

Extant

Enhance programme evaluation report



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December 2017

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Introduction

Extant is the leading national organisation for the development and delivery of opportunities for visually impaired people to engage with the performing arts; this work includes artistic programming, training, consultancy, and advocacy.

In 2016 they developed a 12-month tour of Ionesco's *The Chairs* as a pilot to explore how appreciation for visually impaired-led theatre could be strengthened, visually impaired audiences could be built, and Extant could extend its geographic reach. The tour programme was delivered with venue partners in Manchester and Birmingham and included supported attendance and development workshops, to encourage participation by visually impaired audiences, and a series of staff development workshops, to support the delivery of an improved experience for visually impaired audiences and artists.

The Audience Agency (TAA) was commissioned to undertake a full evaluation of the approach and, in response to the research findings and resulting recommendations, Extant devised the Enhance programme; a package of support for touring companies and receiving venues to Enhance access for their productions.

To measure the success of Enhance against the objectives for the project, Extant commissioned TAA to evaluate all aspects of the programme including impacts for the target audiences, venues, companies, and Extant themselves.

This report sets out the findings of the evaluation in the context of the programme aims and objectives.

The programme

Extant provision for the Enhance programme included the following elements:

- Collaboration with venues to identify appropriate touring companies within their programme
- Support for touring companies to develop and deliver accessible programme notes and a touch tour for each production
- Delivery of visually impaired awareness training for venue staff
- Facilitation of an Audience Steering Group and workshops to support engagement with visually impaired attenders local to each venue.

Enhance programme schedule

Title of production	Performance style	Company	Venue	Date
La Bohème	Opera	Opera Up Close	MAC	9-11 Feb 2017
Meet Fred	Puppetry	Hijinx Theatre	MAC	9 May 2017
The Marked	Mask & puppetry	Theatre Témoins	Lowry	20 May 2017
Declaration	Storytelling & audience participation	Art with Heart	Lowry	23-24 June 2017
The Third Policeman	Physical	Miracle Theatre	MAC	8 July 2017
Andante	Dance	Igor and Moreno	Lowry	19-20 Oct 2017

Programme objectives

The overall aim of the Enhance programme was to develop an approach to making theatre more accessible for visually impaired audiences in a sustainable and replicable way; using tools which are simple to implement across a range of different performance types, venues, and companies.

“Our plan was that Enhance would continue a relationship with the venues, where we had already started to build up visually impaired audiences, but disseminate good practice around enhancing accessibility for other ... companies touring to these venues” (E1)

Specific objectives included:

- To refine lo-tech approaches to delivering accessible theatre across a range of performance styles.
- To develop a deeper understanding of the support and resource development which venues and companies might need to put these tools into practice.
- To understand what styles of performance, if any, are best suited to this approach to creating more accessible theatre experiences.
- To raise the profile of Extant as an organisation and identify ways to share their approach, knowledge, and values.

Evaluation objectives

The Enhance project evaluation was designed to measure the effectiveness of the pilot programme, and assess the potential for future delivery, through exploring a series of key questions with partners and participants:

- How effective was the Enhance programme in creating an attractive and accessible experience for visually impaired audiences?
- What are the drivers for venues and companies to make their offer more accessible to visually impaired audiences?
- What are the perceived barriers to creating a more accessible offer for visually impaired audiences?
- How effective was the Enhance programme in overcoming barriers to making the offer more accessible to visually impaired audiences?
- How effective were the partnerships between Extant, the venues, and the companies?
- How might the Enhance programme be developed and delivered in the future to maximise its potential to support increased accessibility for visually impaired audiences?

Key research themes

- Audiences - impacts of the programme on:
Levels of confidence in attending, experience of attending, and access to new styles of theatre.
- Venues - impacts of the programme on:
Organisational change (staff awareness and confidence, sustainable approach to delivery of Enhanced performances etc.), partnerships with touring companies, audience development, and access strategies.
- Companies - impacts of the programme on:
Levels of awareness and confidence in creating and delivering Enhanced performances, partnerships with venues and Extant, and potential for future delivery of accessible performances.
- Extant - impacts of the programme on:
Relationships with companies and venues, organisational development, consideration of developing Enhance as a support package offer

Methodology

To evaluate the success of Enhance against the project objectives, evidence of the impacts of the programme on the partners and participants was collected using two main strands of qualitative research activity: self-completed assessments and one-to-one interviews. Each approach drew on question guides which were designed to align with the programme objectives.

