Involving disabled people in planning and



Taking an inclusive approach to evaluation helps measure a wider range of people's engagement. Image: Sense.

Sense and the National Trust's innovative and flexible approach is making sure everyone's experiences are represented.

Have you ever listened to a plant or felt music? The Internal Garden project made both of these things possible with £64,000 in National Lottery funding. It helped people who are deafblind or have complex disabilities to connect with nature in National Trust gardens across the West Midlands.

Internal Garden was a collaboration between Sense, the National Trust and sound artist Justin Wiggan. It aimed to find new ways for people who use non-traditional forms of communication to access heritage.

> It's only when you combine the different forms of communication that you can try to get the truest sense of somebody's journey.
>
> *Stephanie Tyrrell, Head of Arts and Wellbeing at Sense*

Using conductive pads placed on plants and people's skin it was possible to convert changes in the plants' electrical currents into music and vibrations. In a series of workshops and sensory walks, participants could hear and feel the

different species in the garden.

Recordings of the plants and audio of the experiences of staff and workshop participants were then shared with the public through interactive soundscape installations at Wightwick Manor and Croome.

Connecting with heritage

For Sense, it was important for the evaluation process to be as inclusive as the project itself.

Stephanie Tyrrell, Head of Arts and Wellbeing at Sense, explains how project evaluation was designed with accessibility in mind: “We always have different forms of communication embedded in our activities and we work closely with the support staff to include observational feedback alongside first-person reporting using easy read surveys and self reporting tools.

“It's only when you combine the different forms of communication that you can try to get the truest sense of somebody's journey.”

During Internal Garden, artists and support staff received training on different responses and changes to look out for in worksh ng on speech garden



Resources like easy read maps and surveys mean more people can access heritage and share their experiences. Image: Sense.

Stephanie highlights the importance of gathering different types of responses: “As well as measuring learning about the heritage of the different gardens and properties, we also looked at factors like: did you enjoy the day? Is there anything

that you'd change? Did you enjoy experiencing the new technology? Are there other gardens or areas that you were interested in? So it was a really layered approach in trying to create this picture of people's engagement within the sessions."

Capturing individual journeys

Inclusive evaluation also involves understanding how engagement with heritage can look different for different people.

"Actually, for some of the people we support, it was about turning up and having a cup of tea or turning up and deciding 'no, I don't want to go in there today'.

"It's important to capture all those journeys: people who wanted to come in and then left, right the way through to people who connected long term with the gardens, explored new plants or learned about the heritage within that particular site."

Sharing disabled people's perspectives

Increasing the visibility of disabled people in heritage can encourage more people to take part in heritage activities and share their experiences. When it comes to addressing ableism in the heritage sector more broadly, Stephanie acknowledges it takes "focus and energy".

But, she says, there is a wealth of expertise for organisations to draw on: "If you're doing an access audit or review, if you've got a new exhibition coming up or a bit of architecture or redevelopment, bring in people with lived experience. They're the experts on what they need.

"Within the heritage sector, there are a lot of people with lived experience, but they may not feel so confident about coming forward. Making the stories of disabled people, now and through time, more visible can make a huge difference. The stories are there – we all need to amplify them."



A participant connecting with the plants at Wightwick Manor. Image: Sense.

“What was really nice was the way the final installation allowed us to showcase the recordings that we'd created in the workshops – the different plants and areas that people connected with – to the National Trust’s wider audiences. In the future we'd love to share these stories further and more explicitly highlight the journeys of the people we support.”

Welcoming everyone

Lessons learned from the delivery and evaluation of Internal Garden will benefit future National Trust audiences, too.

“When people are nervous about getting it wrong, that can be a barrier to access in itself,” Stephanie says. “Raising the confidence of staff and volunteers to welcome disabled visitors – simple stuff like having easy read maps or somebody that can sign ‘hello, nice to meet you’ – can go a long way.

“It doesn't have to be all-singing, all-dancing, mega expensive or mega resource heavy. It's our attitudes that can really open the door for people to be able to connect and feel welcomed.”

Planning your own heritage project?

Get advice on how to involve more people and measure the impact of your project with our inclusion and evaluation good practice guidance.



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It can be hard for people with complex disabilities and medical conditions to access nature and heritage. Photo: Sense.



ardens



itor access to Parc Cefn Onn

Tour guides at the Foyle Valley Railway and Transport Museum posing with visitors. Credit: Destined

Why you should involve people with lived experience in your heritage project