Feasibility study into the potential contribution of VocalEyes’ services for Museums, Galleries and Heritage sites

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Executive Summary

This research, carried out by Eulalia Pereira on behalf of VocalEyes, has been commissioned in order better to identify what blind and partially sighted people most want out of their engagement with visual arts organisations, what is currently available and thence how best VocalEyes can support those organisations to provide the best possible access for the audience.

The research has thrown up a number of issues, identifying many of the barriers to full access. A real problem is that the audience is currently small, and organisations find it difficult to justify major expense in providing access in a context of reducing budgets. Sustainability and ensuring that any expenditure delivers a broad range of opportunity (e.g. description to be used in more than one context) comes through as vital.

Other major barriers to enticing an audience of visually impaired people into a venue include communication, confidence, transport; i.e. even before any attempt is made to offer access intellectually to the collection or exhibition, it is vital to consider and address these matters.

But what ultimately comes through clearly is that if an organisation can surmount these issues, they can win a loyal and proselytising audience and their knowledge and experience will rub off on other audiences – i.e. true customer care really pays off.

The Report commences with an explanation of the methodology behind the research, which is then outlined under the two main headings – Research into the activities, plans, views and issues of Organisations; and audience views and needs. It concludes with a series of recommendations as to how best VocalEyes can support organisations in providing access for blind and partially sighted people to enjoy the best that our cultural organisations present in the 21st century.

We are most grateful to the Paul Hamlyn Foundation for funding this research and to all the organisations and individuals who gave us their time to participate in it.

Judy Dixey, Executive Director, VocalEyes
1. Context

VocalEyes is a charitable company providing access to the arts for blind and partially sighted people, mainly through audio description. At the heart of its mission is to work with blind and partially sighted people to enhance engagement with the arts.

VocalEyes supports arts organisations to make their work accessible through various means including:

- Audio description – live and recorded
- Audio description training
- Consultation and advice

(See Appendix 2 for VocalEyes’ Description projects and Appendix 3 for training - available on request)

2. Research aims

VocalEyes identified that there was no consistency of access provision within the museums, galleries and heritage sector. In order to determine therefore how best the company could support the sector, it commissioned this targeted research to investigate current issues, interests and needs both for the sector and for the audience.

3. Methodology

3.1 Organisation research

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (in person or over the phone) with Access Officers at Museums, Galleries and Heritage sites. The aim was to investigate:

a. Existing provisions and forward plans
b. Training needs and requirements
c. Feedback on VocalEyes

A total of 21 organisation interviews were conducted.

(See Appendix 12 for participating organisations, and staff members consulted; Appendix 4 for the discussion guide; Appendix 8 and 9 for what is available at the different venues; Appendix 10 for future plans and Appendix 11 for training information - available on request.)

3.2 Audience research:

The audience research aimed to find out what the blind and partially sighted audience experienced, and what they felt they needed, when visiting museums, galleries and heritage sites.
A total of 30 blind or partially sighted people took part in the research, which consisted of
accompanied visits and post interviews (3 people), events and post interviews (5 people) and
responses from 22 people from the VocalEyes database.

4. Organisation research results

The research confirmed the variety of ways in which museums, galleries and heritage sites
make their venues, collections or exhibitions accessible.
Key determining issues were as follows (in order of importance):

- Limited resources
- Lack of demand
- Sustainability
- The need to start small
- Continuous access
- Usability and marketing of access provisions
- Consultation and case studies
- Everybody’s different
- Inclusivity
- Holistic approach

4.1 Limited resources

All the organisations were keen to develop resources for the blind and partially sighted
audience. However, 40% of the organisations mentioned limited time and staff resources and
95% cited budget constraints as the reasons why they were unable to develop their provision
(with the exception of the Eden Project which stated that their resources were sufficient).

4.2 Lack of demand

66% of the organisations were particularly concerned about the low number of visitors and
therefore queried if there was a demand for additional provision.

4.3 Sustainability

There was an increasing need for museums, galleries and heritage sites to see these
resources as sustainable, because of budget restraints and the need to get the most out of
investments. The Geffrye Museum felt that it was more cost effective and sustainable to train
up their own staff to deliver descriptive tours and to cascade this training to other staff
members as opposed to buying in Freelance describers. Furthermore, once a ‘bank’ of
descriptive tours had been created, they could use these in different ways; e.g. at an event, an individual visit, outreach work and also online.

