

North East England Tourism Awards 2009

Access for All Award

North Music Trust, The Sage Gateshead (Gold award) Calvert Trust Kielder (Silver award) Hedley Hall Country Cottages (Bronze award)

'We pride ourselves on being open and accessible to everyone – right the way through from the building itself to our diverse programme of music and events,' says Helen Fussell, head of strategic communications for The Sage Gateshead – Gold award winner of Access for All.

'The Sage Gateshead was designed and built to be accessible,' Helen says. 'We sought to go beyond compliance to become a model of good practice. We aim to be accessible to all: from visitors and performers to deliveries and staff. There is level access everywhere – from front of house to backstage and in all staff areas.'

'Gateshead Council involved people with various access issues as part of their planning panel. Therefore, when the venue opened in 2004 we were as accessible as we could be.'

Considering accessibility from the very start is still evident when putting together programmes and events. Helen explains, 'Chris Turner is our dedicated access champion in the customer services team. He ensures our accessible facilities are maintained and our information is up to date.'

'Chris is the main contact point for access information enquiries and feedback – both internally (eg for event planning) and externally (for visitors to the building). He trains staff in dealing with customer enquiries about access issues and shows them how to use all our access equipment. He's also responsible for putting together and updating our Access Guide and Access Statement.'

Chris continues, 'We are particularly proud of our Access Statement. It was a great process to go through as it makes you focus on your strengths and weaknesses, meaning we can identify where improvements can be made. It gives clear, concise information to customers about all our accessible features. We're pleased it's used by One North East as an example of best practice.'

The Sage Gatehead's commitment to being accessible to everyone is evident in their ticketing policy. 'We want to be affordable to everyone. Our cheapest concert tickets start at £7, we offer discount packages and concessions, and we have a carer-comes-free ticket policy,' Helen explains.

She also highlights the attitude of the customer service staff. She says, 'They're so committed to

accommodating every request they can and aim to respond to all enquiries within a week. If you send in a letter you will get a response, saying thank you for raising the issue and explaining what will be done.'

The Sage Gateshead was host to this year's national MS Life conference. 'We wouldn't have won the conference if the organisers hadn't been confident we could deliver accessible facilities for such a wide range of people,' Helen says. 'For us, the event proved our detailed planning processes work and highlighted the need to have even more flexibility. MS sufferers often don't know until the day how incapacitated they might be. We therefore changed all the bolts on the seats in Hall One so we could remove more seats to accommodate wheelchairs if required. It's just one example of our ongoing commitment to making improvements.'



Feedback from the awards assessment was also useful. Helen says, 'One thing the assessor commented on was the lack of audio on our website and whether we'd assessed its accessibility in general. It is DDA compliant and we're reviewing the site at the moment, but we've already started to put on more audio and will add more as it's developed. All feedback really helps. We don't want to get complacent!'

Silver award-winner, Calvert Trust Kielder is also committed to ensuring their centre's activity breaks are accessible for people of all abilities. The Trust, which has just celebrated its 25th anniversary, offers fully-integrated activity breaks for groups and individuals, adult respite care for those over 18 years old and self-catering lodges with groups and families in mind.

Tara Martin, a team leader in customer services says the Trust is particularly proud of the fact they can tailor-make anyone's package. She says, 'We can respond to special requirements, from dietary to

providing a pick up from the station. This means we don't just have three standard packages – we can tailor them to guests' needs.'

Staff will discuss with guests what activities they are comfortable with and able to do. The Trust also has a specially-designed harness for the Tower and a hoist available on the jetty. These allow staff to make sure the guest is comfortable with what they are being asked to do. Tara says, 'It's important we discuss with guests what they would like to do and how they might wish, for example, to be transferred into a boat.'



All the staff, from activity to catering and domestic, are therefore involved in providing the tailor-made packages. Tara says, 'We have high standards of customer care throughout the centre. Customers often have a sense they are returning to their second home – they know all the staff, for example on reception, and know where they can get a cuppa. We see this as one reason for our 70% repeat business.'

She continues, 'We also consider our respite care service to be very important because it provides respite for both the client and people at home. Without it parents and carers wouldn't get a break as well.'

The Trust makes great use of their customer feedback to inspire new services. Tara says, 'As well as having customer feedback forms, it's also nice to sit down with the guests and ask them what they think – what would they suggest? For example, following comments from our guests, we now have an indoor climbing wall as well the outside tower for days when it's raining.'

'One of our big comments this year has been about families, who come to us with one child with disabilities and one non-disabled child. Our tailored packages allow them to do activities together and not feel different. Inclusion is very important to us. All guests are treated the same no matter what disability they may have.'

The winner of the Bronze award is also strongly motivated by wanting to offer choice to her guests. Brenda Fraser, proprietor of Hedley Hall Country Cottages says, 'The motivation for developing cottages which would be accessible to all stems

from my husband being disabled. We found it very difficult to find places to stay that could accommodate people with different degrees of disability. I wanted to offer a choice to people – to tailor to individual needs as much as possible and increase the opportunities for people with disabilities.'

Brenda runs her 4-Star self-catering cottages alongside B&B accommodation in the Hall itself. All four cottages have achieved National Accessible Scheme Hearing 1, Visual 1 and Mobility 3.

'We put in facilities to suit the whole family as I feel it's important not to single anyone out,' Brenda says. 'As well as a level wet room, built off a bedroom so the disabled guest has the privacy of bathing in their own area, we put in a second bathroom with bath and overhead shower for other family members.'

'The cottages are spacious with turning space for wheelchairs. We have ramps to the front door with yellow lines every so often so guests with a visual impairment can know where they are. I also feel it's important to have level access to the outside patio and garden area.'

She adds, 'We hoped the cottages would work hand in hand with the B&B, so someone could, for example, choose to be independent of their parents staying in the Hall.'



Brenda is particularly proud of the fact the Stanley Lions Club have donated an electric hoist, which has been used on a number of occasions. 'It has been very gratefully received by guests,' Brenda says, 'and led me to contact a local company so guests can hire other equipment if needed. I've had very positive feedback about this aspect of my service. A few of these guests have been back to stay with us on more than one occasion now.'

Brenda concludes, 'When I was putting my awards entry together I realised just how much I had achieved under emotional and difficult circumstances. Feedback saying that I was committed made me realise just how dedicated I am to this project, and its future. I want guests of all abilities to have the facilities and service that will cater to their needs and help them enjoy their stay. Hopefully they will come back to Hedley Hall and recommend it to others.'