

Integrated Access Inquiry 2017-18 Report

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# Background and Objectives

Extant is a national organisation that has been forging a performing arts practice made by and dedicated to visually impaired people since 1997. Extant has also developed new ways of providing integrated access to visually impaired audiences. At the same time, other companies, both disabled-led and non-disabled-led, have also been working to integrate access into their productions, not just for visually impaired people, but also for people with other access needs. Even so, there is a sense that this work is lacking research and exposure, and that those who are experimenting with these techniques are doing so in isolation, meaning that reputable resources on the topic are difficult to find. This has led us to two major questions that relate to this research: do we truly understand what visually impaired people need from access? Do the current models of integrated provision meet those needs?

To mark their 20th year, Extant commissioned *Is It Working*, a research inquiry into audio description and integrated access as it is being used currently throughout the UK. This research brings together feedback from visually impaired audiences with information from the creative teams charged with providing integrated access to see if it’s possible to quantify what makes effective integrated access. We extend our thanks to all who have taken part. The results of that Inquiry are presented here with a view to calling companies into action to do more, and to support said companies as they travel down this path in the future.

***The Research Team***

Two researchers were appointed to carry out this research, both of whom have direct personal experience and knowledge of audio description (AD). **Dr Louise Fryer** is an academic and audio describer, who teaches and practices mostly traditional AD (TAD) but who has worked with a number of companies to develop Integrated (IAD) approaches. **Amelia Cavallo** is currently completing her doctoral research at Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. The working title for her thesis is *An Eye for an I: Crip Agency for the Blind Woman Performer.* Amelia is a visually impaired performer who has taken part in shows with both TAD and IAD.

# Background to Audio Description

[Please see Glossary on p.52 for definitions of terms]

According to the RNIB over 2 million people in the UK live with sight loss. That number is predicted to double by 2050 because sight loss is linked to ageing and the UK has an ageing population. For people who are blind or partially sighted one way to access a live performance is through audio description (AD). Toby Davey is the deputy Director of VocalEyes – a nationwide UK charity that “provides opportunities for blind and partially sighted people to experience the arts at UK’s theatres, museums, galleries and heritage sites” (VocalEyes, website.) According to Toby “Audio description in a theatre is a live verbal commentary providing information on the visual elements of a production as it unfolds. It describes action that is essential to an understanding of the play's story, as well as other visual information such as the style and design of a production, facial expressions and visual jokes that a blind or partially sighted member of the audience might otherwise miss. The description is delivered in between the dialogue of a performance and is picked up by the audience member wearing a special lightweight headset.” This type of AD has been available in a growing number of UK theatres since the late 1980s (Fryer 2016).

Toby’s definition (above) refers to what this report calls traditional audio description (TAD). For live events, this involves a trained, sighted describer (or describers) writing and delivering a description, once the production (play, dance etc.) is complete. TAD may be thought of as closed (not available to the whole audience) and *post hoc* (written after the event). As Cavallo (2015, p.126) explains “AD is added after the piece has been created and is delivered to the blind spectators via headsets. Unless directly using the service, it is likely that those attending an audio described event will be unaware that anything different is happening.” AD, at its most traditional, adopts a “neutral” stance in terms of content and delivery in an attempt to avoid subjectivity. It aims to reflect the point of view of the audience, rather than that of the artistic team. TAD is generally delivered live at one or two performances in a run.

However, it should be stated at the outset, that there is no simple binary distinction between TAD and IAD (Integrated AD). Some shows with IAD might be closed and delivered through a headset; some TAD is produced in a creative partnership with the artistic team and delivered with non-neutral word choice and emotive vocal expression.

# What We Wanted to Know

* What are the traditional models of access provision within theatre?
* How do these work or not work for the audience?
* What are the impairment specific and pan-impairment examples of integrated access and what has been the audience experience of these?
* Is it possible to provide integrated access that meets the needs of everyone involved - audiences, artists, companies and venues?
* How can artists and companies best be supported to provide integrated access services for visually impaired people and how should they be checking that what they are providing meets the needs of the audience?

# How We Found Out

## Methodological approaches

The researchers adopted a qualitative approach, because “qualitative studies aim to provide illumination and understanding of complex psychosocial issues and are most useful for answering humanistic 'why?' and 'how?' questions” (Marshall 1996, p.522). 20 respondents took part in semi-structured interviews, and a focus group was organised with 7 members of Unscene Suffolk, a community theatre company, based in Ipswich, for adults with visual impairment (Table 2). All participants provided written consent.

**Interview Sample**

The researchers opted for a purposeful sample using key informants. These were selected on the basis of Extant’s contacts, as well as “the researchers’ practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature and evidence from the study itself” (Marshall 1996, p.523). The aim was to reach companies and directors who have experimented with Integrated Audio Description (IAD); and other stakeholders, such as audio describers as well as access advocates and providers of other access modes, such as British Sign Language (BSL). Although most

interviewees work in live events, such as circus and theatre, one informant is an academic who kindly shared the findings from her research into IAD in Museums (Rachel Hutchinson). The interviews were carried out either face to face or via Skype. Most were conducted one-to-one, but occasionally two people from the same company were interviewed together (New Wolsey Theatre, Elbow Room Theatre). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Each transcript was subsequently checked by the interviewee. The sample demonstrated a broad geographical reach across the UK and encompassed both urban and more rural environments. More informants were added until saturation was reached and no new themes emerged from the data.

## Analysis

Thematic coding was used to analyse the transcribed interviews. Illustrative quotations are used in this report with the interviewees identified. This is because they already have a public profile and are willing to share their experiences with others interested in access. Where the quotes are from focus group members, the participants are identified using an ID code to preserve their anonymity. Table 2 provides demographic information on these participants.

## Table 1: Interviewees

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Company** | **Interviewee** | **Role** | **Location** | **Speciality** |
| **Corali** | Archdeacon, Sarah | artistic director | London | dance |
| **Ramps on the Moon/ Agents for Change** | Beddard, Jamie | access consultant | Ipswich | theatre |
| **Elbow Room Theatre** | Clarke, Chloe | Theatre- maker; AD | Cardiff | theatre |
| **Taking**  **Flight Theatre** | Davidson, Elise | artistic director | Cardiff | theatre |

**Unscene Suffolk** Elbourne, Jenni artistic

director

Ipswich theatre

**independent** Elliott, Willie audio describer, actor

London audio describer

**Rationale** Geering, Nathan artistic

director

Sheffield hiphop

**New Wolsey Theatre**

Holmes, Sarah CEO Ipswich theatre

**Westminster University**

Hutchinson, Rachel researcher London Heritage arts

**Independent artist**

Lopes, Milton director London Circus and

storytelling

**Vital Xposure** McNamara, Julie artistic

director

London theatre

**Extant** Oshodi, Maria artistic director; CEO

London theatre

**New Wolsey** Philips, David head of production

Ipswich theatre

**independent** Porter, Liz access consultant

London Heritage arts

**Invisible Flash** Rawlinson, Jo creative producer

London theatre

**Collective Encounters**

Redvers Rowe, Mandy Theatre-

maker

Liverpool theatre

**Birds of Paradise**

Robson, Garry artistic director

Glasgow theatre

**Graeae** Sealey, Jenny artistic director

London theatre

**Elbow Room Theatre**

Thorpe, Sami performer, BSL

interpreter

Cardiff theatre

**Oily Cart** Webb, Tim artistic director

London children's theatre

## Table 2: Focus Group demographic information

**ID Demographics**

U1 Female, 30’s - registered blind – some useable vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (5); very familiar with AD (5)

U2 Male, 30’s , registered blind – some useable vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (5) very familiar with AD (5)

U3 Male, 70’s, registered blind – some useable vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (4) familiar with AD (4)

U4 Male, 40’s registered partially sighted – some useable vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (5) familiar with AD (4)

U5 Female, 60’s- registered blind – some

useable vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (5) very familiar with AD (5)

U6 Female, 70s - registered blind –also some hearing loss no useable vision, doesn’t use AD whenever it’s available (1) not very familiar with AD (1)

Female, 50s registered blind – no useable U7 vision, uses AD whenever it’s available (5)

Table 2 provides demographic information about the focus group. The 7 members of *Unscene Suffolk* were aged between 37 and 77, with a mean age of 55 years. Three members of the group identified as male and 4 as female and all were registered blind. In their own evaluation, 5 members of the group reported having some useable vision, and 2 reported having no useable vision. A short questionnaire gauged their familiarity and use of AD. Statements were scored from 1-5 (1= strongly disagree – 5 = strongly agree). The results are reported in Table 2. All but one participant agreed strongly with the statement that they would use AD whenever it was available. The respondent who disagreed was also the least used to listening to AD. This may be because she also has some hearing loss. Although this was a small group, their contribution is important because they have experienced AD as users, principally, but not exclusively at the *New Wolsey Theatre* in Ipswich, and they have also experienced their own performances being described as actors with *Unscene Suffolk*. The (sighted) director of the company attended the focus group as a facilitator and gave a separate interview.

# Summary of key findings

* The term integrated access means different things to different people. It refers to ways of embedding access provision so that access is thought about from the beginning and is part of the creative process. It also encapsulates a desire to enable a performance to be appreciated by as diverse an audience as possible. Some people do not like the term and prefer to talk about the aesthetics of access.
* Problems with current AD provision include technical issues around the use of headsets (poor sound quality and discomfort as well as isolation and social stigma); AD content (what is described and how) and the purpose of access (whether it should provide users with access to the story or an immersive experience comparable to that of the rest of the audience)
* Traditional AD is perceived to be inflexible and rule-bound. A range of integrated approaches has been tried with varying degrees of success. IA is perceived at times to prioritise art over access.
* The best access is tailor-made for each show. This includes casting an appropriate access professional.
* The current pool of describers is not sufficiently diverse.
* AD is still largely invisible. More needs to be done to raise public awareness.
* Integrating the AD increases its availability.
* Recording the AD also increases its availability but can bring other problems.
* There is a fear around getting access right. The important thing is to consult and to learn from mistakes.
* Access is not simply an obligation. It offers a creative challenge.

