

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

work, building, access, learners, library, space, volunteer, accessible, Becca, learn, give, doors, organisation, centred, open, excluded, pandemic, means, lots, dwr

SPEAKERS

Becca, Gabrielle (Gaby), Debs, Niamh, Joy,

Show notes/suggested further reading:

- GWL's Volunteering programme:
<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/how-to-get-involved/volunteer-at-gwl/>
- GWL's ALN Programme:
<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/how-to-get-involved/get-help-with-reading-writing-or-numbers/>
- GWL's Accessibility information: <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/about-us/accessibility/>
- The Transformative Space of the Library report, 2021:
<https://womenslibrary.org.uk/about-us/accessibility/>

Intro

Hello and welcome to the GWL at 30 podcast series. Developed and recorded by volunteers, this podcast sheds light on our history and celebrates our thirty years of work across 6 main themes – accessibility, green, LGBTQ+, anti-racism, violence against women, and changemaking. Our first episode is on the theme of access in its broadest sense, with volunteers talking to staff members across facilities, adult learning, and volunteering.

Niamh 00:00

Hi, I'm Niamh, and I've been volunteering with GWL since December 2022.

Joy 00:06

Hello, I'm Joy. And I've been a member of the library since the 1990s.

Niamh 00:13

We are joined today by past and present GWL staff who will be talking about access and their roles. Access is a huge part of our work. This is just a snapshot of access at GWL.

Becca 00:26

Hello, I'm Becca, and I'm an ex-employee of Glasgow Women's Library. I was Facilities Management Officer from Spring 2019, to the very beginning of 2023.

Gabrielle (Gaby) 00:40

And I'm Gabrielle Macbeth, I'm the volunteer coordinator at Glasgow Women's Library. I've been in this role since 2011. I now work part time with my colleague Ren to deliver the volunteer programme.

Deborah (Debs) 00:57

My name is Deborah Walker, I'm an adult literacy and numeracy tutor. You will hear us being called ALN tutors. And I've been with the library since 2019.

Joy 01:07

So Gaby, the library has been in lots of different places and it would be interesting to hear a little bit about your experience of working at the Mitchell Library, which is where GWL was before coming to Bridgeton.

Gabrielle (Gaby) 01:24

Yes. People might know that we have moved many times in our 32 years history. When I started, we were based in the Mitchell Library, which was a temporary space before we moved here in 2013. We call it the Mitchell Library, but it was actually the former Anderston Library, which is an annex of the Mitchell. We were really on the premises of the Mitchell building and very much under their control, I suppose, in terms of opening hours. We were on the ground floor, but there was a number, a few steps, to get into the building and it wasn't wheelchair accessible, which was really frustrating for us. But... the space in general was quite frustrating. We were really crammed in. We had to kind of make do, but it was temporary, so I think that's probably why at that time, we really didn't invest much in making the space more physically accessible. I think it also meant that when we came here, we saw it as completely non-negotiable that the whole building would be wheelchair accessible. So, we made lots of different changes to this building to ensure that hopefully, anyone could come and visit us. And also, that anyone could work here and volunteer here as well. You can't just think of access as for visitors, it's something that can impact anyone who's part of the organisation, in whatever role.

Niamh 02:55

Glasgow Women's Library takes a person-centred, values led approach to access. Can you give some concrete examples to show what that means in practice?