The interviews with company partners were conducted and transcribed by Harshadha Balasubramanian, who interned with Extant on this project.

All other primary research was conducted by TAA.

The table below contains key data relating to the delivery of the primary research in detail.

Evaluation theme	Details	Number of participants
Audience	After each performance, members of the Audience Steering group recorded their experience using a standardized set of questions in a self-completed form	6
	At the end of the programme telephone interviews were conducted with selected Audience Steering Group members	2
	Workshop participants / performance attenders who were not members of the Audience Steering group submitted feedback via Extant	3
Venue partners	Telephone interviews were conducted with staff from the Lowry and MAC who had been involved in the commissioning or delivery of the programme	5
	Venue staff who received training as part of the programme recorded their experience using a standardised question guide in a self-completed form	28
Company partners	Telephone interviews were conducted with the partner companies' directors / producers using a standardised interview guide	6
Extant	Extant's CEO / Artistic Director submitted responses to a series of questions before and after delivery of the programme	1
	The experience of the access workers involved in the programme	2

was captured through a telephone interview and a self-completed set of responses to the interview questions

The experience of the intern involved in the project was captured informally through email.

1

Evaluation participants

The table below gives details of the participants involved in the Enhance programme evaluation alongside a pseudonym.

Pseudonym	Details
ASG1	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at the Lowry
ASG2	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at the Lowry
ASG3	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at the Lowry
ASG4	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at MAC
ASG5	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at MAC
ASG6	Audience Steering Group - attended performance at MAC
A1	Non-Audience Steering Group attenders - the Lowry
A2	Non-Audience Steering Group attenders - MAC
CP1	Company Partner - performed at the Lowry
CP2	Company Partner - performed at the Lowry
CP3	Company Partner - performed at the Lowry
CP4	Company Partner - performed at MAC
CP5	Company Partner - performed at MAC
CP6	Company Partner - performed at MAC
E1	Extant CEO
E2	Extant access worker
E3	Extant access worker
E4	Extant intern
PV1	Partner venue Head of Operations
PV2	Partner venue Audience Development Manager
PV3	Partner venue Creative and Partnerships Development Manager
PV4	Partner venue Artistic Development Lead
PV5	Partner venue Head of Theatre Operations
PVS1	Partner venue staff - the Lowry (included gallery assistants, gallery interpretation, and hospitality teams)

PVS2

Partner venue staff - MAC (included catering team, front of house, retail, programming, marketing, and senior management teams)

Analysis

Thematic coding has been used to analyse the qualitative data gathered. Illustrative quotations have been used for some but not all points made in this analysis. Where quotes are used, the participant is identified using a pseudonym; these pseudonyms may be matched with the details given in the [evaluation participants](#) table.

Summary of key findings

The key findings are set out below in the context of accessible programming specifically aimed at visually impaired audiences and the Enhance pilot objectives.

Impact of Enhance on the experience of visually impaired attenders

- The Audience Steering Group participants were highly positive in response to the overall experience of attending the Enhance programme performances.

“It was enriching, and allowed me to experience performance in a different way” (ASG3)

“I felt that this was one of the more enjoyable and accessible performances I have attended” (ASG4)

- Prior to taking part in the Enhance pilot, many of the participants felt that there were types of theatre performance that were not, and could not be, accessible to them.

“I have a greater awareness of different types of theatre ... it’s increased my experience and helped me to understand that things that might seem closed to me can be accessible” (ASG1)

- Following their experience of the programme, most commented that they are now confident that, if it were Enhanced, they could have a meaningful and enjoyable experience of attending any style of theatre.

