

Developing visually impaired audiences in Wales



Cyngor Celfyddydau Cymru
Arts Council of Wales



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There are approximately 107,000 blind and partially sighted people living in Wales and over the next 25 years this number is expected to double.

RNIB Cymru, 2018

1 Introduction

This toolkit is for venues and companies across Wales to develop and cater for visually impaired (VI) audiences. Here you will find a range of information about how to make your work or venue more welcoming and accessible and how to build and keep a VI audience base.

It has been composed by visually impaired theatre practitioner and consultant Chloë Clarke and Disability Arts Cymru for Arts Council of Wales. The information provided has been carefully researched and generated through discussions with visually impaired people (VIPs) across Wales, as well as findings from surveys and case studies. We have also spoken extensively to arts professionals, companies and venues of varying capacity to ascertain the barriers you face when providing access. We aim to address these barriers and help you find solutions so that access to theatre in Wales can become more commonplace and you can build a broader, more diverse audience.

2 Why create this toolkit?

Our aim is to increase awareness amongst theatre practitioners and arts venues about how best to cater for VI audiences and how to interact with us.

It is clear to us that many people are keen to learn more about access and put this learning into practice. Our hope is that, in providing useful and practical guidance, progress will be made more quickly in developing understanding and implementation of access provisions across the arts in Wales.

Most arts practitioners consulted during the creation of this toolkit agreed that, where VI access is concerned, there is still a lot more to be done and that they're not sure how to do it.

This guide is designed to point out the things that everyone can do across departments, organisations, companies and as individuals to work together in order to instigate the kind of change that's really needed. We will also provide information about where to go for further guidance.

“The door was shut to me for arts and culture because I just thought it wasn’t made for me. I didn’t know there was AD in theatre - I’d use it at the cinema but didn’t realise it was elsewhere. It’s given me the confidence to believe I could be involved - I now perform, I got into writing and I’m a community critic.”

3 The Social Model of Disability – Why Providing Access is Important

The social model explains disability as existing not because individuals have impairments, but because society is not structured to include those who do. Society puts up many physical and attitudinal barriers to those of us with impairments, and not allowing us access to things that people who don't have impairments can access easily is what makes us disabled.

This model was introduced by disabled people in response to preexisting models, imposed by non-disabled people, that promoted the attitude that disabled people need to be fixed (medical model) or looked after (charity model) rather than recognising us as independent individuals with as much inherent value as everybody else. In short: it is not our impairments that make us disabled - it's society.

Many attitudinal and physical barriers exist within the arts. Helping remove these barriers and providing more access doesn't just grow your audience but also addresses the imbalance, inequality and exclusivity that exists

throughout our industry. It requires a long-term commitment to consistently providing access but also a need to address your own preconceptions about disability and changing your mindset in order to be an ally to disabled people and really understand the barriers we face.

Regardless of whether the opportunity to use the access you provide is taken up - or even if it is disliked - this must not affect your willingness to provide it. Everyone is different and has different tastes, therefore nobody ever gets it 100% right every time. It takes time to build an audience, particularly one that has traditionally been excluded, so be patient and consistent.

For more information on the social model of disability, here's a useful video by Scope:

<https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/social-model-of-disability/>

“It seems like people throw around those words – “accessibility”, “inclusion”, etc. but it’s not really pushed along that far – and people don’t even really know what it means to the people using it.”

4 Getting Started: Understanding Visual Impairment

There is a vast number of different types of visual impairment - the way that an impairment affects an individual is as unique as the individual themselves. Therefore, there is no 'one size fits all' form of access, but there are plenty of commonalities that mean certain types of access provision will suit the majority of people.

Most importantly, it's the attitude you take to interacting with VI customers or employees that will ensure equality and a positive experience for everyone.

- Those in customer-facing roles should be natural and comfortable when speaking to VI customers. This is made easier if they have up-to-date knowledge of the access provision offered by their company or venue.

For this to happen, awareness needs to be facilitated organisation-wide.

- Having natural and open conversations or interactions to ascertain what we need is important. If in doubt: just ask.

5 Language

To help you have the confidence to speak frankly about visual impairment and ask questions, here's a guide to the language we commonly use to describe ourselves:

- Visually impaired person, or VIP, is the most widely used term.
- Partially sighted or blind - also perfectly common and acceptable.
- Sight loss - some people refer to themselves as having sight loss, though this term is generally used more by organisations.

