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## INCLUSIVE APPROACHES IN HISTORIC GREEN SPACES

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**ABSTRACT:** In line with ideas of sustainable development outlined in the UN resolution “Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” the key objectives to be achieved by 2030 include: ensuring universal access to green spaces and public spaces that are safe for all and inclusive, while at the same time strengthening efforts to protect cultural and natural heritage. The article presents, using selected examples of historic parks, gardens and landscapes, how these goals are being realized. Sites examined here include the Garden of Versailles, Stonehenge and the cultural landscape surrounding this monument, managed by English Heritage, and the Historic England policy of making historic parks, gardens and landscapes accessible. Analysis of strategies for making historic green spaces and cultural landscapes accessible to people with special needs, developed by the above institutions, concludes with proposals of general principles for an inclusive policy for this category of monuments.

**KEYWORDS:** historic parks and gardens; people with special needs; people with disabilities, accessibility

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## **1. Introduction. International and national formal frameworks for inclusive policies in historic sites and areas**

According to the World Report on Disability, approximately 15% of the world's population suffers from some form of disability, of which 2-4% experience significant difficulties in their daily lives. It is estimated that the level of global disability is increasing due to the ageing of populations and the spread of chronic diseases (WHO, 2011).

People with disabilities are not the only ones who face barriers that prevent them from enjoying different spheres of life on an equal basis. Older people, people with common illnesses, pregnant women and parents with young children also face barriers. These users are collectively referred to as people with special needs. According to the statutory definition, a person with special needs is someone who, because of external or internal characteristics or circumstances, needs to take extra steps or apply extra measures to overcome barriers in order to participate in various spheres of life on an equal basis with others (Act of 19 July 2019 on Ensuring Accessibility for Persons with Special Needs, Art. 2). Problems that people with special needs may face in historic green spaces include but are not limited to: inability to overcome differences in ground level, presence of curbs and borders, uneven or poorly paved surfaces, lack of benches, lack of guiding elements and tactile paths, lack of nearby parking spaces for people with special needs, lack of information and communication accessibility, and finally, segregation and stigmatization of people with special needs.

Nowadays, formal solutions and strategies are being developed at both international and national levels to support people with special needs. By outlining the Sustainable Development Goals in the document "Transforming the World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (UN, 2015) the United Nations mandated, in Point 11, to take action to shape "[s]ustainable cities and human settlements," taking into account the need to ensure universal access to green spaces and public spaces that are safe for all and inclusive by 2030. This demand is particularly relevant for vulnerable social groups, including but not limited to women and children, older people and people with disabilities.

It is worth noting that in the same paragraph of the above-mentioned UN document achieving sustainable development is argued to require strengthening of efforts to protect cultural and natural heritage.

In Poland, the legal basis for regulating the social functioning of persons with special needs is the Act of 19 July 2019 on Ensuring Accessibility for Persons with Special Needs. In addition to "person with special needs," it also defines the concepts of "universal design" and "reasonable improvement." These statutory definitions refer to the "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" drafted in New York on 13 December 2006 (UN, 2006). The topic of accessibility of cultural objects, including historic ones, is also the subject of recommendations made by of the Ministry of Development Funds and Regional Policy, entitled "Guidebook for the cultural sector on ensuring accessibility" (2021) as well as recommendations prepared at the local government level, e.g. "Accessibility Standards for the City of Warsaw" (Tota & Miśkowiec, 2017).

Considering the subject of this article – making historic green spaces accessible to people with special needs – and the statutory definitions of universal design and reasonable improvement, it can be assumed that:

- “Universal design in historic green spaces” aims to design green spaces and facilities within their boundaries in such a way that they are usable to everyone, including people with special needs. In historic green areas, this type of design should be applied mainly when designing new elements linked with the modern functioning of historic green areas (e.g. modern playgrounds located within historic parks, necessary elements in the surroundings of new restaurants or car parks). Due to the conservation practice of minimizing contemporary functions of historic sites, universal design should prevail given that it does not destroy the historic fabric.
- “Reasonable improvement in historic green spaces” involves adapting historic areas and facilities for use by people with special needs to ensure that they can enjoy such places without undue or disproportionate burden. Due to considerations of conservation, decisions to implement reasonable improvements must take into account the need to protect the historic fabric.