# What is Integrated Access?

The report begins by looking at integrated access (IA) provision in general and at the way different modes of access interact before turning to the specific challenges of integrated AD. As IA is still evolving and various strategies have been tried, interviewees were asked what IA means to them. Responses fell into three categories: those who felt it was about process – how the access provision fitted into the creation of the performance; those who felt it was about making the content available to as diverse an audience as possible (reach and inclusion), and those who didn’t like or didn’t use the phrase. As integrated approaches have evolved to avoid issues with traditional approaches, some criticism of TAD is implicit in the following comments:

## Process

**Jamie (Agents for Change)**: Integrated access is access that’s embedded in the process. The idea is that it starts at the beginning of the process. It’s not an add-on. It’s there from beginning.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: Integrated access for me means that it is not a bolt-on, it is not an add- on. Access isn’t something that’s thought about at the last minute meaning it’s not “Oh I need to make this accessible for a certain group of people. Let’s find somebody who can make that happen and stick them on the side of the stage or [ironic tone] maybe let them see show once

before they audio describe it.” It's not something that’s thought about at the last minute. It’s very much part of the whole process and part of the production.

**Rachel (University of Westminster)**:

For me integrated access means taking the creative possibilities that access brings and questioning what could they offer the mainstream audience, thereby bringing something new to the mainstream audience essentially and also with the hope that that will then increase the attention that’s paid to the access and what is offered.

## Reach and Inclusion

**Nathan (Rationale)**: Integrated access is literally just about making sure that everybody has an equal opportunity to experience our productions and our shows and our performances really.

**Liz (Independent access consultant):** For me, it would be about considering as many needs and diverse situations as you possibly can.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: In our case it is mid-scale theatre taking its responsibility seriously to create opportunity for everyone.

**Willie (describer)**: Integrated access in terms of theatre is when all of the access requirements for an audience are integrated within the production so it might be British sign language (BSL), it might be AD. Or it could be captions as well.

## Aesthetics of Access

**Jenny (Graeae)**:We don’t call it integrated access. We say “aesthetics of access”. And it’s the same thing. What is it about the art that informs how aesthetics of access can work? For every play, that will be different. I think the word integrated is a weird one. Integrated on whose terms? I don’t really like that word. For *Graeae* it just is, it has to be. We always try to start with that notion.

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** I don't like the phrase “integrated access” ... my way of looking at it is it's an access aesthetic at the heart of the work, which means from the beginning of an idea -

and we work with new stories so it's new work, new writing - from the moment we are working together it's a collaborative effort… There are some really interesting creative responses to trying to find a way to pull in the threads of access into the heart of your work, which is I suppose what they mean by ‘integrated access’ but I don’t like that term. But then I don’t like the term integration, really, somebody always gets lost in the human smoothie.

**Sarah A (Corali)**: I haven’t heard the expression [integrated Access]. I’ve heard people talking about an aesthetic of access. I’m thinking along the same lines - that it’s inherent in the style of the performance. So considering the needs of any audience member that might be coming and making sure that it is an aesthetic concern, not just an access concern.

# How Do Different Access Modes Relate?

One concern of this research was to uncover how AD relates to other forms of access provision. There is a perception that AD is the Cinderella of the access services. Overall, needs are best served by avoiding pigeon-holed provision and by taking an imaginative approach. Sometimes access needs compete but provision intended to meet one type of need can also bring unintended benefits for others. This is discussed again under Open Access and Advocacy (below).

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: I think that blind people are bottom of the pile. I think that is just how it is. That is my experience of working with Alex, you, Karina. I see your experiences in work and in life and the things you have to contend with. I think, you know, you’re not waving your hands around, so it’s not accessible to sighted people.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: The company has been on quite an extraordinary journey of what access is, and we are still on that journey …The journey into AD - we would have one show audio described per venue. And we realised this wasn’t good enough because blind people could only go on that particular night. There was a real inequality. We realised if we were making performances accessible for Deaf audiences, we had to do the same for blind audiences.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: There was a model box, and touch tour possibilities again all based around the show, what the characters were wearing, and various things to show what the set

was like… I think it was a great tool not just for the VI audiences but also for the kids. This is why we say access is for everybody. Although you might gear this towards VI members of the audience, you get tremendous spin-offs so for example the stuff on line is really valuable for people with autism. Having someone friendly to meet and greet and talk in a friendly way to talk about the show again is very good for kids and people with autism. I just think it’s good with audiences. We’ve done relaxed performances many times, and they’re almost always the best performances we do. So many colleagues say that, so you wonder why every performance isn’t more of a relaxed performance.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: We have “all comers shows” so we might tour a show with a 3-6 years version and an under 2’s version. We call them all comers because that is not dependent on any disability or label that is slapped on you. You can just come. We do facilitate physical access, but we also stray into the area of relaxed performance access.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey)**: We were doing the sort of normal occasional BSL performances and occasional audio described performances but they were high days and holidays. We’re very customer-facing. We’ve always had a desire to be welcoming to everybody.

**Sami (Elbow Room Theatre)**:I've got deaf friends and peers that are intrigued by the world of AD because it's something they hear about but don’t get to access and … so exploring that crossover I think is really interesting but with these projects we’re sort of really learning to go D’you know - there's not been that much that’s been explored in terms of creative audio description and we can't explore everything there is to explore in one project because that is when it becomes really complicated. So … as things come up we go that's really interesting and that's probably for a different project somewhere down the line.

## Competing Access Needs

Julie Mc (Vital Xposure): we cannot be all things to all people. It's honestly impossible to create full access for every human being. I'm still getting told off because I don't like [live captioning] and I don't use it but I can't use it because it's LED screens with flickering lights and you will lose me. I’ll have a seizure. You know. So I would tend to walk away from that possibility.

**Jenny(Graeae)**: I commissioned the writer to write the AD within it so it was seamless, so d/Deaf and blind people could sit side by side and there was no attachment in terms of

headsets or anything, the job was to write it in a syntax that worked for Signed Supported English and BSL. And he struggled.

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: I think that it is quite fashionable for access to be integrated into performances. I think it is often not done very well. Everybody misses a little bit, but all the people who don’t need access get a bit of everything. I honestly don’t want to see somebody sign badly if they can’t sign. It doesn’t enhance the performance. Perhaps this is stuff that was good when it was happening 10 years ago. Now I think it is more refined on stage.

# Access for All?

Making access provision open such that the non-disabled audience sees or hears it is one way to improve awareness of access and raise its profile. But by catering to some access needs you may be excluding others. Is it possible to create a style of access that suits everyone?

**Chloe (Elbow Room)**: Well [laugh] that's tricky. Everybody? I’m not sure. I also think we have certain demographics to it and what we found […] was that a lot of the visually impaired audience that we had in were quite elderly and they really didn't appreciate this style of AD. I'm not trying to replace anything. I'm not trying to reinvent anything I'm just trying to offer options and different choices. So […] I know there are people like me - perhaps it's a younger target audience we're going for who do appreciate this style and so I think it's not the question it's accessible for everyone because not everyone is going to like it but as long as we’re giving them the choice of liking it or not.

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** I keep it open, so anyone who wants to try the experience they’re very, very welcome. And I made sure we have as many headsets as possible to provide that experience for as many people as possible because I don't think it should be just to provide a service for visually impaired people although I think it's important that that service is on offer.

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: I think that *Tommy* (Ramps on the Moon) is possibly the best example of integrated access, and that shows how things have developed over the years. I’m sure that everybody with a different disability would have something to say about it, how something didn’t work for them or wasn’t quite good enough. However, that was a show that has pushed

the boundaries. And for me as an audience member, I wasn’t irritated by there being so much access.

**Jenny (Graeae):** I think, same as sign language, there is a discrepancy. Some prefer captions. There’s a whole landscape of everyone having an individual preference. Some like character- based AD; some don’t. Sometimes it’s quite hard to cope with the diversity of what people like, but we have to keep pushing. It’s interesting. But unless it comes from the gut and the heart, it will never work.

**Jo (Invisible Flash):** I wonder if the experience of AD is as accessible and inclusive as someone coming on stage and being a BSL interpreter? And how can change come there? Who can lead on that? And where are the allies?

# Current AD Provision: Is it Working?

From access provision in general, the rest of the report focuses more strongly on AD. In order to find out if current AD provision is working, respondents were asked to define good/poor AD or to recall positive and negative experiences. Several themes emerge from these comments. These can be broadly divided into concerns related to content and concerns related to the technical system. One further question these responses raise is for whom is the current provision (not) working? There are potential conflicts between different stakeholders in access. It seems obvious that the access users’ needs should come first. But the creative team also needs the access to work for them to ensure audiences can access their creative vision. Many of the negative experiences relate to the use of headsets, which can be perceived as socially isolating, as well as failing to transmit the AD in a way that is pleasant or easy to listen to. For this reason, these comments have been divided into concerns over the technical transmission of AD (headsets and sound quality); the AD content (what is described and how) and the purpose of the AD - whether it is there to provide only an understanding of the story or whether the intention is to provide a more immersive experience. Some blind audiences feel that because AD is based on an occularcentric paradigm and does not represent their cultural experience, it fails to address their needs. Finally, a question is raised about the invisibility of AD – still a problem 30 years after it was introduced to the UK.

# Technical

## Headsets

Technical difficulties largely result from closed approaches where the AD is delivered via a headset. Headset problems are threefold. They can be divided into sound quality; comfort / ease of use, and isolation and social stigma. It is worth noting that headset delivery is currently changing through the development of apps, such as Mobile Connect, that allow the AD to be accessed through an audience member’s mobile phone. These apps are still experimental, not always available and come with their own problems but their development suggests that some of the concerns surrounding headsets may be overcome in the future.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: I think bad headsets seem to be the bane of the whole bloody thing. You can have headsets, such as in Graeae’s *Reasons to Be Cheerful*, which is a fabulous bit of AD. It comes through headsets done by a character on stage. Only the blind and VI people access it, but although this was a brilliant audio describer and piece of AD - I felt anyway - it was continually let down by the poor audio sets available. The equipment side of it is a constant bugbear.

## Social stigma

**U4**: … I was one of these people who said “ I don’t need AD because I can see what’s going on” and it wasn’t until I came up here and I was with people who were using it, I wasn’t just going on my own with my parents to the theatre so I would be the only one who was sat in the whole place using the AD, but being in a group and I’m actually finding, yeah that does help … so I use it a lot now.

