provide reliable data about the their facilities, and the person in the box office will probably be able to answer any queries accurately if you phone. That wasn’t the case some years ago. There is nearly always provision for one or more chair users in the audience, generally with a nearby accessible toilet.

At some places the management want to maximise their revenue rather than provide the maximum number of chair spaces or the best view for a chair user. This may apply when it is necessary to remove a seat to accommodate a wheelchair.

Disabled walkers will have more difficulty in getting the information they may need, and hence appropriate seating. The data published in our earlier guides was insufficient in this respect anyway, and we don’t have the necessary resource to make a comprehensive description for all of London’s venues.

In many places, the best way for an ambulant disabled person to get an easily accessible seat is to book one which is on a level where there are wheelchair spaces. This should avoid internal steps, although it may be necessary to use a side entrance which might need to be specially opened. Note that most auditoriums have raked seating, with one or two steps between each row, and very few have handrails by these steps.

Cinemas

There are now a good number of cinemas with accessible screens throughout London, and we only mention here a few accessible multiplexes, some of which have adjacent parking.

There are ten Vue cinemas in London, see www.myvue.com/vue-cinemas-in-london.

They include a cinema on Lower Regent Street with five accessible screens. Particular ones of interest with parking, include Westfield London (at Shepherd's Bush), Westfield Stratford, and, further out, one at Acton. There are quite long distances between the parking and the cinemas at both Westfield centres. There's the smaller and more compact Whiteleys complex in Queensway, with an attached MSCP, see www.viewlondon.co.uk/cinemas/odeon-whiteleys-info-9223.html.

If you require information regarding subtitles and audio description for cinemas visit www.yourlocalcinema.com.

Arts centres

The biggest centres are around the South Bank, and at the Barbican. All the venues there are basically 'accessible' but see www.accessinlondon.org for details.

On the South Bank, there's a whole variety, with the National Theatre complex, the British Film Institute centre and the concert halls known as the Southbank Centre, including the Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall and the Purcell Room. There is also the extensive London Wonderground which appears during the summer in temporary venues with sideshows, bandstands, food stalls, and sometimes roving performers. This is located between the Festival Hall and the London Eye.

The Hayward Gallery on the upper level, is described in the chapter on *Museums and galleries*.

The Barbican has, among other things, a concert hall, two theatres, three cinema screens a library and an art gallery.

All of these have relatively good, nearby/ish BB parking, and relatively good (if slightly confusing) access. If you're going to any of the venues for the first time, we suggest that you arrive there with plenty of time to spare, to allow for some 'exploration' !

There is a smaller arts centre at Kings Place, near St Pancras station, and several venues near to each other at Stratford. Parking is slightly more of a challenge but both are around 500m from an 'accessible' tube station.

Note also the generally excellent provisions made at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and those at the lower levels in the London Coliseum in St Martin's Lane. Parking near both of these can be a bit of a challenge.

Reliable information sources

For anyone with special needs, it is generally best to negotiate access with the venue management when booking. This is particularly true in places where seats have to be removed, which takes a little time. Fortunately for theatre going, the culture is such that booking in advance is quite normal. That is not quite so true for going to the cinema, where people are more used to taking decisions on the spur of the moment. However, the new multiplexes do offer disabled cinema goers much more choice about where they can go, and an environment where there are virtually no access difficulties.

Most venues provide for people who have impaired hearing. A good number of theatres now have infra-red systems and will lend you a headset, while cinemas tend to use induction loops.

There are occasional signed performances for deaf people; both SOLT and the venue concerned will have details.

For people who are visually impaired it is often best to sit at the front of the stalls. Chair users have to use the 'chair spaces' provided or transfer to a nearby seat.

Artsline have been information providers for more than thirty years, and now have an extensive database covering arts and entertainment venues. They have promoted the key message that access equals inclusion - which has been part of the Access Project (PHSP) *raison d'être* since the 1960s.