Language will vary according to the individual's circumstances and preference. I, personally, refer to myself as either partially sighted, blind or visually impaired because I'm registered blind from birth but have some useful vision. Sometimes we refer to our impairment in a much more casual way:

for example, I would often just say 'I can't see very well' (this doesn't mean I don't need just as much assistance as someone who is more visibly a VIP).

When hearing someone at a venue communicate about me to someone else, I would expect them to use the term VIP or visually impaired.

The key to language? Don't panic - just be natural, and if you're not sure: ask - although it's difficult, we would rather be asked than know somebody is unsure and stumbling over their words.

The Myth of 'Blind'

Most people believe the term 'blind' or 'blindness' to apply only to those with absolutely no vision whatsoever. In fact, this is very rare - statistically only 4% of visually impaired people in the UK have no vision at all (RNIB).

Therefore, most of those who identify as blind will have some vision.

Being able to tell

Many VIPs will not use access aids such as guide dogs, long canes or symbol canes all the time - if at all - so please be aware that you often can't tell that somebody is VI.

Bear in mind that many of your existing customers may be VI but don't identify as such. Some people may not realise that they can benefit from certain access provisions such as large print programmes until they are offered them.

Most VIPs don't attend theatre because they expect to be excluded so aren't aware of many, or any, existing access provisions. It's important to explain what is on offer if you have it, don't assume prior knowledge.

6. Interacting with VI customers and employees

Although we don't want you to be anxious about language, there are certain good practices that are important to be aware of. These are simple things but are often overlooked.

Describing where something is

(eg. customer toilets, an item in the room) -

Don't use ambiguous language like 'over there' or 'up the stairs'. Use language that clearly and specifically describes something's location or, better still, show us.

Pointing is pointless - Rather than pointing at things, it's easier if you are able to just take us where we need to go.

Guiding - When guiding us somewhere, ask if we'd like to take an arm or if we're ok to follow - don't take our arm, offer yours. Be aware of steps or obstacles en route and mention them if necessary - when referring to steps, say if they go up or down.

‘Does he take sugar’? When interacting with a VI customer who is accompanied by someone please talk directly to us rather than solely interacting with our companion.

For more information on sighted guiding there’s a helpful page here: <https://www.rnib.org.uk/information-everyday-living-family-friends-and-carers/guiding-blind-or-partially-sighted-person>

Visual impairment awareness training is a very useful thing to implement across company and venue departments. Please see the [Useful Contacts](#) section for information on visual impairment awareness training.

A summary of our most common access requirements when visiting venues is as follows:

- Assistance navigating to key locations in venues - box office, toilets, bar/cafe, auditorium, etc.

- Staff knowing how to interact with us naturally and helpfully, it's clear when staff have received VI awareness training or not.
- Staff being up to date in their knowledge of what's on offer (audio description, touch tours, etc.).
- Being able to reserve seats at the front and centre, even when seats aren't normally allocated.
- Assistance locating our seat.
- Consistency, being able to trust that the same access will always be in place and that we will receive the same treatment every time we visit.
- Accessible printed material or audio equivalents such as programmes, menus, season brochures and flyers.

- If using a guide dog, sometimes we like to take the dog in with us or be able to leave it with a staff member.

“Before, I didn’t know that there were touch tours or AD in theatre - I never got information from any theatres that it was going on. I would go to the cinema and watch AD’d films but I didn’t realise AD was available in theatre.”

7 What You Can Do

The following section will outline how to make productions and venues accessible for VI customers and employees. We will look at a range of adjustments that can be made, things to be aware of, and available access tools and how to use them.

How to Make Your Production Accessible

If you intend to make your work accessible, you ideally need to consider your VI audience from the outset of the project.

Audio Description (AD)

More information in [section 10](#)

Whether you're planning to employ a professional describer to provide 'traditional' AD or to integrate AD into your piece with the help of a consultant, conversations should be held about this early on.

- Research and contact audio describers and consultants in your area to inform your funding application (see [Useful Contacts](#)).

- Have conversations about your options with both of the above.
- Plan what type of description best suits your work.
- Engage the whole company to work with the consultant/describer so that everyone is contributing to the access and aware of access requirements during performance.

More information on different AD styles can be found in [section 10](#)

Audio Description Consultants

More information in [section 11](#)

To help with your planning right at the start of your project, it is best practice to budget for a consultant (fee estimates can also be found in [section 11](#)). Consultants are VIPs with experience in theatre and work alongside or instead of a describer. It's important to use a consultant because they are in the best position to guide you on what your VI audience will need

and want. Experienced consultants can help you design the AD when integrating it into your work.