Gabrielle (Gaby) 03:04

Yes, I wanted to give an example of what that means in my role working with volunteers. The person-centred thing means to me acknowledging that everyone, everyone's different. There's no formula really for being accessible and for including people so one of the first things that we do when someone gets in touch about volunteering is, as part of the application process, we ask them, what will make it easier for them to volunteer with us. And that I think, throws that question wide open. And then we get a really wide range of answers from people saying, things such as 'Well, for me it would be travel expenses' or 'I don't like really busy spaces', or 'I'm in a wheelchair'. It might be 'I have a visual impairment and need a laptop with a light large font', or 'I have caring responsibilities, and therefore some flexibility would be appreciated'. I'd say that maybe 90% of times, these are things that we can accommodate, and that we want to accommodate. In terms of being values led, I think that a really important value that GWL has when thinking about access, is about being reflective and being open to learning. That also means acknowledging that we don't have all the answers and that we do have blind spots, and that sometimes people are excluded despite our best intentions. And we must be really open to people telling us that and to hearing that, and to do what we can to address it. And we need to avoid the sometimes reflex, (response), which is to be quite defensive. I have certainly experienced this 'Oh, I didn't mean to do that' but it's an opportunity to learn and to do things better.

Joy 05:01

Becca, Gaby was just mentioning there that there had been a lot of changes made to the building. And of course, the building was already a library before GWL came here. But could you tell us a little bit more now about the specific changes that were made to the building in order to make it more accessible?

Becca 05:24

Yeah, so in the first phases of development, which is before I worked here, and before the library moved into the building, there were a few big adaptations made. One was the lift shaft, which is on the side of the building, and which enables much greater physical access to this room here, the community room, as well as the gallery and the toilets upstairs. And that lift has also created an opportunity for the sculptural artwork on the outside of it, which I think is really beautiful. And another really big change that was made was in the room that we call the event space. It was, as I understand it, just a wide open room. And then what was built inside was the archive, storage and the mezzanine. And that enables access to the archive boxes. Having that protected specialist storage for them in shelves that are rolling shelves so you can sort of get in and out of them easily means that people are able to come to this building every day to use the archive material for all sorts of different projects. And the mezzanine also has its own platform lift so that it is physically more accessible than just with the staircase. The other thing I think important about physical access to the building is the toilets. There were three extra toilets put in place, down in the event space. And I think another one up here by the community room. So, as well as adding capacity for numbers of people in the building, the toilets are all individual closed stalls. They are accessible by just you know, one door, which I think makes it a really safer place than a sort of toilet block that might be gender exclusive or less welcoming. I think that's a really beautiful thing. More recently, and during the lockdowns, we were able to do a few more things for physical access, and we automated lots of the doors. And so, the doors are running automatically all the way through from the main entrance at the main library space all the way through the corridor to the lift. And then from the lift and into the community room here. Those doors were, or particularly the main doors beside the main entrance were really heavy. It was a daily thing of popping up to help people come in or letting people know that they're not closed or that they're just heavy. And so, I think changing that was a delight. It is absolutely lovely that now they just swing open from a sensor as soon as people arrive in the welcome hall.

Joy 08:16

So, a lot there that's been done in terms of physical access. And in terms of the building as well. One of the other things that has been noted is the sense that this is really a building that is very much one that's cared for. So, Gaby, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about how that sense of the building being cared for is really fostered.

Gaby 08:34

Mmm,,yeah, it's interesting isn't to think about that as being about access as well. But we want people to feel welcome when they come here. And we want them to feel comfortable. And I think we spent a lot of time when we first moved into the building, thinking about the alignment of the shelves and the shape of the front desk, and how could we make that something that was physically accessible, so not too high, but that also wasn't austere or kind of put a barrier between people behind that front desk and people coming in. So, things that... you're just really giving time to find the right Feng Shui and yeah, all of that. But then also small things like we've got lovely big fluffy cushions. And I think some of us obsess about this more than others, but I like to go around and plump them till they're all neat. And some of my colleagues love bringing in flowers and there's plants. So yeah, ...things that I guess might belong in someone's home as well. And I also want to give a big shout out to our wonderful cleaners Doreen and Niku who love the space and their role is to make sure it's somewhere that's clean and healthy but also somewhere that's cared for and loved. And I know that in their work, they're thinking about people coming in, business coming in and finding it cared for and, and clean and loved as well. And I think if people come in and see a space that is loved, hopefully they feel that they're loved as well that they're cared for and, you know having a place that's conducive to, to learning and to relaxing, relaxing, thank you is...yeah, it's so important. I think we have lots of beautiful things, I think we have a complete aversion to hideous office furniture, because it's usually beige, and maybe not very nice

materials. So, a lot of our stuff is actually recycled and reused. It's not cost us loads of money, but it's good. It's nice stuff that's personal to us.