**Louise (Researcher):** Do you find it’s kind of embarrassing to use it or to be seen to need it?

**U4**: Ummm in a way but then I went through a whole phase of almost denying the visual impairment so it was a case of I wanted to go and see the show as an able-bodied person, not have to queue up and get this headset whereas perhaps if they’d got a system where if you were using your own phone you could sneak in and just, oh sorry I forgot to turn my phone off, which some people do anyway. It’s more you don’t have to go and ask someone for assistance or whatever, so that would be a lot more portable for people, a lot easier for those that don’t want to ask.

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure)**:There was another person who complained about feeling isolated as a visually impaired person because they were the only person using the headsets in that particular context.

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: Could it be easier, could it be through your mobile phone? I work at Rose Bruford and those students had live camera feeds, mobile phones with cameras, two big screens. It was bonkers the amount of technical equipment, but the access we’re using during a show… surely that can all be done through your mobile now? You just put your earphone in and tap go, and that way you’re not using all of this paraphernalia and 1980’s walkmen.

## Sound quality

**Liz (Independent access consultant):** I really loved *Reasons to be Cheerful* as a show, and I loved the concept of what they were trying to do, but unfortunately my headset didn’t work. I do feel frustrated when I see a show and no one apart from the VIs are getting the description, because no one understands what is going on.

**Maria (Extant)**: *Tommy* was integrated, but that was terrible because you couldn’t hear anything. It was presented as accessible, but it wasn’t. The signal kept dropping out and the thing was pre-recorded so it was talking over dialogue and you couldn’t hear anything over the music. It was very stressful and painful actually.

**U4**: You find that with the headset on, you can’t necessarily hear what’s going on on stage and when they start playing music, the music’s so loud you can’t actually hear what’s in the headset. What might be nice is if there was some way of having the sound from the stage at a low level in the headset.

**U2**: I think the technology aspect has to be worked on so when you move your head from side to side it doesn’t go buzzzzzzzzzz in your ear. Some do have interference.

**U5**: That was one thing where the digital system they had before was better. It was a much clearer signal. I’ve been to some places where there’s been a constant buzz or a constant whistle and you couldn’t hear what was being said over that. [murmurs of agreement]

**Maria (Extant)**: One of the questions is with AD and how they might make the equipment more user-friendly. In terms of outdoor performance, I think that there is always a challenge there, because things need to be so big and amplified. How does description get integrated into performances like that in a way that is meaningful and that works for the audience? Classic case is when there is an attempt to do that in a big space, you have to fight your way to a speaker and if you can’t really see much, you’re just looking at the speaker. And you realise

everyone is shouting and clapping or something, and they’re all facing another direction so you think “oh it must be going on over there.”

## Comfort/Ease of use

**U5**: I don’t think any headsets are comfortable, are they?

**U4**: I wasn’t too impressed with the traditional headset thing because it had got buttons on it and all you had to do was accidentally press the wrong button and you lost all the AD and you had no idea if it was working or not or why it wasn’t working.

**U5**: You put it in your lap and you don’t touch it. [laughter]

**U4:** When they switched the AD channel off at half time, I think one or two of the boxes thought “Oh the AD has finished so we’ll go into automatic sleep” so it didn’t wake up again at the start of the second half – mine didn’t. But I can see enough to turn it back on, but if you’ve got to have sight in order to see if the AD is on [laughter] so I wasn’t too impressed.

**Maria (Extant)**: Bad audio description can come from technical problems and that sort of thing. Technical issues around wearing headsets is a pain in the bottom. If you could somehow have equipment that would release your ears - like we used bone-conducting headphones in Flatland - that would be wonderful for audio description to have. Then you could hear both what was around you and what was being described.

# AD Content

Technical issues dog both TAD and IAD, although these are avoided in integrated performances where the AD is open, such as those where the describer becomes a character or where descriptive language is woven into the script or the sound track. Such strategies are outlined later. This section summarises positive and negative experiences in terms of AD content, divided into concerns over accuracy; AD density; vocal delivery and whether the AD presents an occularcentric view.

## Accuracy

**Jenny (Graeae)**: I went to one of the first AD things with VocalEyes, and there was a person describing a woman and they said “she has a short-ish skirt on.” Actually, she had a really short skirt on. The description was inaccurate. The description is about the direct relation to the play. So it goes back to that thing where I don’t want someone I don’t know describing something that they don’t know. It’s out of respect for both sides. The two have to come together.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: It gets horribly confusing when people try to describe things as honourably as they can, and is it that important? Like in dance, unless someone confidently creates an image that you can hold onto, I mean leg movements, arm movements, whatever, I’d rather listen to the music.

**Maria (Extant)**: I think [good AD is] about coming out and feeling satisfied. People you speak to afterwards, even if there is a moment of “oh is that how that happened. Oh that throws a different light on it then,” that sort of thing.

## AD Density

**Maria (Extant)**: Good AD is things being described concisely and accurately.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: Poor AD can be a bit of information overload. I think if there's too much information that's happening from the AD clashing with the action of the theatre. It is kind of like they have to let one another breathe. I guess.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: You do not interrupt dialogue, and you don’t need to fill every space. There is tension and emotion in those spaces.

**Jamie (Agents for Change)**: [Good AD is] providing people with the right amount of information when they need to know what’s going on but it is not easy to get the balance right. Some people like more. Some people want to make up their own mind. It’s complicated.

**U4**: OK *Tommy*, it was its first night, I’m not sure if that was live or recorded but

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)** I think it was recorded.

**U4**: I know I made some comment that there didn’t seem to be much AD in the first half and I distinctly remember someone saying at the bit where Tommy’s father gets shot, you hear the commotion and the bang but it didn’t actually say who’d shot who and that was a key part of the story. And I think we made comments because they were asking us for feedback at half time & I said well we could do with a bit more AD, but after the second half I thought there’s more AD here, perhaps I shouldn’t have complained. Which is why I wondered if it was live or pre-recorded.

**Jo (Invisible Flash)** [talking about her blind friend and colleague]: She always says that she likes AD of course because it enables her to go to the theatre more, but less is more for her. So if she knows that granddad’s sitting on the sofa, she doesn’t need to be told that there is a sofa there, or the colour of it, especially if the character says something like “can I sit with you on the sofa granddad?”

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: I’m always keen on looking at, “what do we need to know” meaning as audience members and participants, what part of the story is missing. Anything crucial to the story needs to be described. Anything else is an artistic call on what is important to experience.

**Maria (Extant)**: I’ve been aware that some visually impaired audiences feel that the level of detail that they would get in a traditional audio described performance has not been there in some of the shows that we have created. I think there is tension expressed around something that claims it is accessible, but still feels like there are bits that are missing. There’s an assumption that if traditional AD was in place that those gaps would be filled. That’s not all of the VI audiences, but has come from isolated voices. I suppose my argument around that is there is quite a bit of traditional AD, but there isn’t much of what we do around.

**Louise(Researcher):** Do you find the traditional description makes you describe too much?

**Willie (describer)**: I think it can. Yes I think in some ways you've got the luxury of describing too much

**Maria (Extant)**: With traditional AD there may be a lot that we’re missing, but we just assume we’re getting everything because you have this authoritative voice telling you stuff. But that is very interesting, that trust. And if an audience feels that they haven’t got a safety net somehow, then I don’t know what you do to fix that perception.

## Vocal Delivery

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: Literal description is too boring. I don’t like boring voices, so I need emotional connection as well. It can get perfunctory or pedestrian. They become one dimensional experiences.

**Milton (Independent artist)**: I have problems with ADs that are monotone or don’t communicate any feeling.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: Quite clinical it can seem…

**Louise (Researcher):** Do you mean in terms of the emotional content of the voice?

**Nathan**: Yeah yeah. So you know we had a lot more subjectivity to it rather than objectivity. And yeah people with visual impairment really seem to love what we're doing.

**Louise**: If you were giving feedback to *The Wolsey* for example what would you say?

**U7**: I normally say just thank you very much, that’s brilliant.

**Louise**: So there’s nothing you can think of that they could do better?

**U2**: Sometimes if the audio describer could actually enter into the spirit of the piece that they’re describing.

**Louise:** So you find it lacking in expression and a bit remote…

**U5**: I mean most audio describers have lovely voices…but I have been to shows where, you know [adopts robotic tone] She moves across the stage [laughter][returns to normal voice] which is what she’s doing but…

U5: And again, I mean having it live because you can put the expression in, in line with what’s going on. Whereas if you’re just in a studio reading a set of lines and then having them inserted then you can’t really…

**Louise:** what they try to do – sorry I’m jumping in – what they’ve tried at *The Wolsey* certainly for *Red Riding Hood*, is recording the description at their first live performance.

**Louise**: Can you think of things that characterise good AD & poor AD?

**U2**: sometimes it’d be the accent of the describer, if it’s too deep you can’t actually understand them but unfortunately you can’t choose who’s going to describe.

Louise: Would it help if you knew in advance who the describer was?

**U2**: Yeah, this is the thing, I suppose. If you know it’s someone who speaks really fast I know they have to keep up with movements on stage, but at the same time if it’s said too quick. You’re thinking where is everybody then?

Louise: So delivery is really key for you?

**U2**: Yeah.

**U1**: I was thinking about expression that there’s such a fine line because if you’re too expressive, I find it distracting and I think the best AD is when you don’t really notice it’s there. Which is why it’s difficult to pinpoint what you’re after in AD. It’s like Schroedinger’s words isn’t it. The sooner you look at them or notice them, they change.

**Maria (Extant)**: A voice that doesn’t feel like it’s too overbearing, and where you can almost filter out the voice even though it’s there, and you can still understand what is going on.

## Occularcentric

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** Some of the complaints that I've had around AD were from people who said look I'm born blind why do you think I need to see what you're telling me to look at and some of the things you're telling me make no sense whatsoever. Like “the blonde white woman wearing a blue blouse over on the left of the stage” he said “is meaningless. What is that? I don't give a shit. I can hear and feel what's going on. Why don’t you learn the way I perceive the world culturally?”