In order to enable people with special needs to use historic green spaces, many of their managers also implement, to the fullest extent possible, dedicated solutions in the areas of heritage interpretation, education and recreation. The following section presents the adaptation of selected parks, gardens and other historic areas to the needs of visitors with special needs, taking as examples the Château de Versailles Museum, English Heritage, and Historic England.

## **2. Making the Garden of Versailles accessible to people with special needs**

It may be argued that the Garden of Versailles was adapted to the needs of people with special needs already in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, when Louis XIV, who had difficulty in moving around towards the end of his life, was forced to enjoy his gardens in a special armchair on wheels. In result, the design of the Garden of Versailles has favored this kind of usage. A forerunner of universal design, André Le Nôtre designed a system of ramps with gentle slopes to connect the different levels of the garden, providing an alternative to stairs. This system still works well today, making it easier for people in wheelchairs and those with visual impairments to move around the garden.



Fig. 1. Louis XIV in an armchair on wheels in the Garden of Versailles. Detail of Pierre Denis Martin's *View of the Apollo Basin and the Grand Canal of Versailles*, 1713 (left). Stairs and ramps connecting parts of the Garden of Versailles, 2018 (right). Photo by Dorota Sikora.

Today, the managers of Château de Versailles declare that both the palace and the gardens are accessible to everyone. In practice, in the gardens of Versailles it is possible to find places of greater or lesser accessibility, but this declaration, presented at the museum's official website, shows that the managers of this monument are fully aware of the need to make it accessible to people with special needs. Accordingly, a special organizational unit has been set up within the museum's structure to provide support to visitors with special needs (Château de Versailles, 2022) in the form of information about, and physical assistance in moving around the site. Among the museum's activities aimed at providing information for people with special needs, the following can be mentioned:

- adding special sections to the museum website, dedicated to people with different types of disabilities: mobility, sight, hearing and intellectual;
- developing a legible system of visual and tactile information (including tactile maps and mock-ups);
- establishing telephone information for persons with special needs;
- developing a mobile application providing both information on the history of the Garden of Versailles and its values, as well as on the practical aspects of visiting, including the current intensity of tourist traffic in various areas of *Le domaine de Versailles*, which can be an important consideration when planning the time and route of visits from the perspective of people with special needs.



Physical assistance to people with special needs consists of supporting them in moving around the garden, providing shortcuts that are not accessible to other visitors, organizing parking in convenient locations, with designated spaces for people with disabilities.

The Château de Versailles Museum also attaches great importance to the mobility-related accessibility of its grounds. The well-compacted mineral and gravel surfaces that predominate in the Garden of Versailles are perceived by users with special needs as affording comfortable movement (Sage Traveling, 2022). At the same time, it should be emphasized that this type of paving has a full historical justification at this site.

The museum has also made sure that the main entrance to *Le domaine de Versailles* is shared by everyone. As it leads through the courtyards of the palace, where the historical surface is made of stone blocks – not very convenient for people with impaired mobility or sight – a strip of even paving was contemporarily laid on the palace axis, using polished blocks of the same material, but with much smaller gaps between them than in other parts of the palace courtyards.



Fig. 2. View of the palace courtyards; after Google Maps (left). A strip of leveled pavement on the palace axis (right); photo by D. Sikora, 2018.

In some parts of the Garden of Versailles, the main roads with uneven stone paving, are accompanied by parallel side roads with a mineral surface. This solution is justified by the historical design of this baroque garden, where the main roads, often with a hardened surface (*Grande Allées*) were accompanied by two narrower side roads (*Contre Allées*).