Touch Tours (TT)

More information in [section 12](#)

A TT is an opportunity for VI audience members to come and meet some or all of the cast before the show and explore the set, costumes and props. They make a huge difference to a VI audience and are free and easy to run. They're informal affairs: more or less a meet and greet with the cast and an introduction to the space, props and costume. TTs offer a chance to get to grips with who is playing who and get a sense of the space - they're vital in order to immerse a VIP in the world you're creating.

Model boxes

These are detailed, tactile, miniaturised versions of the set, often located somewhere outside the auditorium or in the foyer of a venue.

- VI audiences can touch and explore the model close-up to get an impression of the set and design.
- These are sometimes presented as an alternative to touch tours, but TTs are advisable wherever possible.

Marketing

In order to reach VI audiences it is vital that you think about accessible marketing formats. If you are offering an access provision you need to advertise it as widely as possible.

This can include

- Audio flyers

- Audio programmes
- Large print and/or Braille flyers and programmes
- Getting the word out through talking newspapers and newsletters and radio stations that cater to VI audiences (such as RNIB Connect), or more general arts programmes
- Using social media
- Using access features on social media such as embedded description of images
- Engaging VI organisations and local groups to spread the word
- Doing outreach, getting out there and meeting potential VI audience members
- Embedding description on Twitter: <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/picture-descriptions>

It is important to consider these factors when applying for funding. Carefully research the cost of providing accessible formats, how you will market specifically to a VI audience and budget and plan accordingly.

It is necessary to understand the role of the Audio Describer or Consultant: they will not bring an audience with them even if they are well known in your area.

More detailed information on marketing to VI audiences can be found in [section 8](#) 'Reaching Your Audience'.

Outreach

- Taking time to engage with groups local to where you're based or presenting work is essential.
- Building up a relationship takes time - you need to consistently offer access and make people aware of it.

- Don't get disheartened - turnout may be low at first because VI access is so rarely available - we will assume it isn't there unless you work to inform us otherwise and continue to offer it over a long period.
- Consistently engaging with VI groups outside of a venue or production dramatically increases attendance.

You will find details of relevant organisations and groups in the [Useful Contacts](#) section.

Budgeting

- Understand access **before** you apply for funding.
- Investigate realistic access costs and manage your budget accordingly.
- Think about costing for alternative marketing materials such as large print/audio flyers.

- Budget the appropriate amount for Consultant and Describer fees - ask for a quote before you apply for funding.
- Think carefully about the type of access you want to provide and why (think about your audience) and thoroughly research the cost and reality of implementing it before applying.
- Arts Council of Wales offers additional funding for employees' access costs. Talk to your ACW officer about this before applying.
- You can achieve all of the above by contacting Describers, Consultants and ACW for advice before applying.

Website (this also applies to venues)

Ensure that your website is accessible by:

- Using a VI consultant.

- Choosing a web designer with experience in accessible design or accessibility features.
- Access auditors can also consult on your web content.
- Adhering to Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines (WAI), which can be found here: www.w3.org/WAI
- Adding font size and colour contrast toggles to your website.

Remember: access and style are not mutually exclusive.

“Venues are getting better but I went to one box office and the staff member was trying very hard to explain and help as much as they could but it was clear that there was no training and no awareness there - that’s more common than not. Things like this need to change because if the first point of contact isn’t on point then many people won’t come back - just like any other customer wouldn’t.”

How to Make Your Venue Accessible

Booking tickets

To make booking fairer and simpler, please consider:

- Signing up to an existing cardholder scheme such as Hynt or offering your own in-house scheme alongside it. When booking online, the customer could thereby enter their unique card number to qualify for concession/free companion ticket/s.
- If you use a booking system (such as Ticketsource) they are able to install this feature if instructed.
- It can be inaccessible for some people if they are required to book tickets by phone or in person, so please consider making it possible for VIPs to purchase tickets online.

Transport and Venue Information

Where possible, providing free or low-cost door-to-door transport can make all the difference in allowing VI customers to independently access your venue.

Where this is not possible, providing clear and detailed information about public transport or walking routes to the venue/event is extremely helpful.

This could include:

- Photos/descriptions of the exterior and approach to the building and its entrance.
- Photos/descriptions of interior areas such as foyer, box office, bar, toilets and auditorium (and how they link up).
- Online interactive maps or videos allowing VI customers to familiarise themselves with the space before arrival.