# Purpose

Being asked to define what makes good/poor AD revealed divided opinions on its purpose. In particular, whether it aims to give users access to the story as opposed to access to the creative vision. This can be seen as the degree to which the description is immersive, engaging and enjoyable, or simply helps audiences understand the plot.

**Sarah A (Corali)**: Because we make shows for everyone, but also with an audience with a learning disability in mind, we are often making sure that the meaning is accessible. A lot of our thinking has been around access needs for that audience. I think it would be wise for us to broaden that thought. I think we have a responsibility to think about it in terms of how we make work. What would be good [AD] is something that is inherent in the production instead of buying in the services of an audio describer. So it may be that someone with a visual impairment is getting a different experience than from other audience members.

## Atmosphere and immersion

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: As a user I want an immersive experience. I don’t just want it to be the functional stuff. I want it to be more multisensory actually. Visual imaging really works for me in art... For example, say the picture is of a woman in a silk dress surrounded by flowers. You might pass around a piece of silk or a flower or a hand held copy of the image around that the audience can look at. And then you get a guide to discuss the piece of work with you.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: I think you know poor description is something that takes somebody out of the immersive experience or the theatrical journey that they’re going on if something is...if they’re caught up in what's happening all of a sudden something intrusive kicks in and its like OOH something takes them away from it. I think that is where you get a poor AD in my opinion.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: There was a production when what was being described clearly wasn't what I was seeing. And it was telling me what was happening on stage but it wasn't conveying the meaning. It is difficult to explain. It wasn't creating the same quality of experience

**Sarah A (Corali)**: We felt that the description of the movement hasn’t conveyed the quality of the movement, not in terms of whether it’s good or bad, but the atmosphere and quality that the dancer is executing. It feels just like “they move their arm from A to B”. Well, they may do but there are quite a lot of other things going on there as well.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: *Punch Drunk* did a brilliant show at the BAC years ago, *Masque of the Red Death*. They worked closely with *Extant* and it was bloody excellent. … it was stories of Edgar Allen Poe set up in different rooms. They had a person who was an audio guide who went with you through the show. My experience of integrated stuff and the best thing I ever saw was a *Graeae* show called *Diary of an Action Man*. I really thought that worked well. They integrated the description with that because it was a storytelling piece and it lent itself to describing things. It was really good. That felt to me like a really good, supported described show. I like a lot of visual detail. I also like to make it so it’s known what the theatrical concepts are.

**Milton (Independent artist)**: I think for me good AD in theatre is AD that includes the blind person who is watching the show. Watching theatre in a theatre is a collective experience, so you are there not only to watch the show but to share the experience with the other audience members. You want to understand, live an experience and share the same feeling of the rest of the audience. The best AD is an AD that makes you laugh or cry at the same time that the other audience members do, or have any other reaction at the same time. Usually what happens, if you don’t have that, I believe the blind person feels isolated.

## Art versus Access

Although a couple of the companies emphasised that having to consider access forced them to become more creative, at times the desire to integrate the access provision artistically can override its purpose of making the production accessible. This is the case for both AD and other access services such as BSL. For members of the focus group, the integration of the AD wasn’t always apparent to the visually impaired audience.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: There is still a slight division between parts of the Deaf community and the theatre community into how things should be integrated. There is a feeling that the language isn’t taken seriously enough and that sometimes the art outweighs the communication […] I think there is a certain fear amongst of some members of the d/Deaf community that the language isn’t communicating to a d/Deaf audience. We’re making it look very pretty with arms waving around for a non-deaf audience, but for d/Deaf people we’re not dealing with the communication side very well. There is a whole issue there that I think is getting better.

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** Let's not name and shame, but they're held up there as a model of good practice and I go along to see the show and I think: ‘I don't know where to look. What am I looking at?’ It's a mess! You know and I’ll be sat near people who say well that's not accurate sign language I can’t actually read the story. Who's speaking now? And to whom? What's happening over there?

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)** They also used [IAD] in *The Government Inspector* which quite a lot of us went to see when the describer was on the stage.

**U2**: I wasn’t aware that the describer was on the stage with them, I thought they were in the booth where they normally are.

No, in *The Government Inspector*, the describer was a character in the show.

**U2**: Oh, is that why it sounded like she was walking around.

**Louise (Researcher)**: So was it not clear then?

**U2**: well I don’t know…[more people join]

Louise: We were just talking about *The Government Inspector* and [U2] was saying that he wasn’t aware that the describer was a character in that show. Were you aware?

**U5**: I was aware, I’m not sure if it was pointed out or just from the way she was delivering her lines – she was muttering the AD & she seemed very out of breath.

**Maria (Extant)**: The *Iron Man* had [a describer] who was just out of breath all of the time. He was running around, being a performer and then just panting his way through his description. You couldn’t understand what he was saying. Sometimes I wonder whether the concept gets lost. You get the theory and then you get the practice. The intention overrides the practicality.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: Sometimes a brilliant idea creatively just won't provide access and I think sometimes you have to accept that and go OK, I’ve got to find another grand here.

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: If that [the access] gets lost for the sake of creativity then you've missed the mark so I think you have to prioritize the access first and then talk about what the creativity and integration could do to enhance that access. Otherwise there's a danger of providing that access not for d/Deaf audiences but for hearing audiences to look at the BSL so it becomes a bit tokenistic which is not what we want to do. And there is a line between tokenism and promoting awareness which I think is great to do and for hearing audiences and non-disabled audiences to see access live on stage and develop their

understanding. But at the same time I don’t want it to be tokenistic so it really depends on the piece.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: I think good audio description can also be about people not twigging what it is straight away and then going “oh! That’s what that was!” Or, like with *Diary of an Action Man*, a blind kid saying that their favourite bit was mum and dad rowing, even though they got all of the info from the description and not from the actors playing the mum and dad.

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: We had one round of Unlimited R&D and at the end of that we had a sharing in the Other Room in Cardiff. It was well attended and we had a mixture of visually impaired and non-visually impaired audience and at that time, what was interesting was we ended up using the AD to benefit the sighted audience more than we realized. And so the sighted audience found it hysterically funny. And the visually impaired audience actually still missed a lot of the information, which obviously meant that we’d missed our mark. And then with the second round of R&D […] 100% of the visually impaired audience felt they haven't missed a thing. They had all the same information that everyone else had but we didn't have the kind of belly laughter that we had the first time around. So it was very interesting to see that the sighted audience actually felt that some of the marks were missed for them although we achieved our main goal of making it completely accessible.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: sometimes I think some of the essential information gets missed out and that’s something we’re still trying to work out and make sure that we have, er we're not neglecting access while we're trying to make it integrated and to make it creative.

**Jamie (Agents for Change)**: In a way being creative is not always providing access

# Open Access and Advocacy

By keeping AD “closed” it remains invisible/inaudible to venues, actors, mainstream audiences and sometimes even audiences who would benefit. A very positive response to the idea of access practices having a broader use and appeal came from Rachel Hutchinson’s research in museums.

**Maria (Extant)**: Another question is about trends and how we get people more aware of [AD]

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: How is it still so inaccessible? How is it that people know about signed performances but don’t know about AD?

**U7:** it was *The Wolsey* that got me into AD I didn’t know anything about it until I found out about it at *The Wolsey* and ever since that I’ve always looked for it everywhere else, I do find it very helpful.

**Rachel (University of Westminster)**: I think that AD could be incorporated into access for mainstream visitors, for the benefit of absolutely everybody. I think the descriptive techniques could improve the engagement of all museum visitors and enhance the experience for everyone. And I think it’s probably fair to say that most museum professionals and curators etc. probably what they want is for their visitors to have a memorable lasting experience of a museum and I think AD has great potential to help with that. For sighted people it provides a multisensory experience so as they are looking at the image, they are hearing information about what they’re seeing and we know that multisensory information increases memorability. So I think it’s a really exciting possibility.

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: …We did a touch tour for everyone so the whole audience was involved. Yeah we set it up so that actors were there in character and just introducing everyone as they came into the space and see the props and so we had several milling about. And I think that was pretty much what they needed. Obviously you need to prioritize the people who actually need the touch over those who don't. It was all very much an experiment and I just wanted to see how it worked in that everyone was invited on [stage] in the same way.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: How do we get audiences to enjoy it? That’s a big one. How do we get a wider audience to experience it as an enjoyable experience, because they’re dominated by vision. But actually this is vision in another way.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: we're introducing people to it and so we mixed another lot in which is the refugee community, the new people into town who actually don't know what British theatre is for them to come and have a really friendly relaxed….And people chatting about what it is and why it is how it is and being able to talk amongst themselves and do it.

That's been so successful mixing the three groups together. Also it's not kind of segmented. It's not we’re going to stick you in that box and give you that. It. Is more.. Just great…

# Enhanced AD

Making performances accessible often goes beyond adding AD or BSL to the show itself. In 2016,

*Extant* developed a 12-month programme offering “enhanced” AD. This included helping

theatres develop simple things such as running touch tours before the performance and having braille or large print programmes available, that significantly improve the experience for visually impaired attenders. Interviewees for this report confirmed the importance of such enhancements. Both TAD and IAD provide audiences with pre-visit information from audiointroductions (a.k.a. introductory or programme notes), workshops and touch tours to making tactile objects and large print cast lists available in the foyer. These are not alternatives to full AD but supplement the through description.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: I believe programme notes and set description are essential and can be a part of any project, every day.

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: We provided alternative formats and not introductions.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: A very important thing for us is pre-show preparatory work. So before the show we have material posted on line, usually on YouTube. It really comes from our work with people on the autism spectrum. I hate to generalise, but people who are classified on the spectrum often have difficulty encountering new situations and new people. We do these things called social stories. The typical one would be about visiting your grandma, or how you brush your teeth. It’s that kind of thing. It’s a breakdown or deconstruction of complex social behaviours. Years ago, we started to work with people on the spectrum. We were discussing social stories with some of these people, and we all realised that one of the most complicated pieces of social behaviour one might go through is a piece of theatre. It certainly benefits young people on the spectrum if they know the kind of physical situation they are going to be in, the people they’ll meet, how they can react, and what is useful to them. The meat of it.