Architectural barriers at *Le domaine de Versailles* in the form of stairs and thresholds between the garden and the buildings are leveled by wooden ramps, which are not permanently connected either to the ground or to the historic buildings. Their simplicity and material (wood) do not permanently transform the historic building.



Fig. 3. The *Grande Allée* with stone paving and the *Contre Allée* with more comfortable mineral paving (left). Photo by D. Sikora, 2018. Wooden platform levelling the threshold at one of the entrances to the Palace of Versailles (right). Photo by D. Sikora, 2018.

As an alternative to walking particularly long distances (e.g. along the route from the Palace of Versailles to Petit Trianon, which is ca 1.5 km long), the museum offers an electric mini-train adapted to transport wheelchair users. It is also possible to hire a small electric vehicle to visit the garden individually. The cost is lower for people with disabilities than for other visitors. It is significant that the entire modern tourist infrastructure of the museum, including ticket points for the mini-train and the small electric vehicles, as well as the vehicles themselves, have a neutral, grey-green color pattern. This makes it easier for all visitors to find their way around, while at the same time ensuring that these elements do not interfere with the historical landscape of Versailles.

The Château de Versailles Museum also takes care to provide the best possible interpretations of the Garden of Versailles for people with disabilities. For example, it offers visually impaired visitors the help of volunteers from the foundation Souffleurs d'Images, who are students or graduates in art history. Their task is to accompany visually impaired visitors during visits, telling them about various places and objects. The museum also offers a number of guided tours of the Garden of Versailles adapted to the needs of visitors with disabilities. Moreover, in months with fewer visitors (usually the end of November and the beginning of December), a week for people with disabilities is organized, with various educational and integration workshops about the history of the palace, the garden and current exhibitions.

Not all spaces and objects in the Garden of Versailles are fully accessible to people with special needs. Making some of them accessible would involve too much damage to the historic substance and its permanent transformation. To preserve authenticity, no attempts were made to enhance the accessibility of steep paths in Petit Trianon and the grotto where Marie Antoinette hid just before arrest. Some visitors may also find it impossible to access the underground route, which exhibits a valuable monument of technology – the seventeenth-century water supply system for the fountains of Versailles. For the same reason, the number of benches in the Garden of Versailles is same as it was historically (with several exceptions). They are considered to be not only utilitarian but also a compositional element; hence, their number, material, color and location are based on conservation considerations rather than on the needs of contemporary visitors. A similar approach was taken in other French historic



gardens, e.g. in the Tuilleries gardens, where no contemporary benches were added despite the high number of visitors. Instead, portable metal chairs, neutral in color, were adopted as a compromise solution.



Fig. 4. A typical Versailles stone bench – part of the garden’s design (left). Photo by D. Sikora, 2018. Contemporary, staggered metal chairs in a neutral color, complementing the historic benches in the Tuilleries garden (right). Photo by D. Sikora, 2018.

### **3. Practices of English Heritage and Historic England in making historic gardens and landscapes accessible**

The English Heritage Foundation and the government agency Historic England are the key institutions shaping contemporary UK policy on historic sites. Established in 2014, English Heritage inherits the traditions of the national organization of the same name, which has cared for selected monuments since the late nineteenth century. It now manages a collection of more than four hundred historic buildings, gardens, engineering monuments, archaeological sites and even Cold War bunkers, visited by more than ten million tourists each year.

One of its flagship sites is Stonehenge. In 2019, UK Age Mobility, basing on TripAdvisor ratings, hailed this megalithic monument as the most accessible heritage site in the UK (English Heritage, 2022). As English Heritage staff acknowledge, “[i]n programming the Stonehenge tour, we worked with disability groups to ensure that it met the needs of those requiring special access.” The adaptation of this site to meet the needs of people with special needs has primarily involved the construction of a footpath adjacent to the stone circle, partly paved and partly grassed, thereby significantly improving accessibility. At the same time, the quality of the landscape surrounding the monument was addressed. In order to exclude possible harmful investments in its vicinity, the land around Stonehenge was purchased by the National Trust (a non-profit organization involved in the preservation of British monuments). With regard for the authenticity of landscape, the Stonehenge visitor center providing sanitary, catering and educational facilities is located at a distance of about two kilometers from the monument. It has been fully adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, and developed in accordance with the principles of universal design. A wheelchair-accessible bus service runs every few minutes between the center and Stonehenge.

