To find out more about Wakefield Museums and Castles Access support visit:
https://www.wakefield.gov.uk/museums-and-castles/wakefield-museum/access-at-wakefield-museum/

Wakefield Museums and Castles

Wakefield Museums is a collection of museums in Wakefield, West Yorkshire, England that tells the history of the area from prehistoric times to the present. Castleford Museum, Pontefract Museum and Wakefield Museum look after extraordinary collections telling the stories of people from the Wakefield District. The service also runs two historic castles, Sandal Castle and Pontefract Castle.

Pick and Mix Station: Sensory Resources for Independent Visits

Across 2021-2022, Wakefield Museums and Castles had an external accessibility audit completed for each of their sites. Keen to take on recommendations, the service set to work to provide an increased number of resources, with a focus on-site for visitors to pick up and use, rather than needing to ask for them.

Wakefield Museums chose to take a unique approach, offering their visitors the choice of what they'd like to take with them, filling a bag with resources from one of their freestanding units. They decided to call the units Pick and Mix stations, recognising that every visitor has different needs and may require something different.

The stations include a range of multi-sensory resources. Each drawer has its own unique theme.

Explore:
Various tools to explore displays in new ways, such as matching shapes, colours, sounds and other materials to the exhibitions.

Touch:
A range of fidget toys and tactile tools to engage with.

See:
Different lenses, colour overlays, magnifying glasses and frames, changing the look and colour contrast of displays to make them easier to read or to reveal new perspectives.

Sound:
Various sizes of ear defenders to support visitors who are sensitive to noise.

The stations are housed in the museum's Welcome Areas, removing the barrier of having to ask for resources. Having to ask the visitor experience team for resources can sometimes feel uncomfortable for us as neurodivergent visitors, feeling as though we need to disclose that we might find the environment challenging. They also include copies of sensory maps and floor plans of the museum for easy access.

The freedom and autonomy offered by not just being able to choose exactly what we want and need but being able to access these things straight away is instantly reassuring. Wakefield Museums have taken consideration to ensure they create an environment where neurodivergent visitors feel seen, heard and safe.

How did Wakefield Museums develop their resources?

I spoke to Louise Bragan, Senior Officer (Programming and Learning) and EDI Lead at Wakefield Museums and Castles to find out more about how the Pick and Mix stations were created.

What were the practical considerations of setting up the stations?

“The drawers are soft closing with space to avoid fingers getting trapped. They are also solid units that won’t tip over if all the drawers are pulled out. They are on casters that lock, so if they need to be moved then this will be possible. The bags hang on hooks on either side or on the wall above the unit.”

The Pick and Mix stations are great, but they are part of an even wider range of resources for your visitors. What else do Wakefield Museums offer to make visits more inclusive for neurodivergent visitors?

“We offer for download prior to your visit or printed out at our sites sensory maps and floor plans. We have recently begun to provide additional maps and plans for temporary exhibitions too.

To date each museum has a visual story to support visitors, such as the Wakefield Museum Visual Story. Plans are to develop a similar document for both Pontefract and Sandal Castles.”

How do you evaluate your resources to make sure they’re still supporting visitors?

“As part of ongoing improvements to the accessibility of our displays and visitor experience, we seek feedback from focus groups, including Shout Out for Change, a group of young people aged 14-25 with SEND and West Yorkshire Sight Loss Council.

We are part of the Wakefield Learning Disability and Autism Partnership Board, made up of family carer representatives, people with a learning disability, and representatives from local services, which enables us to share information and gather feedback on our offer.”

What advice would you give to another museum who was looking to develop more provision for their neurodivergent audiences?
“Talk to your staff and peers to see if they can share insights about what could be required to enhance your provision. Talking to a group of neurodiverse young people has been invaluable to learn and increase understanding about resource that could support varying needs.

Start with something, even if it seems a small thing. Sometimes the small things make a big difference to others”