- Arranging visits for VI individuals and groups to be shown around during less busy hours.
- Descriptions of the building and space can be added to websites or accessible printed marketing material (and also provided in audio format).
- UCAN has designed an app, UCAN Go, which is an interactive guide around venues. You can find out more about this here: <https://calvium.com/products/ucan-go/>

Card/Membership schemes

Hynt is an Arts Council of Wales initiative that functions across Welsh venues to provide consistent access for disabled customers. The main benefit for Hynt cardholders is the knowledge that they will automatically qualify for free companion ticket/s at any Hynt venue.

Find out more here: www.hynt.co.uk

Free Companion Ticket/s

To offer this service is to make a reasonable adjustment as stipulated by law (*Equalities Act 2010*) and can mean the difference between a VI audience member being able to come to the theatre or not. By offering a companion ticket you are much more likely to build and retain a loyal VI audience base.

Disabled Person's Concession

Disabled people don't have the same opportunities to employment and are therefore more likely to be on a low income or employed part time ("Only 27% of blind/partially sighted people are in employment" RNIB), so a concession on ticket prices makes going to the theatre much more possible.

Visual Impairment Awareness Training

This is the best way to ensure all the staff in your company or venue are fully aware of all aspects of access for VI audiences.

It often comprises of some or all of the following:

- Assessment of existing experience and knowledge
- Best practice in greeting and interacting with VIPs
- Sighted guiding training
- Language
- The social model of disability
- Introduction to 'sim specs' - glasses that simulate various types of visual impairment (such as tunnel vision or cataracts) so that you can experience what it might be like to navigate a space or complete a task without relying on full vision.

For longevity, managerial staff who have received this training could then implement it with any new staff when they start, alongside their general duty training.

Details of available awareness training and trainers can be found in [Useful Contacts](#).

Buddy system

This service has been implemented to assist VI audience members from door to seat and back again. Buddies pair up with one or two VI audience members and:

- greet them from their transport (if using) on arrival.
- orientate them around the space.
- help collect tickets, get a drink at the bar, find the toilets, find the allocated seat in the theatre and assist during the interval and after the show.
- they will sometimes be required to sit with the customer and sometimes just assist or guide either side of the performance

- if not sitting in during the show they may be asked to look after the VIP's guide dog, where applicable (otherwise box office staff often watch the guide dog).

Physical Access - Accessibility Audits

To make your venue more accessible you can employ an Access Auditor to advise you on any necessary adjustments. Some of these may be structural and more costly, and some can be implemented simply and cost-effectively.

Venue Marketing materials - Accessible Formats

- Offer printed information such as brochures, schedules and season programmes in alternative formats: audio, Braille and large print in printed form and online.
- Ensure that any accessible performances are clearly advertised in accessible formats.

- Consider setting up an access page on your website if you don't already have one and keep it up to date if you do.

Interdepartmental Communication

So that VI customers have the best experience when visiting your venue, and will therefore want to return, it is important that all staff are fully informed of what is on offer. This is particularly important for box office and front of house staff. You can facilitate this by ensuring that there are no gaps in knowledge or failures in communication between departments.

To facilitate interdepartmental awareness:

- Conversations about access should be held during weekly interdepartmental or departmental meetings.
- Department managers should be briefed to relay appropriate information to their staff.

- If an incoming show has access either integrated or added, box office and front of house staff need to be made aware of what that provision is and how the audience uses it (eg. if there is a touch tour where do the audience go to access it, what time is it on and who is running it? If AD is provided, is it part of the performance or will they require headsets?).

Making What You Offer Known

When investing time and funding into providing access, it is vital that you widely advertise it in accessible ways. If you're investing in offering a service, definitely invest in making it known.

“If you go somewhere where you’re not made to feel comfortable, especially if you’re paying money for it and you want it to be enjoyable...well, I don’t normally go back to places that don’t make me feel comfortable.”

8 Reaching Your Audience

Unlike the D/deaf community, VIPs do not have a shared language or culture so we are traditionally harder to reach and engage as a group and are particularly at risk of exclusion.

Venues and companies can have very good relationships with VI customers if:

- They have worked to establish trust and the customer is assured that, when attending a performance, they will be appropriately catered for from start to finish.
- The appropriate language is consistently used by all staff.
- Staff across all departments are trained and aware of what's on offer and how to cater for a VIP ([see sections 4-6](#)).
- Where possible, you get to know your audience well so that staff recognise us and remember our access requirements.