4.4 The need to start small

Multiple sites: Organisations with multiple sites might only offer audio description and additional resources at their larger venues or for special events. The development of additional provision tended to be on a small scale, with scope to expand gradually. For organisations with numerous sites, changes might happen at an individual site level.

Variety: A number of organisations were testing out slight variations to their events; for example, at both the Fitzwilliam and Geffrye Museums, they had recently incorporated a creative opportunity for the blind and partially sighted audience into their events, in an attempt to be experimental and offer a varied diet to the audience. One of these additions was that curators were increasingly being asked to give talks. These new projects had received very positive feedback and those venues noted that they do try to be creative, experimental and offer a variety of opportunities to the audience.

Piloting ideas: 8 of the organisations noted that they develop new activity on a small scale because of the opportunity for testing. Then, if successful, that activity could be replicated in other galleries and sites. This was especially the case in larger organisations such as National Trust and English Heritage.

New space: The creation of a new gallery space was seen as a perfect opportunity to develop and try new resources which could then be rolled out to future new developments or to other sites. Venues were aware of the possibility and importance of integrating access issues from the design and development stage of a gallery.

One-off exhibitions: Organisations might decide to provide additional resources and events for blind and partially sighted visitors for specific temporary exhibitions, particularly if they were aware that their venue generally had limited access for this audience, and where there was the possibility of including access provision in the specific exhibition budgets.

4.5 Continuous access

All organisations were conscious that they needed to provide a range of opportunities for the blind and partially sighted audience. 8 out of the 21 organisations mentioned that they were concerned about the need to offer continuous support for the audience outside specific events and tours.

4.6 Usability and marketing of access provisions

In addition to developing resources and opportunities, venues were concerned that the audience could actually access what they have created. This was both in terms of the resources being user-friendly (eg touch screens are often unusable without extra support) and that blind and partially sighted visitors were aware of what was on offer for them. Organisations stressed the importance of staff knowing what was available for blind and partially sighted visitors to ensure that they could then give appropriate information to visitors.
The majority of venues highlighted difficulties in marketing and reaching the audience. Bristol Museums and Galleries were particularly keen to go beyond their core blind and partially sighted visitors to encourage new members of this audience to visit; however, there was much confusion concerning how exactly to achieve this.

Many saw the strengths of keeping in touch with past event attendees with the purpose of having repeat visits and taking advantage of the power of word of mouth. The Eden Project felt their success in reaching the audience was as a result of winning the Rough Guide award for accessible sites, and by having a profile with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health. Other venues spoke of the need to develop a marketing strategy for reaching this audience.

4.7 Consultation and case studies

While it was clear that consultation was important, there was an element of fear in the decision of an organisation to consult with the audience – i.e. they were afraid that the provision they had developed might not work properly.

Kew Gardens, the Eden Project, North Lanarkshire Museums Service, Birmingham Museum and Galleries, National Trust, Bristol Museums and Galleries, Peterborough Museum and Galleries and Geffrye Museum all spoke strongly about the importance of visually impaired audience feedback and involving them in conducting evaluations of resources. They noted that this was needed in order to eliminate false conceptions of the audience and to ensure a real understanding of needs and points of view. Collecting feedback was also seen as important as it provided advocacy and justification to do more or to make changes to existing resources.

Bristol Museums and Galleries, Wales Museums and Galleries, Norfolk Museums and Galleries, English Heritage, Kew Garden and North Lanarkshire also noted that they have advisory panels which involved both staff members and visually impaired people (usually from local groups or RNIB). These groups were consulted on a regular basis to help inform decisions and assess resources that were being developed.

As well as consulting the audience, venues were also keen to consult with expert organisations and local blind associations. Those mentioned included:

- a. RNIB (Wales, National Trust, Geffrye Museum, English Heritage, Historical Scotland);
- b. Henshaws (Manchester);
- c. Action for Blind People (National Trust);
- d. Cardiff Institute of Blind (Wales Museums and Galleries);
- e. People First (English Heritage);
- f. Sensory Trust (Eden Project);
- g. Deaf Blind UK (Peterborough Museum and Galleries);
- h. Disability Voices (Peterborough Museum and Galleries),
- i. Cam Sight (Kettles Yard),
- j. Norfolk and Norwich Association for the Blind (Norfolk Museums and Galleries).