There is also a version of these social stories that the adults can use and a version in kids’ language. We also suggest follow up activities, which extends the footprint of the performance to be something that can be thought about and played with either side of the performance.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: I think that what happens for a VI audience member before they come to the theatre and when they arrive is also really important. That is something we got really right in *The Tin Soldier* in that there was summary of the show available online with various things like the cast talking about who they were, what they were wearing, that sort of thing. So you could actually clock into that, and it was done in quite an entertaining way as well. At the same time, we had a person there who met everyone coming in and spoke about access. There was a model box, and touch tour possibilities again all based around the show, what the characters were wearing, and various things to show what the set was like.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: We spent a lot of time making sure we had a good AD preamble. We had a life-sized model box where people could sit in the chairs, and a group from *DIY Company* described all of the characters. The whole audience could listen to the preamble, but if you didn’t listen to that and just came into the show cold you were fucked. We learned, quite rightly, that you can’t always assume someone is going to be there to listen to the preamble. So that is an interesting dilemma. Do you play that so everyone before the show gets it? Maybe that is something I’ll try and do next time.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: We provide touch tours and so … if it's movement based … we get the people with visual impairment to feel those movements even be put into those positions but also to identify the sound effects associated with those movements.

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** On another occasion, we were working in museum spaces and I provided an introductory tour for anyone who wanted to take that up and people afterwards said that what was most inspiring was to meet the characters *in character*. Because I don't let them step out of character just because they're letting somebody feel their costume or touch where they're sitting or be aware of and handle the props and the objects that have come out of those museum spaces, you know. So the character would describe what they were holding and why they were holding it. So the intention is also described not just the act of picking this up. I would want to know, why this character is wearing these things and picking this up? Why now? And that had to be done in character, I've always told that information in character.

Rather than - and I’ve been to some very traditional kind of introductory tours - touch tours where they're just actors saying: ‘I play such and such a role. Oh yeah and I wear this garment…’ that kind of deadens it for me. And I think but Why? Why did they cast YOU with THAT voice? Playing THIS character?

**U5**: We actually had a CD in the post which had all of the information that you give out before the performance which was very helpful because quite often you don’t want to sit in the theatre half an hour before the performance starts. It’s a social evening going to the theatre.

**U3**: the other thing a theatre could have on a CD is their brochure.

**Louise(Researcher):** What about the other things they’ve instituted at *The Wolsey* like having the model box in the foyer? A model of the set…

**U2**: It was very tiny.

**U5**: It was small and I couldn’t really make head nor tail of it, even though somebody was reading out things and telling me what I was holding.

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)**: It tends to get incredibly busy in that foyer in the half an hour before a show. So unless you’re there really early it’s quite difficult to spend any time staring at that table and being able to hear what anybody’s saying.

# AD for every performance?

One major benefit of IAD is that by having the description woven into the script or delivered by a character, it is available at every performance. An alternative is to record the AD, so that its presence is not dependent on the availability of describers and the associated costs. But responses reflected the compromise here: while greater availability is really appreciated, recorded AD is fixed and cannot reflect the flexibility of live theatre.

## Recorded versus live AD

**Jamie (Agents for Change)**: We’re now doing recorded AD I know some people prefer live. But in the end we wanted to give people equality so they could come whenever they want. So it’s a balancing act but it’s not ideal.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: At other times, it’s been pre-recorded. It is difficult because I understand why that happens and sometimes its worked really well. But other times particularly on a tour I've seen a show later on in a tour and it's not the same things happening on the stage because obviously tours develop and little subtleties change and things that are actually really important have changed and so I'll be listening to the audio description and go “Oh well that's actually not what they doing, now. And that's developed so it’s misinformation.”

**Jamie (Agents for Change)**: If it’s recorded, you need an operator who knows the show. It’s quite a challenge.

**David (New Wolsey Theatre)**: for *The Last Five Years* our DSM as well as cueing lights and sound and everything else had a laptop and they had to also cue the AD. And the feedback from them was it was such[…]they didn’t feel a cue. They can kinda feel there’s a lighting cue, they can feel when the scene changes happen. Because we are seeing changes happen but for AD cues it is very strange. She almost didn't quite understand or have feeling for what was going so…

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: So that's when we got our first professional AD team in, but we have an operator for every show so there’s somebody whose sole job is to operate and listen to the output and make sure they time it.

**David**: Everything is so flexible in this show [*Red Riding Hood*] that we had to have an operator on it. Last year we did *Sinbad* [with recorded AD for] the first time. We had a number of AD cues you had to change the order of at one point, Sinbad threw a rope onstage or when Sinbad goes on stage and things like that and you have to be part of it. It's not a cheaper option.

**David**: And as you're making changes, yeah, which Kerry [the director] did continually throughout the whole tour. It's really hard for the AD to keep up…. We did go for pre-record. It was really hard to make the changes and keep up with it. It was a nightmare actually to be honest. But it was a good nightmare. But we were re-recording in venues. Adam an actor in the company who did start to put the description at the beginning he’d vocally changed by the time we kept adding bits in. Yeah it was it was a real challenge.

**U3**: Was that pre-recorded?

**Others**: Yes

**U3**: Really? I didn’t know that, I thought it was live

**U7**: I preferred it live, I must admit. But this year I think they’ve got it spot on, it was really good.

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)**: It’s a trade off isn’t it because the benefit of pre-recording is that they can do it for every single performance. I think they still do a show with live AD, as part of the run because the idea is to increase choice so…

**U5**: Initially it was just one matinee wasn’t it?

So it’s made a difference in the sense of allowing you to choose your date.

**Louise (Researcher):** Do you think that’s worth the trade-off?

**U2**: Yes I think so

**U5**: I did like it when it was live though, when things go wrong and they tell you.

**U2**: I’d rather have it pre-recorded than nothing at all.

**U4**: I knew it was pre-recorded because every time the colour of the lights changed, it [the AD] was so prompt, it was obvious. It wasn’t someone seeing it happen and then saying it. The audio was triggered by the very same buttons that switched the lights.

**Louise:** Well I think the issue is that if you don’t have the describers there, you need somebody to trigger each cue to make sure it keeps in synch.

**U5**: Yes, if something goes wrong on stage and it’s pre-recorded the AD could get out of synch. I think it may have happened once or twice but luckily someone was there to stop it and re- synch it but it does need someone to oversee it.

But that’s potentially a benefit of recorded over live is that you can actually have stuff being said on cue.

# Integrated strategies

Respondents outlined strategies they had tried in terms of integrating the AD. What becomes apparent is that there is no single “right way” to integrate.

## Describers as characters

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: We [ … ] experimented with the two actors playing the central parts being the voices which wasn’t necessary. I had an idea in my head that it might be an extension of the story, so the audience who were listening to the AD knew it was the young woman commenting on the young man, but I don’t think it was a conceit that was ever going to work, really.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: I think character driven audio description works for me. So in *Blanche and Butch* for example, although our audio describer was actually working through headsets, she was a visible performer on stage. She played the stage manager in the show and had a character.

**Milton (Independent artist)**: In the other R&D we tried to focus more on the AD and the person doing the describing. The idea that I had was for the person doing the AD to be part of the show in order to make it more creative, so I thought that having an actor musician audio describing the show like he was the writer of the show would be creatively interesting, more interesting than if it was someone outside. The other fact is that the person doing the describing is a blind person, which I realised just a few months ago is something that sounds weird for other people who don’t have disabilities, but for me it was quite an obvious choice. I think it has to be a blind person to describe it in order to understand how the show could be communicated to blind people. So then, we did a music video to promote the show as a teaser. Again, I had a blind performer describing it. I wrote a script and directed him, so we recorded my voice and timed it, then the artist doing the audio description, he did a kind of verbatim into a microphone, and we recorded it more or less to the same times.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: Fiona Buffini (Nottingham Playhouse) who is directing *Our Country is Good* 2018 a spring production for *Ramps on the Moon* at the moment which is just about to go into rehearsal. Of course that's a lyric piece has no music at all. She has made the aboriginal character who's got not a big part in the original script to be there throughout on stage. And to describe what's going on.

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)**: So the first few years of working together, we used a form of description which was sort of like having narrator characters who did the description and the way that we make our shows lends itself to that because we have a large cast and we do quite a bit of chorus work and storytelling anyway, it doesn't necessarily take a lot more effort at the scripting stage to add in elements of description which are kind of describing visuals as opposed to just telling the story but obviously you do have to know what is going to be happening on stage which is not always easy to know. As the director of the play and so writing or co-writing that in the first place, I have some power to make sure that it does happen as part of the script and but yeah it can be quite tricky and we decided after a few shows to try some other methods. We found it's very difficult for the visually impaired actors to deliver the audio description because they themselves can't see what's happening. So for them it's just reams and reams of extra lines to learn as opposed to something which is going to come very naturally through watching the piece which is part of I guess how it works when you're doing it in a non-integrated way.

**Willie (describer)**: *Up ‘n Under* is a production that I’m doing now in which the AD’s coming live from stage. It lends itself perfectly for this integrated description mainly because it's a storytelling piece so the text is very much the performers telling the story. And the writing is

very, very descriptive. So for me it was a good show. It's about allowing the characters to tell the audience what's the story because that’s the style of the writing and I just add anything physical that needs to be described so for example, I'm also playing a character so initially a narrator sets up the story and then introduces the first two characters. So in fact other than describing when the narrator actually comes onto the stage I didn't actually describe for about five or six minutes even when these other two characters come onto the stage because she introduces them and it's all in the text already… Because it’s all about rugby there’s a conceit that I'm a sports commentator so I already have a big headset. With a mic taped inside it - a radio mic - and in one of my pockets I've got a transmitter with a mute switch so that’s on and off and on and off all through the show. And even at one point when I'm commentating with a handheld microphone in one hand to the whole audience I take it away and switch on my audio description in my pocket and I’m back and forth so it's quite complicated it is a bit like patting your head and rubbing your stomach. And at the end of the piece there is actually a rugby match. The writer John Godber was very detailed about what happens in the match so I’ve been able to lift that and use it as commentary and just change little bits to make it in the present and change the style of the writing so it becomes you know sports commentary rather than just stage directions. It is very detailed and the director’s used that detail to choreograph the game. So for me it is has just been a case of lifting it out.