Niamh 10:52

So the cared for feeling in the building. That's something that GWL has control over. But some of the more structural things that maybe GWI can't do much about, it's maybe physical access, is there some physical access issues that are beyond GWL's control? And how does GWL kind of mitigate for those kinds of problems?

Becca 11:13

Yeah, well, my first answer to this question would be about the sort of transport links to the building, but also in the way that you phrased it then, it did make me remember that this is a listed building, which creates a few barriers for us as well. For instance, with the work I mentioned earlier, where we did the automated doors and all of the work that was done in the big renovation before we moved in all had to go through the planning office as well, which was a fair amount of admin, and we're really well supported by architects to help us get through that. But it is relevant to accessibility, particularly some of the things that were designed in early 1900s, for particular uses and are now, not ideal, like one of the doors in particular, is so narrow. And it would just be lovely to just make it really big, In the sort of other things that are outwith our control, yeah, the train station, unfortunately, has big staircases down to the platform. Definitely the nearest train station with level access or lift access would be Dalmarnock, which is a couple of miles away. So that's a tough shout and though you can get the bus along, I think that does make a barrier. I think one of the ways that we're adapting to it, or trying to do what we can with what we can is, we actually sponsor? sponsor? the railway station. 'Adopt', thanks. So yeah, we adopted the Bridgeton railway station, which means we have planters and sort of little gardening boxes, and we also have signage on the platform, and I'd say, the Active Welcome cluster do a really big amount of work in helping people who might arrive in this area and not know where the library is, or not have been here before. And there's...so there's signage, and maps from the train station. But there's also lots of pedestrian and cyclist signage, for a few miles radius around here in this sort of like turquoise, green signs, and so they can help people to get here. I suppose the other side of it is the digital access that's enabled through the blogs, and through all the website content, social media, the videos, and digitization of things that are created in GWL that are shared globally.

Niamh 13:46

And so Debs, can you tell us a bit about what the costs of access are for GWL secured financial/time resources? And can you give some examples of the cost of access ranging from nothing too expensive or time consuming, to resource heavy.

Debs

On the ALN team, I would say, we probably cover all of those financial resources. And financially, we are able to offer our learners travel expenses. At the moment, we pay £5.50, which is really good, because that's gone up from £5.. So it sort of covers the the increase in train fares or bus fares. We were also really lucky last year to get some funding. That funding allowed us to buy new resources. We looked at some of the resources that we had previously. Some of our financial worksheets was still working in pounds and shillings! It was clear that we needed to get rid of those and move into the 21st century! The funding meant that we could update a lot of our things, meaning that they were a lot more accessible for our learners. We have learners with all different sorts of learning issues or visual issues. One learner doesn't see very well and the grant meant that we could invest that money into paper with wider lines, and larger flashcards to work with her, Also a keyboard too. We were lucky enough to have one of those large keyboards donated as well. It's very good. When we start with a learner, we will take it softly and since every learner has their own experience we tailor learning to them. It's bespoke. We allow them to guide us in how things will work.

We've had learners that won't initially come through the doors. That can be a barrier for them. So we'll work with them, whether that be chatting to them on the phone, or maybe meeting them outside the building. There have been lots of ways that we've done that. It can be quite time intensive as well, just working with them. But eventually, when we get them through that door, then that that's the most special moment and we can work with them. So yeah, there's a lot goes into resources and time and finance.

Joy 14:04

If sometimes said that out of difficulties come opportunities and COVID and the lock downs that went along with COVID, were maybe an example of that. So Becca, could you tell us a little bit about the changes that had to come in during that time?