- The production is just as accessible as the venue.
- Communicating and visiting with VI groups in your area or where you're performing is consistent - taking the time to make and maintain connections.
- Booking tickets is made easy and possible to do online.
- Accessible performances are regularly created and programmed.
- Where possible, free transport is provided and a buddy system or similar scheme is implemented to facilitate attendance.

Useful places to get the word out and promote accessible work include:

- RNIB Connect Radio
(Facebook page and radio station)

- the Arts Show (BBC Radio)
- tweeting RNIB
- Sightlife
(formally Cardiff Institute for the Blind)
- Wales Council for the Blind
- Disability Arts Cymru
(who also have a newsletter)
- North Wales Society for the Blind
(who have a talking newsletter)
- Elbow Room Theatre
- Disability Arts Online
- Disability Wales

Please see list of useful twitter handles in [Useful Contacts](#)



The above will help establish a reputation of trust with a wider, loyal VI audience base who will be much more inclined to repeat visits to that venue or make an effort to see more of that company's work in future.

Remember, it takes time and continued effort. The access has to be there consistently over a long period, along with accessible marketing, and gradually audiences will learn that they are no longer excluded from your venue or your work.

“It never felt like theatre was accessible for me to go on my own and I’d pay so much money for something I wasn’t going to get the full potential of. When you think of theatre you think of slick, expensive musicals that cost a lot and aren’t accessible. Now I know there are all sorts of things going on all the time – small production companies, a lot more accessible things than I knew there were. But there’s still a lot more I would like to have access to.”

9. Access: Whose Responsibility Is It?

Access should be a primary consideration for both the company (or artist) and venue, and therefore conversations about who takes on what responsibility should happen early on.

- For example, when programming a show, venues expect the company to deliver copy and images to a deadline - people on both sides of this exchange should be aware of alternative marketing formats and discuss their options at this stage.
- Many venues have invested in owning technology such as audio description headsets. Discussions should be held regarding not only the type of equipment that is available at the venue but in what state of repair that equipment is in and where it is most effective - headsets run low on battery if not frequently checked and can lose signal and be ineffective in certain areas of an auditorium or theatre space.

- If you have gone down the route of integrating description into your work and headsets are not required, communicating this to the venue is vital and, even more importantly, the venue must disseminate this information across departments so that staff are aware and those in customer-facing roles can advise audience members on what is available to them.
- If a show is marketed as audio described there will be an expectation of headsets - until integration becomes more commonplace the type of access on offer must be made clear to avoid alienating your audience.
- It is both company and venue responsibility to go out and engage the VI audience. It takes time to build a loyal audience base and you must expect progress to be slow, but if you commit to providing access and advertising it accessibly alongside reaching out to VI groups and individuals you will reap the benefits eventually.

- It's important to consider the cost of all your VI access options and provisions - from outreach and engagement to accessible marketing to audio description (consultants and describers) - and to hold discussions between venue and company as to whom can cover what. You should be supporting each other to do this rather than seeing it as a problem or obstacle.

10 Audio Description

'Traditional' AD

Audio description (AD) is an additional commentary that provides description of physical action and features onstage so that blind and partially sighted audience members don't miss out. AD generally describes body language, expressions, movements and lighting effects.

In 'traditional' forms of AD, describers will deliver the description live from a location in the auditorium and will time it so as not to overlap the actors' lines. The recipient will listen via a headset (usually provided by the theatre) that allows each individual to regulate the volume.

This type of AD is usually arranged by the company (unless the venue has an arrangement with a particular describer) and is provided by a qualified Audio Describer who will observe (and film or record) some rehearsal, compose an AD script then deliver it for a decided number of performances.

Traditional AD offers the service user a straightforward description of what is happening and doesn't put much responsibility on the company or cast to adapt the performance in order to accommodate it. It appeals to some VIPs because, to date, it has been the convention and they know what to expect, but many VIPs may prefer a more creative approach that doesn't require them to wear a headset.

There are relatively few professional Audio Describers in Wales and audiences may become familiar with the describer in their area as, to date, they will often be the main point of contact for their VI audience.

Please see [Useful Contacts](#) for details of qualified Audio Describers in Wales.

