Case Study

Vindolanda Trust

Access for All Cohort 2025-26

Supported using public funding by ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

Sophie Westlake, Activity & Diversity Officer for the **Vindolanda Trust** took part in MD North's **Access Cohort** in 2025-26.

She said, 'We were keen to learn from other museums, including those who have won awards for their accessibility work, and to replicate best practice and innovative ideas within our own museum service.

The cohort offered a structured framework within which to develop our accessibility offer, build skills across a wide range of accessibility needs, and learn practical tools such as how to undertake an **Access Audit**.

Having a dedicated mentor to directly support the development of our access resources was a particular priority, as was being part of a peer network across the North to share experiences and offer mutual support.

We were able to include our Magna Project Heritage Trainee in the training, who won **'Rising Star Award'** at the **North East Tourism Awards** partly as a result of being part of this cohort'.

What was the Access Cohort?

The cohort brought together delegates from **14** museums across the North of England who shared the aim of improving their offer for disabled visitors. The programme included a range of in-person and online events, combining sessions led by access consultants with lived experience, a range of expert guest speakers and case studies from museums who are leading the way in access and inclusion in the region. A new group of museums are currently taking part in 2026-27.

Visitors using newly created sensory bags © Vindolanda Trust

Some of the outputs resulting from the cohort:

- Developing sensory and visual story resources
- Organising audio described tours with tactile maps
- Creation of ‘Did you know..?’ posters to highlight accessible resources
- Undertaking an access audit of their website
- Development of two temporary exhibits with sensory elements
- Organising ‘Dementia Friends’ training for the team

An audio description tour of Vindolanda Roman Fort © Vindolanda Trust

What’s next for the museum?

Sophie said, ‘The training from the cohort has directly informed several important developments we are now taking forward. We are developing an **Access Rider** for all external people we work with, such as artists or freelancers, to ensure their individual needs are identified and met from the outset.

We are also establishing an **Accessibility Advisory Panel**, which we aim to launch later in 2026. The learning from this cohort will be used to train our wider staff team and embed a network of **Access Champions** who can advocate for this work within their own teams. Longer term, we plan to create a staff working group to ensure accessibility is genuinely embedded across the whole organisation.’

Top Tips for Success

1. Giving a member of staff **dedicated time and training** supports them to understand accessibility deeply and advocate for it across their team, which has a far greater impact than a single project or tool

2. Some of our most practical and creative developments came from learning what other colleagues were doing, **the power of a network** and having valuable in-person conversations makes solutions far easier to adapt and apply

3. Accessibility works when it is **woven into the whole organisation**. Our experience shows that improvements made for specific access needs benefit a wide range of visitors, and building staff working groups and Access Advisory Panels with audiences who have **lived experience** ensures the work has lasting influence and is not dependent on any one person

Find out more about how MD North can support you to make your museum more accessible on our website or contact Liz Denton liz.denton@museumdevelopmentnorth.org.uk