“With creative thinking, I now feel that any style of theatre can be made accessible for me” (ASG2)

“The use of mask and puppetry along with the lighting effects means that this form of theatre relies very much on its visual aspects. As a partially sighted audience member many of these aspects would have been lost if it weren’t for the Enhance programme.” (ASG2)

Drivers to create and deliver accessible programming

- The venues and companies cited a commitment to making their offer as accessible as possible as an important organisational objective.

“Access is a strategic priority for us and we deliver a lot of accessible programming but need to ensure that the resources available to us are used

most effectively” (PV1)

“We’re very keen as part of our core aims to be invested in well-being and equality. We are absolutely open and want to become more accessible as a company” (CP2)

- The opportunity to work with Extant, either through building on previous work or due to their reputation as experts in the field of accessible theatre for visually impaired audiences and artists, was a motivation to take part in the Enhance pilot specifically.

“Following the successful partnership for The Chairs we wanted to build on the momentum this created. It was good to have the opportunity to keep going with this work - we have a lot of tour companies coming into MAC and it was a rare gift to look at how we could work with them to make touring shows more accessible” (PV3)

“We want to learn from the best people and they’ve [Extant] got such a fantastic reputation ... the opportunity to work with a company who are renowned for this kind of work was one we couldn’t not take up” (CP1)

Barriers to creating and delivering accessible programming

- The key barriers for both venues and companies were related to time and budgetary constraints, and the perception that accessibility for visually impaired audiences is reliant on complex and costly approaches such as audio description.

This generally results in only larger productions, with a longer run and more mainstream appeal, being associated with accessible performance programming.

“It’s not usually cost-effective to offer accessible performances for shows in the smaller, studio, spaces with emerging companies” (PV1)

“Usually our accessible performances tend to be the longer running shows, those with family audiences, or things that are ‘must-see’... we wanted the Enhance programme to make the offer as broad as possible and not make assumptions about our visually impaired audiences and what they would be interested in attending.” (PV3)

“It’s very hard for us to put into place the necessary infrastructure- to have

additional activities for people who might require additional support ... is challenging and so are the cost implications” (CP1)

“We were keen to look at making our shows accessible but there are some obvious challenges, the routes we’d heard about [audio description and BSL] were quite few and far between and we didn’t have the time or financial resources to pursue them” (CP6)

Effectiveness of the Enhance programme in supporting the creation and delivery of accessible programming

- The Enhance pilot was demonstrably successful in establishing an effective and replicable lo-tech model for the creation and delivery of accessible programming for visually impaired audiences.

“Feeling that Enhance has the potential to develop into a workable method for main-stream companies to engage with meaningful access within their productions for visually impaired audiences that could really change the culture on a grass-roots level.” (E1)

Impacts for audiences

- The programme notes improved the experience of attenders across all of the productions, with many participants saying that they would have been unable to access the performance without them.

“Without the programme notes it would have been very difficult if not impossible to follow the story as a blind person” (ASG3)

“As I am partially sighted the production notes gave me a good idea of how the different elements of the performance would come together.” (ASG2)

- As seen in the evaluation for *The Chairs*, the touch tours were universally popular, and all the participants commented on the value they add to the experience of attending theatre as a visually impaired person.

“This really helped as were able to understand which prop was used in each scene as he described it, rather than having to remember ... we had a tactile memory of each scene” (ASG5)

“For me, touching an object makes it real in the same way as seeing it does for sighted people. I did not need to think and guess during the performance” (ASG3)

“There were a lot of props on stage in this piece that I wouldn’t have known about without the touch tour” (ASG2)

Impacts for venues

- The venues indicated that Enhance supported them in embedding good practice regarding accessibility for visually impaired audiences across the organisation as a whole.

“The project legacies for us are multiple - our staff are more aware of the needs and more confident in supporting visually impaired attenders, we now have experience of delivering accessible programming across a broader choice of shows, and it has extended our audience reach” (PV3)

“It really helped us to look at our own organisation and build empathy and understanding of how to deliver against specific audience needs, and explore the possibility of truly integrated programming” (PV2)

“Working with Extant and learning from their expertise has helped us to recognise how we can make changes, sometimes quite small ones, which will benefit visually impaired audiences and, as a result, probably make access easier for other audiences as well” (PV5)

“The programme opened up new routes to making shows more accessible, and demonstrated the approach can be applied to smaller and different types of show” (PV5)

- Enhance also supported the venues in developing relationships and new ways of working with companies to create opportunities for increasing access for visually impaired audiences.