## Embedded Approaches

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: In the scripts and the texts we work with, we use highly descriptive language. So far, the work that we have used has been written by Alex Bulmer. We use descriptive language throughout so that blind and VI audiences don’t miss what is going on, on the stage. Our work isn’t audio described. The description is within the narrative.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: So she started to write it into the narrative. It was so beautifully done and so seamless that it didn’t read as a visual thing. It was too embedded.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: We’re pushing it so that the AD is sung, so the song talks about what is going to happen and then it happens. It also allows us to be visually abstract.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: In our shows we have embedded AD into the script, poetically, almost creating a new character. We also use live soundscapes and use some elements of sound design.

## Multisensory Approaches

**Liz (Independent access consultant):** How do we take what is there and imaginatively use the technical agenda to enhance in a multisensory way? There needs to be more attention in looking into how sound is used on stage.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: [Our] shows are all multisensory. They don’t just ever rely on the senses of seeing and hearing, which a lot of conventional theatre does. Touch, smell and taste with kinaesthetic sense or the position one’s body has in space; temperature, things like that. We’re always discovering new senses and are operating with them.

**Maria (Extant)**: We have done it with sound designs that reflect the lighting designs, so if we have a mood that changes in the lighting we reflect that in the sound. It’s not described as such, but it creates a sense of the atmosphere through the sound. We’ve done it through performers describing themselves, through performers describing other performers, so it’s either first or second person. We’ve done it in a call and response sort of way, call and response with audiences and we’ve done it in outdoor performances where we again enlisted the audience to join in to find ways of describing things. We’ve done it in preambles before shows, collective programme notes where an audience sits together to hear notes and to have a touch tour.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: We've reinvented AD utilising the skills of a beatboxer to give a richer soundscape to audiences with VI. I think that's the best way to put it. We've taken that a step further and in some other pieces as well and what we've done is… Instead of just having audio description as an add on, we have actually had it as a key factor in determining our choreography. We have also gotten people with visual impairment to physicalize each sound effect our beat-boxer makes. So we're kind of like I guess creating our own language cos if the majority of people with visual impairment are saying that each sound effect is more associated with that movement then that will always be the sound effect that we use with that movement.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: What I wanted to do with *Learning To See* would be to incorporate live music and sound on stage so that as you move on stage, you could identify where that person is via an interesting sound score. It’s not done enough as far as I’m concerned. I’m really interested in how you can use what’s around you technically - not just

lighting, but all of those interventions. All of those things for me as a partially sighted person help illuminate what is happening. I wanted to explore that in my own work. The heritage work I was doing at Lewes Castle is different. It’s a site that has a rich history and characters within it, so we commissioned a sound designer and an audio describer, and they worked very closely with staff at the castle to develop a script that was character driven. I didn’t want it to just be “you’re turning left, you’re turning right, 12 steps up or down.” I wanted it to be an immersive experience and Joseph used binaural sound to bring the castle to life in a new way.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: we've really been looking at what movement styles are the most visible to people visual impairment. We've been looking at projection that's been specifically designed to enhance visibility. We've also been looking into costume. And obviously AD.

**Jo (Invisible Flash)**: We also use tactile props that the audience has the opportunity to handle, during, before or after the performance. Also, a lot of our props make noise as they are being used, so the audience know what we are talking about or what the actors are doing.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: One of the things we do is we are always looking at ways of touching without touch, because of cultural sensitivities. You can’t really pick up and cuddle kids, so how do you touch them? We use fanning. We’re forever blowing and wafting different kids of air across people, sometimes perfumed, sometimes not. There’s a physical context, but a gap there too. That’s important. We also make different offers. If one thing isn’t working we will withdraw it and go in via another sense. Or if something is not pleasing, we will go back to something that was. That’s also why the performers we want are performers who are perceptive and inventive. So they can see how well they engage with the audience, and if they are not they can come up with different things.

# Is TAD rule-bound?

The degree of experimentation in creating an integrated approach suggests by implication that the style of TAD is fixed. Some respondents made this criticism of TAD explicit:

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: I get worried about traditional modes of AD getting set in stone. It’s an artistic process that needs to be interrogated.

**Milton (Independent artist)**: Is there any dogma? Is there such thing as “the right way” to do AD? Or is there interesting ways of doing AD? Is there an AD police or hierarchies? Should a person who audio describes be paid the same as an actor even though he has to write his own script? Can we use AD only using headphones or can we use it doing it in mics? Can we have a different tone of voice when you describe what is going on or could we have a character? There are a lot of questions. These are the questions I am thinking about for my show. Can AD be considered an art, like a radio drama? Can we put AD in the same place as we would the writing of a play? For me, it is something so new, and I believe things like art shouldn’t have any rules but theatre has loads of rules. People want to do loads of stuff and they have certain ways of doing it. They believe that there is a right way and a wrong way. And I think that AD and sign language can go down that path which is sad. It should be the opposite. I think rules are meant to be broken, things are meant to be reinvented.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: There is no template that can fit over every story you want to tell that says “tick these boxes and then you’ve done it.” I don’t think that’s the case if you’re talking about genuine, creative access and the imaginative use of access tools. The key word is imaginative which means it will change from show to show.

# Tailor-made Access

It became clear that every aspect of the AD needs to be tailored to the specific production from the descriptive style and content, to the skills and expertise of the describer (describer profile).

## Content

**Jenny (Graeae)**: I said that I knew exactly what was going wrong and I know what we need to do. It needs to be in a diary form. And suddenly we had the right framework for Mike to be

able to describe what is happening. So it starts with “September 7th, 2004. Everything is in the bedroom, check.” And then he describes all of the things in his bedroom. Then his invisible dad arrives and he describes his dad and they go on these big adventures, and then the soundscape would support these adventures. It was beautiful storytelling and that is all it needed

**Maria (Extant)**: Each production comes often from a place where we are exploring new territories around content and form, so you have to think through how access will work each time in different ways depending on the style of what you are doing. The style of the performance is also really important. You need to find a match. That is why I am talking about the R&D of the R&D. With *The Chairs*, when we re-toured it, we had a 3-day R&D specifically for the audio description because we knew that in the first tour, the idea hadn’t quite worked.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: All of the shows are different, but they start from the same place. We look at the requirements and the needs of the audience.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: It’s always an experiment, and it’s not always everyone’s cup of tea.

**Maria (Extant)**: I wonder whether there is something around the evolving role of technology and whether that could do anything. There’s something in terms of audience experience and how technologies on stage or off could do something, or whether there is a role for something personalised that could be done. The question for me is that with description, whether it’s traditional or integrated, it’s a flat rate off the peg thing that someone else has chosen to do, whether it’s some groovy interpretation by the performer or some sterile describer up in the lighting box. To have something that really says “this is what I’m interested in for the performance,” Like, I dunno, a footballer who wants to know who has knobbly knees or something. It could almost emulate how people choose to look at things, because everyone sees different things.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: There is no template that can fit over every story you want to tell that says “tick these boxes and then you’ve done it.” I don’t think that’s the case if you’re talking about genuine, creative access and the imaginative use of access tools. The key word is imaginative which means it will change from show to show.

## Interpreter/Describer Profile

Just as the style of the access interpretation needs to be appropriate to the piece, so does the profile of the access interpreter.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: Identify who you want to work with and don't necessarily just go “Oh that's the person that I know does this.” so then think about it in the same way as you would when you were thinking about auditioning and you’re thinking about you creative team and have chats with people and see if they are on the same page as you with working in that way and think about who works for your production.

**Sarah A (Corali)**: For example, we have worked with some excellent audio describers that have pretty much become part of the performance because they are aware that they are on the stage and people are watching them. They have a stage presence. Others seem to detract from what’s happening. I think that it’s actually that we haven’t worked with an audio describer that has the expertise to describe that kind of practice. The reflection of how we have used it in the past is that it has felt like an evolving form that we haven’t fully explored.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: Bad audio description is when you get some cowboy who comes in, watches one show and makes some notes. I’d say the same about bad BSL. Some interpreters will watch a show, won’t even bother to record it and will just deliver it. I know how hard our audio describers and interpreters work to translate a script. They put the hours in, and some people don’t. That’s the difference between good and bad.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: For some theatres now they pre-programme all the AD, but they have the same person for every show. That is bad AD. If it’s black led art, you want a black audio describer. If it’s an all male cast, you have a man. I saw a piece that was a one woman show, the actress was a Nigerian woman talking about rape, and the BSL interpreter was a man. It was wrong. You could tell she felt the male presence there. He should not have accepted that job. It’s things like that where I worry that the mainstream thinks they’re doing it.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: Like so what we're doing here the *Rationale* method is twofold. So on one hand we have we're creating a brand new jobs line that's never been opened to beat boxers before in terms of you know AD and also generally audio describers seem to be in their 40s 50s and 60s. And so there doesn't seem to be that much interest from younger people to want to pursue audio description as a career option.

# Ingredients for Integrating Access

This next section addresses the final two research questions: How can artists and companies best be supported to provide integrated access services for visually impaired people and how

should they be checking that what they are providing meets the needs of the audience? The answers to the first question can be summarised as understanding why you are doing it; building in access from the start; collaborating; funding it. The answer to the second is ask!

## Making work accessible means understanding your motives

**Sami (Elbow Room Theatre)**: I've talked a lot about this recently with companies wanting an integrated interpreter but then not really knowing what that means. And I think more needs to be done about why you want integration and what that means. I think there’s quite a wide spectrum it could be anything from a d/Deaf perspective, from having an interpreter that's on the stage in costume to having an interpreter that is a character and referenced throughout the piece and has interaction with other characters on stage. And I think depending on your time and your resources that can be a sliding scale of how much you integrate.

## Making work accessible means building it in from the start

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: what I would advise companies particularly is to think from the very beginning that you’re going to have to budget for this because often …I am brought in after R&D’s happened when you’re nearly at this stage of going into full production and it's far too late for me really to be able to advise very much. And then they haven't budgeted adequately so you know you, I can't really… I’m very limited as to what I can offer.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: Access tools such as AD or sign language and captioning for Taking Flight are all very much at the centre of where we start our creative journey so it will be something that we consider with our designers way before we go into rehearsals way before, before I even get initial sketches and for example for our Shakespeare's, our designer Becky Davis will always have considered how tactile our costumes are going to be before we’ve even gone down the route of thinking about colour schemes or anything like that. It is always on the agenda before we move forward it and working out how are we going to integrate sign language and how we're going to try to integrate AD. And that happens very, very early on in the process.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: It also takes planning. You can’t just do it midway through rehearsal and decide wouldn’t it be nice if. You have to be there from the stage of the concept of the show. You have to say from the beginning, “right what are we going to do about AD and

access generally for this show?” That has to be built in from the moment you sit down with the germ of an idea.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: It’s not just what happens on the stage, it’s way before that. It’s considering it right from the beginning, even from the planning stage and across the whole journey - the making process, budgeting, producing, advertising. It’s the experience and evaluation. It’s not just one part.