The Access Officers considered that these organisations were able to provide opinions and good practice on a whole range of aspects such as language, signage, font size, writing
description, tactiles. Their input could help provide advocacy to colleagues and senior management to encourage the development of provision, and could offer advice as to how the venue could meet the duties of the DDA (1995 and 2005) and where applicable, the Disability Equality Duty (DED).

Working with associations for blind people had also helped venues reach those audiences; Norfolk Museums Service thought that these associations ought to help more in bridging the gap between venues and blind audiences. Birmingham Museum and Galleries, National Trust and Royal Academy were all looking to increase relationships with local associations or groups for blind people.

Kettles Yard, Birmingham, National Trust and Kew Gardens noted that sharing information with peers in the form of case studies would be hugely beneficial when developing their own resources. Case studies were seen as being useful for a number of reasons:

- they could illustrate the different options and opportunities (which could then be adapted to their own venues);
- they could illustrate what resources were most effective and what worked best for the audience; and
- they could present models of good practice and benchmarks to aid consistency of offer among venues.

Access Officers also mentioned that a case study demonstrating the benefits of description would be valuable.

### 4.8 Everybody’s different

Royal Academy, Wales Museums and Galleries, National Trust, Hampton Court Palace, and Museum of London made it clear that when working with the blind and partially sighted audience they realised it was important to respond to individual needs. Providing an individual service enabled the audience to get the most out of their visit, and meant that the organisation had the chance for continued learning from visitors about how best to support them. Most venues had developed close relationships with the blind and partially sighted visitors who regularly attended the venue.

With the aim of delivering a personalised approach, there was a need for staff to be flexible in their approach; for example, by providing a descriptive tour without notice. However this could be difficult as the appropriate staff might be committed elsewhere.

Layering information in audio guides was one way of offering a more individual service, giving the option of delving deeper into content if wanted; nevertheless there were then issues around choosing which items to layer and how to ensure that the layering was easy to access.

### 4.9 Inclusivity

Birmingham Museum and Galleries, Wales Museums and Galleries, Historic Scotland, Royal Academy and English Heritage noted that their main goal when delivering access was
inclusivity. They steered away from segregating specific audiences and instead looked to create provisions that were useful for a number of audiences.

For instance, many were interested in developing a general audio guide which was useful for all audiences. There was, however, little knowledge of how this might be done and so this need was usually part of the brief given to companies tendering for audio guides.

This trend mirrored the requirements of the Equality Act, which brings together equality issues, and comes into force in 2010

4.10 Holistic approach

Organisations were keen for all members of staff, including FOH, Curatorial teams and Designers to take responsibility for access issues instead of it being the responsibility of one person (the Access Officer). 6 organisations reported that they were moving towards a more holistic approach to access. An improvement in senior level support had helped the progress of resources and better provision.

To integrate access into their organisation, many Access Officers were developing Disability Equality Strategies and Action Plans (sometimes looking 10 years ahead) which would help to guide longer-term developments and prevent provision occurring on an ad hoc basis or being discontinued when staff changed and moved on. These strategies and plans were seen as continuously evolving documents which would ensure provision became more embedded into the work of the organisation. Training and descriptive tours were being incorporated into these strategies.

4.11 Training themes

When deciding to participate in training a number of key considerations for organisations were noted:

- A need to ensure that any training fitted in with strategies and policies;
- Budgets and funding;
- and a concern that there was a demand by visitors to justify such training

About half of the organisations felt that no description training was necessary, since awareness and confidence building training was seen by many as sufficient and the end solution.

Some organisations were reluctant to have descriptive training as they felt that they have too many staff to train up; e.g. National Trust and Kew Gardens. They realised that a few people could usefully receive description training, but they were then afraid that if they marketed the availability of that service, those trained people might not be there when visitors came.