Becca 16:17

Yeah, when we decided to close in March 2020, it was just before legislation to close. And I think that gave us all really serious pause for thought about our purpose as an organization. It took us a few weeks to consider it, and to imagine what might be possible to continue digitally. And also what was really important to consider was how we would make the decision to return. It was a very sudden decision to close, and for everyone to work from home. The process of making the decision of how to return was a very careful considered one. We invited all staff, I think it was staff, and not volunteers, (to discuss) phased return. Well, there were three sort of factors to the strategy for how to return. We had a risk and opportunities register, which is where we laid out the risk of catching COVID, but also the risk of feeling unsafe in the building, and also the risk of feeling isolated at home. And we considered quite a broad range of those risks, as well as the organisational risks of not having the shop open every day or you know, things that were more practical. And so we had the risks and opportunities register and a phased return planning document. That was when we set up the structure where we'd meet once a month to reflect on the guidance that was being given from museum organisations, library organisations, and visitor centre organisations and what was coming from the Scottish Government in best practice advice for how to reopen. And so gradually we brought this plan together. But I think the most important part was actually the third strand of these meetings, which was the guiding principles meeting..I wasn't at the meeting, I was part of the other two, but not this one. But it was a document that really influenced my work throughout 2020 through to 2022, thinking about what are the principles that matter the most to our organisation and about why we want to reopen and ``what we want to achieve whilst being closed or whilst being part time closed, or, you know, having some of our resources less accessible. And those principles were things like ...

(Gaby intervened) It really acknowledged that people were experiencing the pandemic really differently. I heard this expression recently about we were all in the same storm, but we were all in very different boats. And some people can feel fine coming back out and some people didn't, and so on. So, then we were thinking, bringing our values to developing those guidelines. It was a really good example of values led work in this quite specific context of a pandemic.

Yeah, thanks, Gaby. Yes. So, for example, with our colleagues and staff members, some people found that, you know, that working from home was a glorious quiet space and other people were in flats with busy families, and maybe students and lots of people with different priorities. For them, being able to do their work at home was really hard. Part of our phased return planning was that before we reopened to the public, we reopened to staff. And then once staff were confident in the procedures of working with the new hygiene regime, then we welcomed volunteers and gradually, we opened the doors to the public as well. And that enabled staff who needed access to the building for their work, for example the archivists, but also those who needed a place to work away from a shared flat or other competing thing, to come into the library.

Joy 20:32

Yes, and obviously some of the changes that came in particularly during lockdowns have endured. So, Debs what in in your area are the other things that had to come in and that you now continue to do?

Debs

So as Becca says there was a phased return plan at the ALN team and we were one of the last teams to come back. Before the pandemic, we were completely one to one, 'in person' learning and then when the pandemic hit, those three of us in the ALN team had to get together. The whole world had discovered this thing called Zoom and we were all on Zoom trying to work out how do we do this? How do we work with learners?

We decided that we would offer learning sessions digitally using the Zoom platform but we first had to make phone calls just to check that everybody was okay. Using the learner's details from the library files, we contacted them to check on their welfare and to discuss this new digital way of learning. It quickly became apparent that a lot of our learners were digitally excluded. We tapped into Connecting Scotland funding, allowing us to be able to give learners a MiFi device which offers Wi Fi and an ipad or laptop, but many of them did not know how to use them. We worked by phone, saying 'Press this button, press that button' eventually to the point where we got them on Zoom and they were able to do their lessons that way.

Now we offer a hybrid model of teaching, which means that if learners are happy and comfortable to come into the library, we can work with those one to one. But as Gaby says, there are learners who still don't feel comfortable travelling on the bus or the train, so we still offer Zoom lessons as well.