## Making work accessible means budgeting for it

**Sami (Elbow Room Theatre)**: If you don't have the resources or time to implement it properly you could be sacrificing the actual point of access which for me is so d/Deaf audience members are able to know the story.

**Liz (Independent access consultant)**: Budget is also a concern around this, but there is a lot you can do at low cost including touch tours, mini sets, good programme notes and I think you can have synopsis of stories on MP3s. I don’t understand why this isn’t just standard for every show because everyone can do it.

**Jenni (Unscene Suffolk)**: I’m actually going to look at a piece that is just in its R&D phase, commissioned by Unlimited called *Pull*-*up* by *Blink Dance Theatre* and at the moment they’ve just got funding to do R&D and they’ve asked me to come in, during this part, not necessarily to create any AD but just to look at it and make some suggestions about what we could do.

Maybe that’s absolutely essential if you’re then going to have your AD worked in, in a useful and practical way, right from the beginning, because you’ve got to know about it before you write your funding application. How is this going to work? And that was definitely the limitation on how we worked together was that we hadn’t necessarily thought about having enough time together.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: What we are trying to do all the time is show that this is added value. It doesn’t come cheap. To do it well costs money, extra rehearsal time, extra bodies. It doesn’t come cheap and people have to accept that. However, I still think it brings added value to shows, both in terms of the creative act and the number of people who can access your work. It does cost money and you have to be aware of that.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: we know that when you can extend the length of a show through several spaces, it is going to be very interesting. But we very rarely get the chance to do that because we have to satisfy funders who want to know how many shows did you did and where and all that. We’re satisfying their questions instead of asking whether there is a better way.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: Money is always an issue for providing access. Cost is always the issue for us in terms of providing full access, particularly for d/Deaf people. We do have an easy to read script for anyone who wants that support. It’s not ideal, but it’s something and it’s at every production. We also have one BSL interpreter for each run which is usually made up of 5 or 6 shows. And we recently had the scope to have the interpreter at a rehearsal so we could integrate them into the action, which we got good feedback for.

## Making work accessible means collaboration

It became apparent, that by leaving the access to the interpreters and not collaborating, companies were perceived to be abdicating certain responsibilities.

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: Something I always say to companies I work with is that this is a collaborative effort and it's never just, you don’t just bring somebody in and they provide it for you it's always working together to find the solutions and find ways especially if we're talking about integration and how to proceed with it and how to make it integral to the piece and how best to weave it in.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: It’s about communication in every way and having that rehearsal room open and also being open to having questions and being open to problem solving together not just leaving all of the access on one person's shoulders and I think it’s a creative journey and a collaborative one.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: For example normally what happens is you have the choreographer creating and the AD, which will be added on. For us that's not great. So what we decided to do was seek out our audio describers and we would create like an 8 count and we say to the audio describer. OK say what you need in order to let your audio description breathe? And they might say so well we need you to spin on your head for another eight counts. Or we need you to walk another four steps because otherwise as soon as the movement’s happened it’s gone again and it's not enough time for us to be able to AD what we’re seeing.

**Willie (describer)**: Well as a describer/actor I really like this way of working I have to say because obviously, I’m in the production so I've been in rehearsals since day one and for a lot of that I've been sitting writing the descriptions as I’ve been watching the play and also I’ve been saying to actors – can you say, just instead of saying he did that, can you say he does this so it actually helps the description. I’ve often gone to the director and said “to help the AD could this happen?” And because this is what she wanted in this show then she is more than

open to it. There may be other directors or writers who may not want that. But she is very open to it.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: The complication as a consultant is that if you’ve read the script and been part of rehearsal, you know what’s going on. You have to filter that out to think about audience experience.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: Good audio description is when there has been an active dialogue between the actors and the describer, director and the describer, and the designer and soundscape artist and the designer.

## Making work accessible means working with venues and taking a flexible approach

**Chloe (Elbow Room Theatre)**: Because it was a sharing and not a ticketed performance we didn't have any front of staff at the venue. And if you take something into production especially something that involves access you need to be working with the venue so they're aware of access provisions.

**Sarah A (Corali)**: We rarely go in cold into a venue, so we would know what the set up is. We would certainly be familiar with any physical access and any additional needs we might need to look into there. But generally, we are working in partnership with spaces because we will be working with an organisation that has an appreciation of diverse practice. In terms of thinking about the audience, it would be inherent in the relationship.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: The other thing we we’ve managed to get flexible about … is that we can do a touch tour at any time you like. It doesn't have to be a pre-booked pre- advertise touch tour. People could if they want a little bit of exploration then that's always possible. But you see that's about the mindset of the change in the organisation because if you have a stage management team who don't understand, they're going to resist it or you have an acting company that don't understand, they're going to resist it. So I think the other bit is just continually rolling out this disability awareness.

## Making work accessible mean reaping creative benefits

**Sarah A (Corali)**: Simply that it will make the work better. We know that from our experience of other integrated access into our performances, so we’ve got to do it. Not just for access reasons, but because it makes the performances better.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: If ever there is something necessary that we can also make beautiful and poetic, we will. One of the things we’ve grappled with, working in water or on trampolines, is

that is difficult for wheelchair users to access physically. The staff throw themselves into it, hoisting these kids on hydrotic things. It has always looked really uncomfortable to me. So we had the idea that we could make the wheelchair hoisting process into a dance. So instead of this utilitarian thing that we get over as fast as possible, we try and make getting transported into the air a beautiful thing. If you go into this stuff with that kind of intent, you can work a long way towards that kind of goal…. you just have to avoid staying at one end of the swing all the time.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: We did *Fall of the House of Usher*. In that play, there are beautiful stage directions, more stage directions than text. So I wrote to ask if we could use the stage directions to be spoken live by the actors so they would talk about what it was that they were doing. That was the beginning of *Graeae’s* journey of exploring how you might use AD as an artistic tool, access as well, but something that was led by the art in the same way that sign language was informed by the art. I could have more control over it, rather than some person coming in, watching the show, writing a script, and coming back and doing it. Where was their real understanding of the visceral process of making that theatre?

**Nathan (Rationale)**: What was really interesting is in doing that, it took our choreography in a completely different direction than what it normally would have been so I had a general idea of what the choreography might look like and then as soon as we started on this process it became very apparent that what I had in my mind what it looked like became completely redundant. Because it became something else just a completely different journey. It was brilliant.

**Mandy (Collective Encounters)**: I’m really interested in looking at different artistic forms to deliver audio description so that it is not simply utilitarian - that it has an artistic voice and that is beautiful in its own right.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: Look at it creatively. But start from a little bit of research and talking to people and get excited about the addition that you're getting to your I call it the palette. A creative team has a palette to work from and they've got very good at sets and costumes and lighting and then they introduced AV. That was a new thing in the palette - when you think about it as one of one of those that it's something else for you to work with.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: It’s also about having a beautiful diversity of actors. Everyone coming in with their stuff and their view of the world, that is also a part of the aesthetics of access.

Understanding their framing of the piece gives you more to work with and play with. I have

never worked with a cast of non-disabled people ever. I don’t think I’d know what to do. I think I’d find it really boring.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: It has a beautiful impact on the whole show if you look at integrating access. It’s not just about ‘oh this is great, maybe we’ll get a few more d/Deaf people in the audience.’ It’s obviously great if you achieve that, but it’s also about the impact it can have on the craft of being a theatremaker.

## Making work accessible means not being afraid and not being afraid to fail

The flip side of experimenting with new approaches is that they might not always work. One message that came through very strongly was that failure is part of the process.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: I think one thing that we did know or did recognise is that it’s actually people’s resistance to…[access] was about fear. And if we could distil the fear out of our staff, then they would then be able to be more welcoming…So the fear factor to start with, with our own staff that thing of when you meet two people and one of them happens to be a wheelchair user. And the person talking immediately talks to the person with them and of course that’s so stupid, why are we doing that? We must stop that and that whole kind of how you can interact and not asking what's wrong with you

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: I think we’ve got to be able to mess it up a little bit sometimes and be prepared for people to say that didn’t work and not go “I’m never going to do that again” and we’ve got to keep trying different approaches and to see what works and what doesn't.

**Jamie (Agents for Change):** I always say it’s not rocket science I think a lot of people make it into rocket science and that puts people off engaging with it. And it isn’t rocket science and it be can done and people need it. And need to engage with it and not be scared off. We are constantly learning, although we’re very experienced, we really are the blind leading the blind.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: We fuck up monumentally at *Graeae*. But that’s the only way we learn how best to do it

**Julie Mc (Vital Xposure):** Do you know what, just don't be afraid. Ask! Ask as there are people who have gone ahead before you. Don't reinvent the wheel. There are so many of us who have done it and we've learned through falling over, through making so many mistakes so we’re in this together. You can pick my brains clean at any time. There's loads of us out here we're trying our best and nobody's got it right.

**Sarah H**: When we did *Tommy*, Paul Sirett who was adapting the script and really wanted to… put in live audio description in other words change the script so that somebody who couldn't see it all could get it from the dialogue. Almost an impossible thing to do with a musical. And also with a piece of work that is pretty unintelligible anyway. ... And that didn't work and also we caught ourselves out and then the other sorts of things that we're trying to do particularly around integrated BSL. That if the script kept changing. But it did. We’d stick a bit more script in to get some AD in and then in that sends the BSL consultants into a frenzy. And how they're going to do that and if you're not wanting to be totally literal with your BSL but you're wanting to do it in a …. So it was …and we didn't have enough time you know we had five weeks rehearsal to get this ridiculously huge production on anyway and we were adding more opportunity to the creative team and what they what they had in their palette and what they could work with.