“We will actively pursue companies that have access at the heart of their work, seeing it as a shared responsibility not just about physical access to the building and so on” (PV1)

“We will put more careful thought into shared responsibilities for access and how we can help companies develop, putting access at the heart of our conversations and learning objectives - raising awareness and responding openly to issues and input from different partners” (PV4)

“We’re looking at making a broader range of the programme accessible, taking this approach of building relationships with new companies - embedding

accessibility and planting seeds for the future, building their and our confidence” (PV2)

Impacts for companies

- All of the participating companies expressed positive impacts as a result of taking part in the programme.

“It’s highlighted that a few very simple things could make the whole experience better for everybody” (CP1)

“It was an opportunity for us as theatre makers, as creatives, to look at how we might make work which is just genuinely more accessible for the future” (CP2)

“It gave us the tools to continue thinking about how to reach an even wider audience ... we hadn’t ever thought about how to reach more blind audiences because of the nature of our work” (CP4)

“We knew that blind and visually impaired people were part of that [accessibility] spectrum but I think we didn’t properly consider how we would work with people and how they would receive our work so yes, this has really changed our approach to accessibility” (CP2)

“It feels like something that much more accessible now and something we might be able to implement - feels a lot more achievable which is a massive legacy for a company our size.” (CP2)

- The training and support offered by Extant emerged as the most useful aspects of the Enhance pilot for the companies; empowering them to deliver their own accessible performances was seen as a unique and highly advantageous aspect of the programme.

“Being able to experience the touch tour and to understand that these are the things that are really helpful, this is the language we need to use - that really helps equip you not just to make performances more accessible but for your work and life in general” (CP2)

“We haven’t actually had the opportunity to run a touch tour before, so it was great for us to be able to do that. That’s something we can quite easily incorporate in the future” (CP3)

Suitability of Enhance for improving accessibility for different styles of theatre

- The venue and company partners indicated that they felt the Enhance pilot approach could be used to improve the accessibility for visually impaired audiences of any theatre performance.

“With an open attitude it can be used for anything, I think. In the long term it would be great to see this approach become ‘normalised’ and applied to everything we do” (PV5)

“I don’t think there’s any style it couldn’t be adapted to, not really. It could be used for a lot of shows - plays, kid’s shows - especially the touch tours, they could be used for anything and all audiences!” (PV2)

“I think it can be used for any production - if we can do it, any company could do it” (CP1)

“I think it can be adapted for any production. Obviously, some productions are naturally more accessible for visually-impaired audiences than others. But there’s no reason why the model couldn’t work anywhere.” (CP3)

“As long as the companies have a real sensibility and are really invested in it, then there are no styles that it couldn’t be used for.” (CP6)

- A number of the companies commented that they had not previously considered that their work might be accessible to visually impaired audiences, and that participation in the Enhance programme had opened up new possibilities for them.

“I think just demystifying it ... when moments and parts of the performance that Maria picked out that we might not have seen as being something significant” (CP2)

“It’s [Enhance] really changed the way we think about our audiences. I know that there was some nervousness from some people in our sphere of influence that maybe dance isn’t necessarily as accessible as theatre or music for blind and partially sighted people, but I think for this show it felt like that’s not the case at all” (CP6)

Effectiveness of the Enhance programme partnerships

Overall, the communication and partnership working was seen as straightforward,

supportive and successful by all those involved. Where difficulties arose, these were largely due to unforeseen circumstances for which no contingency was in place and in some cases a lack of initial clarity over roles and responsibilities.

The partnerships between Extant and the companies were particularly successful, largely due to Extant being seen as responsive, open, and flexible throughout the process.

Venue partners

- The venues felt that the partnerships with Extant and the companies generally worked well and that communications were good; particularly for those who were in direct contact with Extant during the pilot development and delivery. Where problems arose, this was due to operational difficulties caused by staff changes and lack of clarity over responsibilities.