We also have the occasional learner who will phone up and say 'Oh, I am waiting for the boiler repair service. Can we just do the lesson on Zoom today'? And that means Yeah, we can just send you that Zoom link, just pop on and we can get you. It's really opened up the services that we can offer. It means also that you don't need to be in Glasgow to receive the services. We offer a service called conversation café and we've done a hybrid model of that. We've had people Zoom in from London and different places, just to be part of it. So it's really opened up the access that we can give.

Niamh 22:55

So Gaby, all the staff are doing some form of access work and working with each other to alleviate barriers and increase accessibility. So in practice, how do volunteers, ALN and the building come together to co work on access? And can you give an example?

Gaby 23:11

Yes, really good question. The building needs to be accessible in as many ways as possible. That doesn't necessarily mean that someone's going to be able to volunteer if we're not open to hearing people saying 'This is what's going to make it easier for us to volunteer'. And there's been examples as well where it's having support with literacy, or numeracy or basic IT that's really enabled someone to volunteer. Organisations do need to have different ways of making things accessible. It's not just the responsibility of the person looks after the building, or you know, the equality, diversity and inclusion officer. It's something that if everyone in the team comes with that commitment, then it means... that people can access the building in new and different ways and they can access services in very different ways. When all these projects come together it means that someone's going to have an experience that's really positive and that's, I guess, kind of bespoke to them. I think it is also so important to really listen to people. People know what's going to make their life easier. They are the experts. They often have found really easy cheap ways of being able to go about

their lives and a really generous way of saying, 'If you could do that for me, that would make life so much easier. And I think as a team we work really well to empower people to tell us those things and to then take them on board and make them happen. We talk to them about having our 'can do' clogs on and being really solution focused because sometimes these things are not rocket science, they are just thinking outside the box and being up for doing them.

Niamh 25:07

And so the last thing I wanted to ask all of you is if there was no limits, if money was no object, what is something that you would like to happen? Like to change? Actually?

Becca

Yeah, I've got lots of answers for this but I think the one that I'd be most excited about, especially now that I'm not an employee, but I'm an attendee at events and participant in projects, is I would love, if there was access digitally to (events) and that's sort of the access that's that I think GWL did really beautifully during the pandemic, where online events were warm, and friendly, and chatty, and like an environment for learning. I think that I really saw that it was such a magical achievement of the library how the online spaces created that atmosphere. And I would, I would really love if every project, and every different thing that happens at the library was able to be duplicated digitally to people who are more isolated or living in places that it's hard to get transport here. You know, and I think that's mentioned before, this comes along with funding for everyone to have computers and internet and literacy and IT literacy support. So it's like a full package. If all of the events and projects were able to be duplicated, that would be fantastic.

Gaby

I've got loads of answers as well. And I'm kind of sweating between which one to give you. I'm gonna cheat I'm gonna say a really practical one, which would be 'Could we have a BSL interpretation at every single event?' and then I'm also going to sneak in one that's more general, just about an unlimited training budget for our volunteers and staff to learn about the lived experiences of everyone in Scotland and how that might impact on their access to GWL, followed up by an unlimited budget to action, and a whole bunch of stuff that comes from that training.

Debs

And I think for me, it would be for ALN in general, but for everybody else a GWL bus. It'd be be accessible to people who could be picked up and brought to the lesson. It'd be electric so it was in line with the aims of our Green team.. And, and it would just allow a lot of learners to be able to come who maybe don't like the thought of being on public transport with lots of different people that they don't know. It'd be real nice.

Joy

We would like to conclude simply by thanking Becca, Gaby and Debs for taking the time to come along today and share their thoughts with us on access at GWL. Also thanking Rachel who has facilitated all of this work, Fi our sound engineer, and Ren who has been supporting the work on the podcast as well. And in general just thanking GWL obviously for all the work it does and has been doing for several decades now. So watch out for our next episode, which will be on the theme of LGBTQ+ issues.

Outro

Thanks so much for listening to this episode of the GWL at 30 podcast series. For more information about our Three Decades project see our website, and stay tuned for our next podcast.