There was however a ‘snowball effect’ at bigger organisations; e.g. English Heritage and National Trust, where individual site staff members had been trained and then became advocates for other sites to develop description resources or to have more training.
For those that were interested in further training, the key needs were:

- Advice as to how to develop all resources. They wanted guidance and practical solutions, to know what the range of possibilities was (through case studies), especially an understanding of the possibilities of new technology; and advice for writing descriptive information for publications, brochures, tour scripts and access guides
- Support in how to reach the audience – how to market the service that was now available
- An understanding of the audience needs - their preferences, and what resources were most useful to them and how to improve visitor experiences.
- Supporting material – to have up to date guidelines on how best to help blind and partially sighted visitors. (Case studies)
- Support with items that are “difficult” to describe (Contemporary art – Manchester Art Gallery and Kettles Yard, 2D objects description – Guildhall Gallery)
- Training to be delivered in modules
- Description training for a range of levels, depending on seniority and knowledge of staff members (e.g. visitor-facing staff to offer on-going support to blind and partially sighted audiences; and Education Officer and Curator level to offer expert voices)
- On-going training and support – especially relevant with high staff turn over; and ideas as to how provision can be maintained in-house
- Accredited course; this was seen as valuable, with the potential to increase staff morale, empower staff and help in creating a more consistent quality service
- Ideas and advice as to how to get the most out of the training (what other provision might it support)
- Training to take place on-site
- Those that had not experienced the VocalEyes training were concerned about the duration of a course and would expect a maximum of 1 day

4.12 Feedback on VocalEyes

VocalEyes was identified as a source of continual training, support in the writing and production of descriptive text and other consultancy work (Bristol). Many highlighted interest in using VocalEyes for marketing reasons, as a way of reaching the blind and partially sighted audience through listings in their newsletter or their website (e.g. Birmingham).

There was very positive feedback from all those that had used VocalEyes. The training generally exceeded expectation and they commented that the training helped to identify good practice, provide practical solutions and inform future work and development of new resources.

As a result of the training, these organisations felt better able to offer live description guides, tours and handling sessions. Their staff were also much more confident in supporting visually impaired people.

The organisations that had received VocalEyes training stated that it was important for each organisation to decide how best to use the skills acquired and the need to practise those skills
after the training, Geffrye Museum noted that, after the training, they had been able to build up a resource of descriptive tours, to distribute these to audiences outside the gallery; additionally they felt confident in cascade-training other staff. The description training also helped inform other work in the venue such as developing audio guides and writing descriptive text.

Museum of London and Geffrye Museum have suggested on-going support from VocalEyes would be welcome; e.g. to check scripts and in doing further work.

However, as Norfolk noted, after the training and developing descriptive tours, very few people turned up to the events which led to staff losing confidence. As a result, for the time being, they did not feel there was justification for having more training; instead there would be greater emphasis on on-going support in terms of marketing.

5. Audience research: key themes

There are naturally many individual needs amongst the blind and partially sighted audience. The research, however, did reveal some common themes about their needs and wants when visiting museums, galleries and heritage sites as follows (in order of importance):

- Confidence
- Transport
- Companionship
- Information about what was going on and what was available for visually impaired people
- Understanding the space
- Collaboration and feedback, which was responded to
- Staff who were confident, knowledgeable and enthusiastic
- Considered resources
- To get the most out of the time in the venue
- Non-segregation/inclusion
- Personal attention

5.1 Confidence

One of the main barriers to visiting museums and galleries for blind and partially sighted visitors was a lack of confidence. They needed to be sure that there was something on offer for them, that they could get to a venue, that they could navigate and easily get around the space. Many felt that they did need someone to go with.
5.2 Transport

Many members of the audience noted that they wanted to be able to make an independent visit although in practice very few do. 93% (28 out of 30) of the people spoken to were not confident in travelling to a venue on their own, especially on public transport. They would therefore rely on someone to accompany them on public transport or to drive them to the venue. It was essential that a venue was easy to find and that the journey was not too long.

5.3 Companionship

93% of the visually impaired people mentioned the importance of having someone to accompany them on a visit. Those who regularly visited venues noted that they were fortunate enough to have a spouse, other family member or friend who was able to accompany them on visits because otherwise they would not go.

5.4 Information about what is going on and what is available for VIps

The majority of the blind and partially sighted people in the research looked for recommendations from trusted sources on which sites to visit. These trusted sources included other visually impaired people, friends and family and groups the audience were familiar with e.g. their local association for blind people.

60% of respondents said that they went to a particular venue or event as a result of word of mouth recommendations. This was particularly relevant when visiting somewhere new.