**David (New Wolsey Theatre)**: when I went to the ADA (Audio Description Association) conference, I weathered that *Tommy* AD stop but it was really useful because actually throughout the entire process people were being very careful and to have people in a room in a forum telling me this didn't work this didn't work for these reasons it's so valuable because it's straight from people who have the experience. So that was great. Sometimes in the process we felt it was just a little bit like walking on eggshells and didn't want to go No oh hang on a minute .. but it's a learning process. That's the whole point of it.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: *Ramps* [*on the Moon*] is about changing mindsets and actually recognising the richness that you're missing out on. But we're not saying that's the way to do it. But we're also quite prepared to share where we've fallen over because well what is the point of not?

## Making work accessible takes time

**Sarah A (Corali)**: If I’m honest, it’s just that we’re scrambling to get everything ready. It’s an issue of time. It’s thinking as well. From time to time we’ve had positive feedback from VI people in the audience because they have been able to pick on the rhythm in the music or the sound of the dance, and I think us being able to work more from what we know is communicating well to VI audiences would be an interesting starting point for us. I’m also aware that this isn’t just wishful thinking. It’s a necessary thought.

## Making work accessible isn’t only important for audiences

**Maria (Extant)**: And then also for our performers as well, we try to make their experience of working with us accessible as well. If that means working with a set designer to make sets more tactile so they can navigate around the set for blocking, or audio cues for when to get on and off the stage, you know whatever. We try to make things accessible for them, and because performances include VI performers, there’s a rich source of consultation there on what we are trying to do for our audiences.

**U2**: I think as a company that works for a progressive amount of time with a certain audio describer and you get used to each other, then I don’t think the improvisation would have been such an issue. If we’d been with you right from the beginning, I mean we didn’t have many rehearsals with you and it was a bit you know scary, waiting, pausing for you to come in, thinking is there any more, is that it?

**U4**: we don’t have the visual cues, so you’re waiting for your specific cue.

**U2**: that’s true but if you’d been with us right from the beginning…a company might have an audio describer, I don’t know do companies have audio describers or…?

## Making work accessible takes consultation with users

Responses show that companies take different approaches when it comes to feedback. Some feel that it is vital to consult with users at the R&D phase. Others feel that post-show feedback is also important but don’t want to over-burden their audience who, after all have gone to see the show for a good night out.

**Liz (Independent access consultant):** you need an outside eye and ear to be part of that making process. Each show is different. Each audio trail is different, but you still need to have that consultancy. It often doesn’t get that weight, because people don’t get paid. Lots of people do things voluntarily, which is fine, but I do think it is quite often taken for granted.

And I don’t know how to make this happen, because it seems more and more that VI’s are consulting on a volunteer basis. I question whether it happens with d/Deaf audiences to the same degree.

**Elise (Taking Flight)**: All we can keep doing is inviting people into rehearsals. Talking to our audience trying to assess what's working and what isn’t and finding new ways to make it better. I don’t really like the word “better” but make it more accessible for more people. And because I mean I'm sighted and I’m hearing so I'm not the best person to be the judge of whether the access is working so I absolutely need to talk to the people that are using the access tools but it’s part of the creative journey.

**Garry (Birds of Paradise)**: it is important to consult with the VI and d/Deaf community when preparing this work. It’s no good thinking it’s great; you need to road test it[…] You can’t do it in isolation from the community.

**Jamie (Agents for Change):** we always do [seek feedback], particularly with recorded AD, on each night we did and we were really nervous about what users think but it was 100% positive about what we do.

**Nathan (Rationale)**: So in terms of formal evaluation we just normally get footage of you know *vox pops* or like audio files and things like that and we've basically given that direct feedback. Cos for us you know they’re really strong in an emotive sense but obviously with the questionnaires that they fill in and we have those bits of feedback and things like that but we tend to do more of the qualitative feedback because in terms of changing people's hearts and minds it's the qualitative stuff that really does that.

**Louise (Researcher):** Can I ask how you get feedback from your blind audiences?

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**: With great difficulty. Because you don't want to hammer them you know it's, it's building relationships actually. So we've got a user group of people we've got people that we will go to and say would you mind telling us what you thought. There's always a line that you'll see in a show report coming from the front of house manager, there was a user in but I'm sorry I didn't get to speak to them because I was busy doing something else so that there will be an attempt to go and speak to them and say Hey and how was that for you? I've got another idea which will be about creating work. It starts from the d/Deaf communities creating deaf space so that if you're inviting a deaf audience and people in to see something.

To get them in here beforehand then give them a bit of introduction to it. And then invite them back afterwards and have a bit of a chat about it. I think that is one way that I think… Oh but I also just want people to come and be part of the audience. I don't know really what people think. So it is delicate yeah.

**Jenny (Graeae)**: we usually have quite sparse, single sentence feedback to our shows. I mean I think that that's one of the reasons why a research project like this is great because most small companies like us are not in a position to gather data which really compares different types of description and goes into great detail about people's enjoyment.

**Tim (Oily Cart)**: Actually, we do get feedback through interviews and things like that, but it is essentially just people’s opinions. Mostly with us it’s not the opinions of the primary audience, it’s the adults present and what they made of it all. I wish there was a way we could somehow have a way of testing this for them.

**Sarah H (New Wolsey Theatre)**:It really is not in any shape or form rocket science it really is simple and actually, you want to be talking to, not just to the users but to the actors too and to people who have the experience. And don't take one opinion as THE opinion. Listen around. And because you’re going to do that anyway, when you're making things are you never going to say oh Joe Bloggs said he only wants to see Shakespeare in doublet and hose therefore I’d better do that. You don't behave like that when you’re a creative force.

Conclusions and recommendations

There is a general worry about complacency. For some companies/venues simply including AD in performance is “enough” without sufficient critical thought as to how it is functioning technically or creatively. Integrated access has sought to overcome the perceived failings of traditional access provision. At its worst integrating the access artistically can override its primary purpose. At its best access becomes part of the creative process, encouraging artists to interrogate their art and offering them another creative tool while providing an immersive experience to its users. BSL is already highly visible and offers something new to the mainstream audience. AD is still largely unknown. Research in museums shows that open, multisensory AD can enhance the whole audience experience, making a visit more memorable for everyone, not only the sector(s) of the audience with specific needs. It is possible that open, multisensory AD can achieve the same for live performance.

Glossary of Key Terms

Some of these definitions have been arrived at over the course of this research. They are collected here for ease of reading.

* **Aesthetics of access**: (See also: creative access, integrated access) “creatively embedding a range of tools such as audio description and sign language from the very beginning of the artistic process.” (Graeae.org)
* **Audio Description**: “a means of helping blind and partially sighted people access audiovisual contents including film and theatre performances by […] provid[ing] a verbal description of the actions, scenery, body language and other relevant details” (Braun 2007,1)
* **Creative Access**: (see also: aesthetics of access, integrated access) “It’s about matching tools and techniques with the specific performance, the specific characters

– building it from within to create a seamless product, stretching and enhancing the whole. This is about taking the techniques used to provide access and weaving them into the very performances they themselves support.” (Verrant 2018)

* **Integrated Audio Description (IAD):** Audio description integrated directly into a performance, often without headsets and available for every show in a performance run. This is usually implemented from the start of rehearsals and is a part of the creative make up of a piece.
* **Integrated access**: (See also: Aesthetics of access, creative access) “Rather than being hidden away, the [access] will be incorporated within the world of the play.” (Love 2016)
* **Traditional Audio Description (TAD):** Audio description delivered via headsets in a “neutral” voice that is not directly related to the performance. It is often

created post production and is provided once or twice a run.

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## Glossary of Abbreviations

* AD audio description
* ADA Audio Description Association
* BSL British Sign Language
* IA Integrated Access
* IAD Integrated Audio Description
* R&D Research and Development

RNIB Royal National Institute for Blind People

* TAD Traditional Audio Description
* VI Visually impaired

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Recommendations for Companies Wishing to Integrate AD

* + **Interrogate your motives**: What do you want to achieve and why?

“I think you'd definitely start from the potential of the creativity”

* + **Start early**: consider access provision from the start in terms of budget, time, technical and creative requirements.
  + **Consult widely**: with your audience; with access interpreters; with other companies that have gone down this route.

“Think about it at the start and think about who you want to work with when you have conversations with those people along the way.”

* + **Cast your interpreters**: Find the person/people with the right skillset for your production - don’t assume that any old interpreter will do. You might not need to bring in an external person. You may decide to give the AD/BSL to an actor/character or write the AD into the script. Whoever you choose, ensure that they have the right training and understand your requirements and the needs of your audience.

“If you start from a place of we’re going to cast a character and integrate them from the outset and you haven't learnt the basics then you're in danger of compromising the access for audiences.”

* + **Collaborate:** Don’t hand over the access to the interpreter, integrate your interpreter into the creative process; include the venue and your company members in the collaboration.

“Some directors never listen to AD. They go “oh yeah we’re doing it,” but they never listen to it. They’re never part of the translation process, and it’s like, if you’re not going to get your hands dirty with this stuff, don’t do it. You’re only doing it because you need to be seen to be doing it, not because you

care about it or understand how it can work. So yeah, this whole bandwagon thing has me a bit worried”

* + **Be Fearless:** Don’t be afraid of getting it wrong. Learn from your mistakes and those of others

“Do you know what, just don't be afraid. Ask! Ask as there are people who have gone ahead before you. Don't reinvent the wheel. There are so many of us who have done it and we've learned through falling over, through making so many mistakes so we’re in this together. *“*

* + **Be Flexible**: Just because an approach worked well for one production, don’t assume it will work equally well for the next.

“There is no template that can fit over every story you want to tell that says ‘tick these boxes and then you’ve done it.’ I don’t think that’s the case if you’re talking about genuine, creative access and the imaginative use of access tools. The key word is imaginative which means it will change from show to show.”

* + **Share**: your experiences – the good and the bad.

“For all in those companies wanting to start integrating access, it is really exciting and it's brilliant and let’s share what we’ve discovered. That’s really important as well. I think it’s happening more but it will be nice to see it opening up even more that we can share our experiences and share what we’ve learned and share what we got wrong and because we are all kinda finding our way here and to try and do the best that we can.”

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