

Case study 2: Allocating sufficient space for wheelchair users

As the secretary of the parish hall you receive a telephone call from an irate visitor who is not happy with the reception and response she had last night from the person on the 'door' at the annual village pantomime. She explains that when she arrived there were no contingency arrangements for wheelchairs but eventually she was found a space at the back of the hall. When she asked to be seated with her family, she was told that as the hall was so busy her wheelchair would cause a potential fire hazard and the hall would not be covered by the insurance.

As the secretary of the hall management committee, how would you respond?

- Apologise and empathise! Go on to explain that the pantomime was being put on by the drama group and therefore it was their responsibility to arrange the seating; if the pantomime is put on by the hall management committee they are responsible. It is important to establish responsibility – the management committee are responsible for the fabric (i.e. ramps, toilets, hearing loop etc.) whilst the hirer is responsible for their management of the event. In theory, the hirer should not be using facilities which are not accessible for disabled people.
- The hall management committee should have submitted floor layouts and seating plans for licensing arrangements with their District Council or Unitary Authority. These floor layouts and seating plans should be available to all user group co-ordinators and hirers. These layouts and seating plans should also comply with health and safety regulations – i.e. the chairs should not block a fire exit, the chairs should be 'locked' together and there should be adequate space for a wheelchair and a walking person to pass in an aisle or corridor. Depending on the width of the room (and therefore the number of seats in each row) it may be necessary to have between one and three aisles. If these steps are taken, there should be no insurance or health and safety redress.
- Disabled people should be able to sit with their family, partner, carer etc. It would be sensible to ask, at the time of booking, if anyone had any specific needs (e.g. dietary, vision, hearing, mobility, transcription). However, there is no requirement for people to share this information, and therefore arrangements should be made in advance. It is suggested that

Access & Awareness Project Community Buildings, Summer 2008

(Scenario)



the first couple of rows (depending on total capacity) might have 2 less chairs (1 wheelchair equivalent roughly to 2 chairs). As in allocating accessible car parking spaces in a car park, it is suggested that 2% of the total capacity of the seating is available for wheelchair users.

- Provide the relevant information to hirers and user group co-ordinators – e.g. policy and procedure documents, floor plans and seating layouts.
- For visually impaired people it would be a real bonus (particularly in a village production) to be offered an audio description of the pantomime. These descriptions can be produced at the final dress rehearsal and it might be an interesting little project for some of the young people living in the community. In the first instance, they may need some guidance from the producer, director or someone who has had experience of doing something like this before.