The app transforming visitor experience for

The museum worked with charities and the community to adopt NaviLens technology. Credit: Flick Baker.

Blandford Town Museum in Dorset shares how it's using innovative technology to help make heritage more accessible.

In 2023 we awarded the small, volunteer-run museum £25,020 to improve its offering for blind and partially sighted visitors. With the help of a steering group made up of sight-loss charities and local people with vision impairment, the museum settled on an app called NaviLens.

Museum Director, Sylvia Hixson Andrews and project producer, Flick Baker explain how it works and why collaborating with people with lived experience was key to the project's success.

What is NaviLens?

It uses technology similar to QR codes which can be scanned with a smartphone app to provide audio guides. NaviLens codes can be picked up from much further away than QR codes, meaning users don't need to see where a code is to scan it. The NaviLens app finds a code automatically and announces the subject.

In Blandford, the app is supporting people with vision impairment to navigate independently through the museum.

When the app picks up a code it speaks aloud to direct visitors to an exhibit, guide their hands to tactile displays, describe objects and tell stories about their history.

Sylvia says the project has been as much about enhancing the experience of heritage as it has been about physical access. “The audio is very exciting to listen to with music and sound effects.

“As we can’t read v

The app means visitors can find and learn about the museum’s exhibits on their own. Credit: Flick Baker.

Why community consultation matters

Involving people with expertise and lived experience of vision impairment was crucial for helping the museum team spot potential problems and find solutions. It taught them:

Not everyone will be familiar with assistive technology

“One of the biggest problems that came out of our meetings was that people who become blind when they're older don’t always know how to use all the accessibility features of their smartphone,” says Sylvia.

To help people understand the technology, Flick created an instructional video for sighted carers and the museum stewards to be able to help blind and vision impaired visitors use their phones’ assistive technology with the NaviLens app.

One legacy of the project has been the start of a Blind Book Group, who meet at the museum every month. The museum team hopes to offer smartphone training sessions for this group in the future.

What works for one person might not work for another

Younger and older visitors had different needs when it came to the content.

Sylvia explains: “If you lose your vision later in life you may be in the early stages of hearing loss as well and find it difficult to concentrate on different things – speech and music – coming into your ears at once. But when we talked to the Royal National Institute for Blind People and to younger people they said having music and sounds was really important to change the mood and add context.”

“So Flick worked closely with musician Dan Baker, who wrote and performed most of the music and was also the project’s narrator. He edited the music and sounds to fade out or in as the narration started and paused."

Testing your approach is essential

The museum’s original plan was to have one audio file for each exhibit. But early tests with the steering group suggested that breaking information down into smaller chunks would offer a better listening experience.

Flick says: “the group recommended dividing audio guides into chapters because they found it hard to absorb more than about three minutes of audio. The other benefit to come out of that is that people have a choice of content, they have the freedom to select what most interests them and skip what doesn’t.”

Find out more about Blandford Town Museum’s work and read our inclusion good practice guidance for further advice on making heritage more accessible.

The new spaces have been designed with visitors of all ages and needs in mind. Photo: Jason Lock.

Putting inclusion, access and participation at the heart of the National Science and Media

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

aluation makes heritage more inclusive

Supporting diversity, equity and inclusion in the great outdoors. Photo: Wayfinding project.

Inclusion, access and participation: eight ways to improve your project’s reach and impact