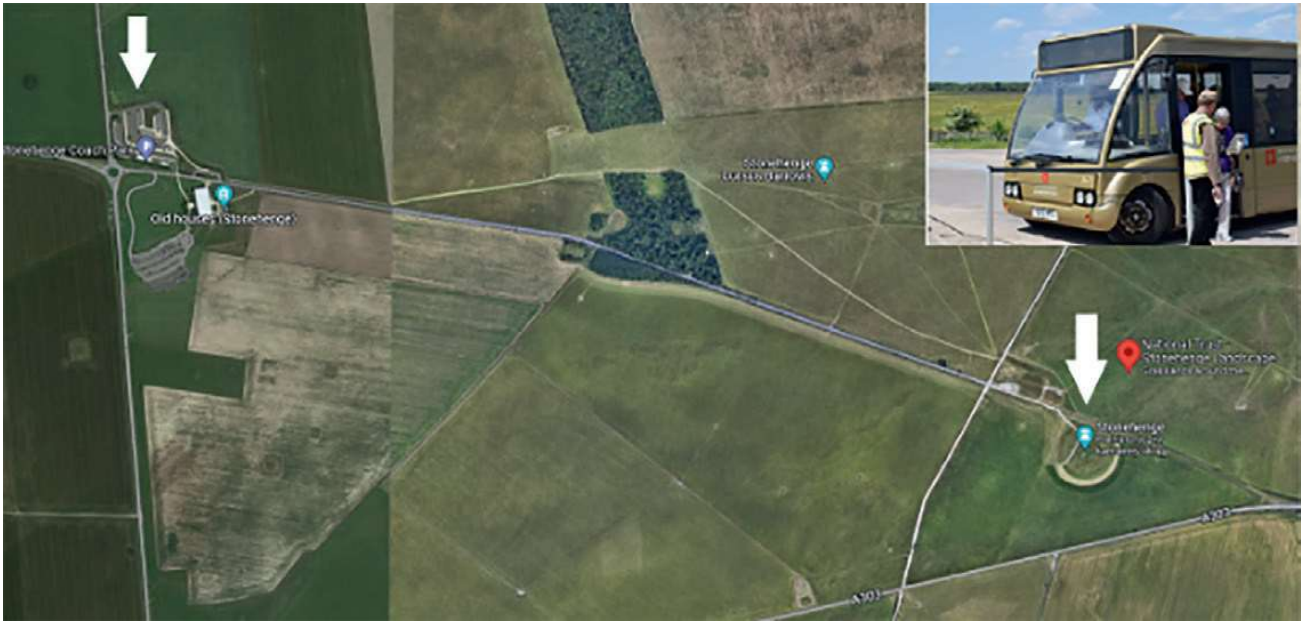


Fig. 5. Stonehenge. Location of the tourist service center and the stone circle, which are separated by about 2 km, with the possibility of access by a bus adapted to transport people with disabilities.  
After: Google Maps. D. Sikora, 2022.