Integrated AD

In recent years, a number of companies and individual artists have been working towards

using AD more creatively and integrating it into performance so that the use of headsets isn't necessary. This avoids some of the problems inherent with 'traditional' AD:

- Many people don't enjoy - and therefore opt out of - using a headset because it makes them feel conspicuous and isolates them from those they are with.
- Noise bleeding from headsets can annoy other audience members and therefore make VIPs feel very self conscious.
- Due to its hidden nature, many visitors to the theatre may not realise that AD is available unless it's highlighted by venue staff.
- Venues and companies often fail to adequately, accessibly advertise the fact that certain shows will be audio described.
- This form of AD can be costly so limits the number of shows that can be described.

- A creative, integrated approach leads to a more equal experience.

Integrated AD usually requires access to be considered from the outset of the creative process: the writer, director and cast work together with a consultant (and often a describer too) to establish what AD is needed and how best to integrate it into the script so that it's integral to the show's style. It thus becomes a subtle addition that often goes unnoticed by the sighted audience but provides access to those who require it.

Where traditional AD might describe something explicitly ('Julie looks uncertainly at Seren'), integrated AD might have Seren say: "Don't look at me like that, I know what I'm doing". It achieves the same thing but is delivered in a natural way.

Examples of different integrated AD styles:

Wendy Hoose - Birds of Paradise

AD is pre-recorded but played over speakers for

the whole audience to hear. It's delivered by a sardonic character who subjectively comments on events.

Romeo and Juliet - Taking Flight Theatre

Used the device of school announcements to deliver live AD and, as the show also integrated BSL, this was all explained through song at the start of the performance (so that D/deaf audiences knew they weren't missing any dialogue when they saw school announcements happening).

Reasons to be Cheerful - Graeae

A professional Describer/Actor playing a character in the show is onstage at all times delivering the AD into a pub telephone to headsets worn by VI audience members.

Double Vision - Gagglebabble

Cleverly integrated AD into the dialogue with a sensitive use of music, sound effects and sound design that enhance the access for VI audiences. AD was part of the design from R&D stage.



The Importance of Being Described... Earnestly? Elbow Room Theatre/ Galeri Caernarfon

A VI-centric piece with a unique style of AD that the action is built around. It aims to provide a choice of interpretation by constantly delivering conflicting descriptions from every character, integrated naturally into the dialogue.

“Most often when I book tickets at venues the box office staff never know if that showing is AD’d so they have to phone someone and find out, and on the day front of house don’t know if there’s AD or where to get the headsets. Some of them say ‘it’s got subtitles, is that what you mean?’ Integrated AD means you don’t have to worry about any of that, but it has to be done well.”

11 Audio Description Consultants

Companies are becoming increasingly aware of the need to employ consultants in order to most effectively provide for VI audiences. Consultants will either work alongside a describer to inform their description script or collaborate with the creative team to integrate AD (which can often be benefitted by involving a describer as well).

It's best to discuss your project with a consultant before you apply for funding so that you can establish their fee and budget accordingly but also so you can discuss the timeline of your project and where it'll be most useful to bring them in - usually at various points throughout development and/or rehearsals from quite early stages.

A consultant will:

- Discuss the style of your piece and how to design the AD so it's in-keeping with it.
- Advise you on where description is most needed and, importantly, where it isn't.

- Work with the whole company to explore solutions and create description that is intrinsic and natural to the show.
- Can collaborate with a describer to design the description, whether integrated or traditional.

The consultant is there to work with you and/or a describer to design the AD or input into the overall process, but is **not** responsible for writing the description itself.

Fees

Audio Describers and Consultants' fees vary. This will depend on an individual's standard rate plus the number of days/hours agreed upon. A lot of preparation is required for description. As a guide, a standard day rate for a consultant can be £250, and one performance plus preparation time for a describer can be £500. These rates are potentially negotiable depending on a project's timeline (for example, a consultant might negotiate a weekly rate



rather than a day rate, which can be more cost effective), but this will very much depend on the individual describer or consultant.

12 Touch Tours

These are delivered by the company (often led by an Audio Describer, if involved) before the show. It's an opportunity for VI audience members to meet the cast and explore the set, costumes and props before they experience the show.

A touch tour makes an enormous difference - if you have a physical sense of the space, set and the people inside it you can engage much more with the performance.

Touch tours are an informal meet and greet in which VI audience members chat to the cast (and sometimes the crew).

It also gives you or the describer the chance to explain and clarify a few features of the show that may be difficult to fit into the AD script or the general script if the AD is integrated.

Touch Tour Tips

- Depending on the size of your cast, you may decide to only introduce a few actors - ideally the principals. They should be in costume and bring any additional costumes (and relevant props) with them if playing multiple roles.
- Where the cast multi-role, it's useful for actors to demonstrate how they differentiate between characters with their voice and physicality.
- Arrange for the company present during the TT to discuss it with the describer (or the person running the tour) beforehand so that everybody feels comfortable.
- Work with the person running the TT to establish which elements to introduce the VI audience to.