73% of the audience mentioned that they found it difficult to ascertain what is happening at museums, galleries and heritage sites and so had to rely on word of mouth; in fact this was their main means of hearing about events (as opposed to via any other media).

On the positive side, the audience noted that when they had a good experience at a venue they were eager to share these experiences with others. Blind and partially sighted visitors, therefore, could be good ambassadors for what is happening in museums, galleries and heritage sites for them, which makes it all the more important to make sure the welcome is a good one.

60% indicated that they would like there to be a reliable central source of information regarding what is going at different venues; some requested information directly from individual venues or looked for suggestions in the VocalEyes newsletter.

While they wanted to know about events generally, it was just as important that they were able to find out what accessible provision there was, that it was clearly communicated on their website or that when they phoned up, or attended the site, they could speak to staff who knew

Information like this being available helps the blind or partially sighted visitor to become familiar with a venue; it builds confidence and does result in repeat visits.

5.5 Understanding the space
52% of the respondents noted that a description of the building and its layout was very useful as contextual information and that often this was not included in an audio or live description. 3 respondents referred to 3D models with description as especially useful in helping understand a space.

For audio guides, 7 respondents preferred descriptive information about the site, noting this was more valuable to them than way-finding information.

5.6 **Collaboration and feedback, which is responded to**

Blind and partially sighted visitors valued the opportunity to work with museums, galleries and heritage sites in developing resources and were happy to offer feedback. However, it was imperative that their suggestions were taken on board, or if not possible, that an explanation for that be given, and that feedback was responded to. In this way, improvements would be driven by the audience and the venue’s engagement with its audiences was enhanced and vice versa.

5.7 **Staff who are confident, knowledgeable and enthusiastic**

75% of the respondents commented on the importance of friendly, confident and willing staff at museums, galleries and heritage sites, but noted the equal importance of them being aware of what was on offer for blind and partially sighted visitors. This was especially the case when knowing what objects were or were not available to touch.

5.8 **Considered resources**

In spite of the increased offer and provisions for blind and partially sighted audiences at museums, galleries and heritage sites, there was a general view that that there was still a lack of consideration of their needs when developing resources. They were adamant that venues should really think about the visitor when developing new resources. In particular, they mentioned:

- that the resources and information produced should be easy to find (in the venue and online);
- that large print labels should be located in appropriate places;
- that it must be made easy to book a place on an event;
- and that events were planned and thought out well;
- and that any technological equipment should be required to meet their needs; e.g. that audio guides were easy to use.

Some spoke of the limitations of the recent touch screen audio guides and existing audio guides without tactile button; or interactives which often didn’t have any sound.

The opportunity to touch objects was among the highest request, with 70% saying it was important to a visit. If it was not possible to touch the real thing then replicas were an acceptable substitute but accompanying audio description was important.

17 respondents felt that live audio description was an important part of a visit and something that they expected to be on offer at museum, galleries and heritage sites.
60% mentioned that audio guides were an important resource, especially as they provided the opportunity to delve deeper into content or to skip through it.

50% saw events for blind and partially sighted visitors as a great opportunity to ask questions and for them to focus their thoughts. However, there was an equal number of people who said they disliked the idea of a segregated event.

This highlights the importance of having a range of resources available for the audience; instead of singling out an individual resource, 63% of respondents noted that they really wanted there to be a choice from a range of resources which were often complementary.

5.9 To get the most out of the time in the venue

Having made the effort to get to a particular venue, the audience stated that it was important to get the most out of the time in the venue.

Blind and partially sighted visitors were also keen that information be layered, as too much information was, for some, tiring and difficult to take in. So, for example, a descriptive event would work better for them if there were some pre-information which could be listened to, thus making the most of the limited time with the Describer.

This was also true at events; although participants did like the variation that might be on offer at an event, they did not want to be rushed through, they wanted to have time to assimilate information, and not to have too much ‘on offer’ there and then.

5.10 Non segregation/inclusion

Even though events designed for the audience were popular, 50% said they did not like going to events and being segregated from the general public.

Again, a variety of offers was important, and clearly there needed to be consideration as to how to facilitate independent visits and co-visits as well as events.

5.11 Personal attention

16 of the respondents noted that they liked the bespoke and privileged feeling they got when visiting museum, gallery and heritage sites if they were offered the chance of a one-to-one session with a gallery assistant.