“Having Maria work directly with the companies has helped to demystify the process of making a show accessible for visually impaired audiences, and has strengthened our relationships with both Extant and the companies involved in this programme” (PV3)

“The partnership worked quite well from what I saw, we all benefitted from the relationship with Extant and the companies” (PV1)

- The training sessions for staff and the opportunity to engage with new audiences emerged as the most valued aspects of delivering the programme.

“The touch tours and staff training sessions were particularly useful. [The] sessions were practical and insightful, specific and relevant to us and our venue” (PV2)

“Great impact on my confidence - I now feel confident communicating and assessing the needs of others” (PSV2)

“I’m more aware of the spectrum of different needs, especially on an everyday level” (PSV2)

- The physical guiding exercise, scenario presentations, and Q&A emerged as the elements which participants found most useful.

“Hearing personal experiences ... was especially helpful [and] the practical guiding around the building” (PSV2)

Company partners

- Most participants expressed very positive responses to the process as a whole

and to the partnership with Extant in particular.

“The simplicity of it and the actual speed at which it worked was fantastic. They [Extant] were there when we needed them” (CP1)

“With Extant specifically, the partnership was a good one.” (CP6)

“It was really easy - very simple, very quick. There wasn’t communication for the sake of communication, we just got on and did it - it fitted into real life touring” (CP1)

“Extant were really reassuring, really encouraging and really supported us on how to have better dialogue with venues. They [Extant] were incredibly communicative throughout - so we had our first meeting almost a year ago now, and we’ve had semi-regular communication over the past year” (CP6)

- In some cases, the communication and partnership with the venue was not quite as successful.

“With the Lowry, everything was fine up until the day but they didn’t flatten the stage properly ... but I rang Elizabeth [Extant] and we talked it over, came up with a plan, and she was really calm and really brilliant” (CP2)

Extant

- The partnerships and communication with the companies was particularly successful for Extant. They experienced some difficulties in the initial discussions with the Audience Steering Group, and due to changes of staff at one of the venues.

“The companies on the whole were easy and enthusiastic to work with” (E1)

“Most of the companies recommended by the venues ... were interested and responsive ...each company was invested in maintaining a good relationship with the touring venue” (E1)

“When the project started it was interesting to learn that the steering group were not clear from our explanation of the project ... I had to intervene and clarify that Enhance should be compared to other performances that had no access in place for visually impaired people ... as the types of show we were Enhancing could never have audio description in place as they were only visiting venues for one or two performances” (E1)

“There was a frustrating lack of communication with no explanation and no

other contact at the venue who could take over ... this contrasted with [other venue] who had a change of staff ... their hand over to a new person was smooth and we found them responsive and understanding of the project” (E1)

- The internal communications for Extant generally worked well, although there was some initial lack of clarity for the access workers in terms of their roles in the programme.

“The support from Extant was good. I was working directly with Maria and if I had a query I could ask her directly so that was very helpful.” (E2)

“At the start I had no idea what I was doing, this was a new type of work for me. Although it was initially unclear, it didn’t matter in the end as I had the opportunity to discuss the project with Maria and it became a shared learning experience” (E3)

“The communication with both Extant and the Audience Agency was very helpful indeed - I felt I could reach out to either of them whenever necessary. I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience.” (E4)

Potential for development of the Enhance programme

There was a consistently positive response to the idea of developing Enhance as a support package from all the participants.

- All of the Audience Steering Group participants said that they would attend Enhanced performances in the future if the opportunity arose.

“The experience alone was the best and it has influenced me to want to come back to see another Enhanced performance” (ASG5)

“If a performance was advertised as Enhanced I would be more likely to attend” (ASG2)

- All the venue partner participants indicated that the experience of taking part in the Enhance pilot programme was highly positive, and that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the delivery of similar activities in future.

“It was a complete joy to work on” (PV3)

- They also expressed an openness to the possibility of paying to receive this level of support, if it was offered as a clearly defined package.