On a much broader scale, the principles of making historic sites accessible to people with special needs are addressed by Historic England – an organization that shapes UK conservation policy, maintains and updates the list of UK historic sites, and supervises spatial planning in historic areas. In 2015, it published general recommendations on enhancing the accessibility of historic areas such as parks, gardens and landscapes, adapting them to the needs of people with disabilities, entitled *Easy Access to Historic Landscapes* (Historic England, 2015) and intended for owners of historic buildings and their managers as well as planners and designers. Historic England’s main policies regarding people with special needs are as follows:

- The motto for actions in the above field is: “Access and conservation: getting the balance right.”
- Historic sites are there for all to enjoy.
- Universal access to cultural heritage and its interpretation means understanding it better, discovering its value, protecting it better and treating it in a sustainable way.
- Easier access for people with disabilities (11.7 million people in the UK) entails easier access for many others: the elderly, parents with small children, or people with temporary health problems (18 million in total).
- Improving access does not always require major interventions in the substance of the monument. Strengthening the skills of staff and volunteers as well as public consultations with disabled users are as important as making physical transformations.
- Measures to make historic parks and gardens more accessible need to be balanced with measures to preserve the authenticity and integrity of this group of monuments.



- The great diversity of historic gardens and landscapes means that improving their accessibility cannot be strictly standardized. Each site is different and solutions should be developed for each one individually by taking into account its unique characteristics.

Historic England has also proposed a range of good practices for a variety of interventions in historic parks to improve their accessibility for people with special needs. These are mostly low budget measures that can also be beneficial from the perspective of conservation. For example, in terms of making park roads more accessible, Historic England recommends to:

- Recognize the historical significance of roads in a park, garden or landscape and their historic materials.
- Regularly repair damage to path surfaces.
- Where justified, replace loose paving with an alternative, paved and non-slippery surface.
- Where cubes or slabs are uneven, re-lay them and make new connections to create a level surface.
- If necessary, incorporate a strip of levelled stone paving in areas with uneven paving.

Historic England also recommends publishing accessibility maps of historic gardens and landscapes. The map of Chatsworth Park was identified as exemplary in this respect. The information it contains includes, among other things, the location of entrances to the site and the location of the most convenient car parks for people with special needs, and the location of basic services. It also informs about the possibility to hire wheelchairs (electric and traditional), to transport wheelchair users around the park in a 28-passenger electric vehicle (important for group visits). Further, the map features routes adapted for wheelchairs (with a color-coded scale of difficulty), and the location of possible architectural barriers. Finally, it reminds about the possibility to enter the park with guide dogs. In this way, adapting the facility to the needs of people with disabilities (as well as organizing cultural and educational events for them) significantly increased the number of visitors.