- Ensure that the whole company is aware of the importance of a TT, who they are for, and why.
- Keep it relatively short (maximum 20 mins) - if a TT is too long it can be overwhelming and hard to retain the information.
- Make sure that you advertise the TT clearly and accessibly with plenty of notice - be clear on what time it will be held (this is to be agreed between the company and venue).
- Many companies choose to hold the TT an hour or so before the performance - it is advisable to consider doing it as part of a pre-show so that VIPs can take their seats for the performance just before the house opens.
- As the venue is the first point of contact for the audience, staff across all departments need to be informed about TTs (and all other access forms being provided), especially box office and front of house staff.

“It feels like you’re much more part of something when you go on a touch tour, you get to meet the actors and director - you get that more personal interaction and get to be part of that world. It makes all the difference.”

13. Case Study: The Importance of Being Described...Earnestly?

The concept of the show

This project was created and developed by and for VIPs in order to address the lack of alternative AD styles available in Wales at the time.

The show features a fictional theatre company attempting to put on a described version of Oscar Wilde's classic play, but all sorts of obstacles get in the way - none more so than the Director's ego.

‘It's a reflection of the attitudes towards access and inclusion within the arts industry while showcasing a multi-layered form of audio description that offers a choice of interpretation to VI audiences’
(Creator/Director Chloë Clarke).

The AD is delivered by all characters all of the time in a natural manner that goes unnoticed by the audience, leading Clarke to coin the term 'Stealth AD'.

Production/creation process

The show underwent two rounds of R&D and then a full production grant to explore this new AD style.

A number of VI Consultants were used, as well as VI Actors and production team and Audio Describers to help shape the AD so that it was functional but invisible. The first round of R&D resulted in creating AD that enhanced the show more for the sighted audience as it brought a lot of humour but was not used sufficiently for access for the VI audience. The second did the opposite: VI audiences said they didn't miss any information whatsoever, but it failed to enhance the experience for the sighted audience. By the time it came to full production the balance had been struck, and audiences said they hugely enjoyed the new and unique style of the show,

while VI attendees were confident that the AD fully served its purpose as a creative access tool.

Accessible marketing formats

Because the project was designed by VIPs and with visual impairment in mind, from the outset all forms of the marketing were inherently VI accessible.

- Flyers and posters were large print as standard and featured a QR code that led to the [audio](#) version in Welsh and English.
- An audio programme was created during the rehearsal process.
- The [trailer](#) was scripted to reflect the style of AD provided in the show, thereby giving a taste of what to expect while being accessible in itself (it was also captioned), in both Welsh and English.

Venue interaction and assuring a positive experience for VI audiences

The company liaised with all venues programming the show to offer guidance, and some basic training where necessary, to ensure that VI audience members attending would be catered for and have a good experience beyond the show itself. It was an opportunity to establish what staff at these venues already knew and what areas needed improving. Staff were keen to participate in these discussions and felt the benefit of hosting a show that gave them more experience in catering for VI customers.

This facilitated positive and natural interaction between venue staff and customers, meaning VIPs felt more confident attending these venues and were likely to revisit. It took very little effort to arrange where venues were open and willing to commit ten minutes or so to having the conversation, yet had a large impact on the experience of the VI audience.

Communicating with the venues regarding accessible marketing was also key - discussions were held between the company and venue to ensure that large print and audio formats of the show's copy were available on both venue website and in their brochures. Marketing department staff in some venues were more aware of accessible formatting and what their organisation offered in terms of accessible web content (eg. an access page) than others, but every venue managed to provide accessible information without any trouble. The show sold out in venues that were particularly proactive in promoting it and its access features.

Audience response

The response to this piece was extremely positive from both sighted and VI audience members because it offered a very relatable experience for VI audiences and the AD served to heighten the comedy for the sighted and VIPs alike. Many claimed that it was a very different piece from anything they'd ever



seen and were pleased that they'd gained an insight into a perspective they hadn't previously considered.