During this time, attitudes have changed enormously, and Artsline are partly a victim of their own success - in that because much of the information is now 'mainstreamed', it has become more difficult to fund their operation.

Their information is available online at: www.artsline.org.uk where there is a searchable database covering more than two thousand arts venues in London. Like that for Inclusive London (see below) it is not now consistently updated.

There's information in the **Direct Enquiries** directory at **Inclusive London** www.inclusivelondon.com but this is also not updated on a regular basis, and does not include a date when the information was last checked. It has a slightly eccentric listing under Entertainment, but it includes theatres and concert halls. The information is presented as a listing from a standard questionnaire, with no attempt at an intelligent description to make it easier to use.

Both the Artsline and Inclusive London information is presented in the form of a searchable database, now regarded as THE modern way to hold and provide data. Unfortunately, as is very common, there is no record of when the information was collected, nor whether it was supplied by the venue operator, or by an independent visitor. This (in our view) reduces its value, and there is a danger of old incorrect data lurking in the system, possibly for years.

With the Access Project data in the guide, it is at least clear when it was collected and published - and there's a page on our website for *Updated information*.

Shape Arts

Deane House Studios, 27 Greenwood Place, NW5 1LB

Tel: 020 7424-7330 Textphone: 020 7424-7368

website: www.shapearts.org.uk e-mail: info@shapearts.org.uk

Shape is a disability-led arts organisation working to improve access to culture for disabled people. It includes participation in a wide range of activities, mainly in the London area.

Society of London Theatre (SOLT)

32 Rose Street, WC2E 9ET

Tel: 020 7557-6700 Emergency helpdesk: 08444 9999-999

website: www.solt.co.uk e-mail: enquiries@soltukt.co.uk

SOLT is an organisation that represents the producers, theatre owners and managers of the major commercial and grant-aided theatres in central London.

SOLT publish an excellent downloadable Theatre Access Guide - where they have copied our style (from earlier editions), in providing information for both chair users and disabled walkers about access to all parts of the theatre. **It is updated regularly.**

SOLT do not, however, include information about the number of internal steps involved in getting to a particular row of seats, nor of whether there might be a handrail on the gangway. This would make the guide far too complicated, but if you're booking seats, you need to ask when making a reservation. As we said earlier, booking seats level with the wheelchair spaces, and using the same entrance, should minimise the risk of encountering unexpected steps.

Visit the www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/access/ site, which also has comprehensive lists of performances which are BSL interpreted, audio-described, or captioned. They also list specially designed performances for people with autism and other learning disabilities, under the Relaxed Performance Project.

Ticket agencies

Some ticket agencies can book accessible seats/spaces, and the information they provide can be generally helpful. However, the person taking your call when making a booking may never have been to the venue you want to visit.

We recently made enquiries from **Ticketmaster** about the accessible facilities at Beating the Retreat on Horse Guards Parade in June. In the on-line section relating to the event, we were offered the (slightly simplistic) choice between various types of accessible seat:

- wheelchair
- mobility impaired
- sight impaired
- hearing impaired.

They have a dedicated phone line specifically for queries about accessible seating, Tel: 0800 988-4440, and were helpful and reasonably informative when we spoke

to them. Mobility impaired walkers would have to say/explain in detail what they can do and what might be a challenge - like steps without a handrail, for example, or going a long way down a row past a lot of 'knees and bags' to get to a seat. The person taking the call said rather simplistically that a mobility impaired walker could sit anywhere they liked in the stands.

The other agencies that we looked at had no information on their website relating to booking accessible tickets.

At **Ticketline**, for example, you have to ring customer services

Tel: 0844 888-4420, who may well refer you on to the venue involved.

At **eLondon tickets** you need to ring *Tel:* 020 7734-2088.

London Theatre Bookings www.londontheatrebookings.com advised us to go directly to each theatre to book an accessible seat/space.

The Really Useful Theatre group have a central booking system,

Tel: 0844 412-4648 or *e-mail:* access@seetickets.com for booking accessible seats.