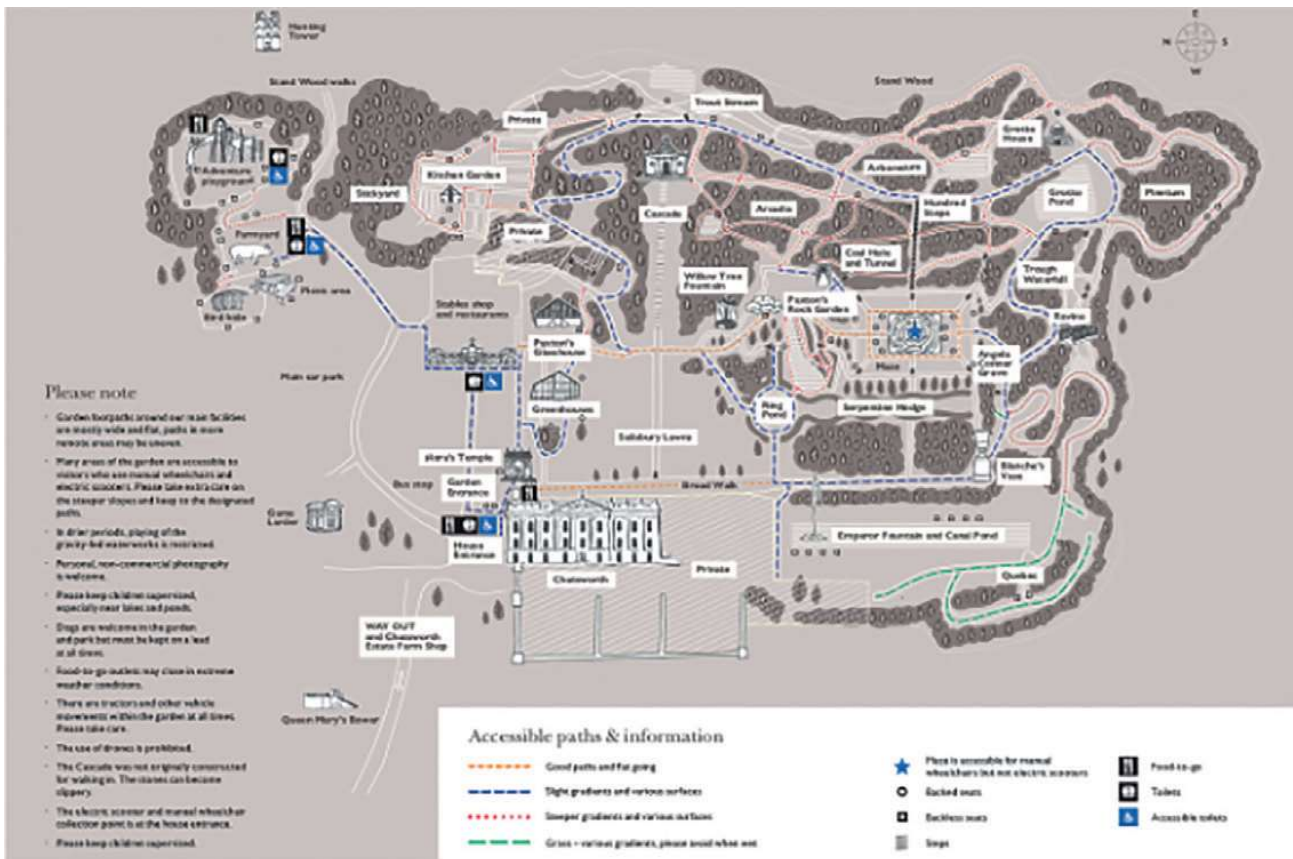


Fig. 6. Accessibility map of the Chatsworth Garden (UK). After: <https://www.chatsworth.org/media/3dhhel3b/chatsworth-accessibility-map-2021.pdf>.

#### 4. Summary

Analysis of strategies to make parks, gardens and cultural landscapes accessible, as developed at the Château de Versailles museum as well as by English Heritage and Historic England organizations allows to formulate some general guidelines for an inclusive policy towards this category of monuments:

- Making historic parks, gardens and landscapes accessible to the widest possible range of users, including those with special needs, promotes a better understanding of their value, protection and sustainable treatment.
- Improving the accessibility of historic green spaces should firstly be based on investment in “human capital” by focusing on strengthening the skills of staff and volunteers in making such sites accessible, developing a broad cultural and educational offer for people with special needs, expanding their ability to move around the site (e.g. by providing wheelchair hire), and consulting groups of people with different types of disabilities about optimal accessibility solutions.
- Universal design and the implementation of reasonable improvements in historic parks, gardens and landscapes should be exceptional and take place only where other methods are ineffective. They must not lead to permanent transformation of monuments in this category, or harm their authenticity and integrity.

- Objectives in protection and conservation of historic parks, gardens and landscapes, and improvements of accessibility in this group of monuments often coincide. One example is paving, whose good condition is desirable from the perspective of both conservation and accessibility. Accordingly, granite paving – highly overused in Polish gardens, and ahistorical in many cases – should be eliminated and replaced with a hardened gravel or mineral paving (if such surfaces are historically justified at the site).
- Providing access to historic parks, gardens and landscapes should be supported by appropriate information policy, including the development of accessibility maps indicating the level of difficulty of individual routes and possible architectural barriers, and of mobile applications, models and tactile maps. Finally, guides should be supported in the development of appropriate competences.
- Implementation of strategies for enhancing the accessibility of historic parks, gardens and landscapes should be accompanied by the promotion of good practices in this field among managers, designers and planners, including the development of publicly available recommendations on this subject.

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