14 Checklist

When planning to make your work accessible:

- Consider VI access from the start of your project - particularly in the writing stage.
- Discuss VI access with your ACW contact.
- Research Describers and Consultants in your area (see [Useful Contacts](#)).
- Have discussions about your project, timeline and your aims, get quotes from Audio Describers and Consultants - budget accordingly.
- Budget for accessible formatted marketing (eg. large print, Braille, audio) and outreach (including travel, etc.).
- Think about how to make your accessible marketing creatively appealing.
- Having held discussions, decide what style of AD is best for you and book an Audio Descriptor and/or Consultant.

- Bring AD Consultants into rehearsal or R&D early on and then periodically.
- Engage with the local VI community - get out and meet them.
- Continued discussions with venues to establish who is doing what to provide and promote access.
- Where possible, visit venues to talk about how they will interact with VI audiences and to scope out the space so, if asked, you can inform VI audiences about it yourself.
- Ensure that all necessary information has been provided to staff across venue departments and that box office staff are communicating this to customers.
- Take photos of these venues' spaces that you can add to social media with descriptions before the show.

- Keep publicising access (accessibly) through social media and any other relevant outlets (RNIB Connect radio, talking newsletters, Disability Arts Online, local groups).
- Provide clear directions and transport information.
- Provide clear information about what to expect when attending the show.
- Ensure that venues send out audio programmes, where available, in advance of the performance to anyone identifying as a VIP.
- Before the performance, check again with box office and front of house staff/ushers that they are confident in their interactions with VIPs.
- Where possible, ensure that VIPs can reserve seats at the front - or wherever they'll be closest to the action - in advance or on arrival.

- Use accessible means (eg. audio recordings) to gather feedback from audiences. Try to get feedback on their whole experience, not just the performance, in case anything needs to be addressed with the venue.

15 Useful Contacts

For Audio Describers and Audio Description Consultants in Wales, please contact:

Audio Description South Wales

adsouthwales@gmail.com

07968139020

Chloë Clarke

chloejayclarke@gmail.com

Disability Arts Cymru

post@dacymru.com

029 2055 1040

Word of Mouth

wordofmouth74@yahoo.co.uk

Other available audio description services:

VocalEyes

<https://www.vocaleyeyes.org>

Organisations to contact for information on visual impairment and VI awareness training:

RNIB Cymru

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/wales-cymru-1>
helpline@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Connect

<https://www.rnib.org.uk/rnibconnect>

Extant

<https://extant.org.uk>
info@extant.org.uk
020 7820 3737

Chloë Clarke

chloejayclarke@gmail.com

Sightlife (formally Cardiff Institute for the Blind)

<https://sightlife.wales>
ask@sightlife.wales
029 2039 8900

Wales Council for the Blind

<http://www.wcb-ccd.org.uk>
staff@wcb-ccd.org.uk
029 2047 3954

North Wales Society for the Blind

<http://www.nwsb.org.uk>

admin@nwsb.org.uk

01248353604

Organisations to contact for information on access and the arts:

Audio Description Association

<http://audiodescription.co.uk>

info@audiodescription.co.uk

Disability Arts Cymru

<https://www.disabilityartscymru.co.uk>

post@dacymru.com

029 2055 1040

Graeae Theatre Company

<https://graeae.org>

info@graeae.org

020 7613 6900

UCAN Productions

<https://www.ucanproductions.org>

info@ucanproductions.org

029 2087 0554

Equity D/deaf and Disabled Member's Committee

<https://www.equity.org.uk/getting-involved/committees/deaf-and-disabled-members-committee/>

<https://www.facebook.com/EquityDDMC/>

ddmcommittee@equity.org.uk

Elbow Room Theatre Company

www.elbowroomtheatre.com

elbowroomtheatre@gmail.com

Hynt

<https://www.hynt.co.uk/en/>

info@hynt.co.uk

Disability Arts Online

<https://disabilityarts.online>

cathy@disabilityartsonline.org.uk

Unlimited

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk>

info@weareunlimited.org.uk

Useful Twitter handles to tag when promoting accessible performances:

[@ChloeClarkeAD](#)

[@DACymru](#)

[@ElbowRoomTC](#)

[@Arts_Wales_ \(ACW\)](#)

[@RNIB](#)

[@RNIBCymru](#)

[@RNIBRadio](#)

[@CardiffBlind \(CIB\)](#)

[@UCANProduction](#)

@weareunltd (Unlimited)

@disabilityarts

@wordofmouth74

@NFBUK

(National Foundation of the Blind of the UK)

@nwsb1

(North Wales Society for the Blind)

@DisabilityWales

@WalesAccessible

@thatLouiseFryer

@VocalEyes

@graeae

@Equity_



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Arts Council of Wales

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