“If it was presented as a package, and we had funding, we would certainly consider it. Long term it would be good to develop the skills in-house to deliver it ourselves alongside companies” (PV5)

“We would consider paying for a package like this, we would be interested in doing it again” (PV1)

- All the companies indicated that they would consider accessibility for visually impaired audiences in their future show development, based on the learning outcomes from participation in the Enhance pilot.

“Being able to experiment with it for the first time being free has meant that we’re now in a position where we’ll go yes - we can absolutely see the value of how that fits into our work” (CP2)

- Although many companies expressed a willingness to pay for this type of support package in principle, their tight budgetary constraints mean that they would most likely need to access external support or partnerships; some companies suggested that approaching venues to pay for this type of support was likely to be more effective.

“If I had the budget, 100% I would pay for this type of support” (CP1)

“I would love to pay for it, I think we should, but I don’t know how. It would have to be through a grant, we’d need to get a grant to pay for it. What would be really useful is to be able to find out honestly how much those services would cost” (CP2)

“I think if you’re looking at it as a paid-for package you need to go to venues, I wouldn’t try and get it out of small companies.” (CP4)

“It depends on what the final package looks like, it might need a bit of repackaging but then we surely would [pay for this type of support] - especially given the kind of ‘bags for life’ thing going on with it” (CP6)

Recommendations and considerations

The following section highlights key areas for Extant to consider further, and suggests approaches to developing Enhance based on the evidence presented in this report and in the context of the evaluation aims.

In terms of developing Enhance as a sustainable and effective support package to increase the range and depth of theatre engagement for visually impaired audiences, three key themes emerged from the evaluation:

- **Clarity** - the importance of establishing what Enhance is, and what it is not, the resource implications, and the roles and responsibilities of all those involved in delivering it.
- **Content** - ensuring that the content of the Enhanced features, specifically the programme notes and touch tour, are carefully thought through in collaboration with the partners to ensure that they are focussed on the essential elements of the production and deliver the best possible experience for a visually impaired audience.
- **Consistency** - defining and identifying the Enhance package to ensure that it is delivered consistently across different types of performance and different venues, so that visually impaired audiences can be confident in knowing what to expect, and to support advocacy to potential partners and funders.

Ensuring clarity

Clarity is applicable to all stages, from initial contact and communication through to delivery.

- If Enhance is to be successful and sustainable as a support package for companies and venues to use in developing their accessible offer for visually impaired audiences, Extant may find it helpful to establish a clear set of guidelines and a standard memorandum of understanding or delivery plan which outlines what will be delivered by Extant, the responsibilities of the different partners, timescales, costs and contingency planning.

“Establish at the start what the exact parameters are of working with the companies and what Enhance comprises of, so expectations on both sides are clear and understood” (E1)

- Having this in place would mitigate against some of the issues which arose

during the pilot due to misunderstandings and unforeseen changes in the Enhance delivery teams, and would support a consistent approach to delivery without needing to reinvent the wheel each time whilst still allowing for some flexibility according to the needs of specific programmes.

“I think more support for Extant from us would have been helpful - there were a lot of staff changes and I think we should have communicated this better .. in future I think it would be helpful to have a central point of contact from our end” (PV1)

- It may also be useful to consider including briefing / consultation sessions into the package lead-in time and costs, to ensure that everyone is clear from the outset about what Enhance entails, the expected outcomes, and their roles and responsibilities in delivering it.

“For future projects I would build in more time to brief staff internally, with so much going on this didn’t quite land. I don’t think everyone was aware of what was going on” (PV3)

“Venue Front of House staff need to be aware when Enhanced performances are taking place so that they are ready to facilitate visually impaired audiences ... for the pre-show notes and touch tour ... this is something that the touring company will need to ... lead on if Enhanced performances are going to develop outside of this pilot.” (E1)

- Given some of the difficulties caused by shows being in different stages of development, it may also be helpful to recommend that Enhance is built into the production at the earliest possible opportunity.

“Access and diversity are part of the creative process, not just applicable to delivery or facilities” (PV4)

Refining the Enhance package content

The pilot has indicated that there are a number of potential development areas for Enhance, to support an improved audience experience and greater take-up by potential partners.

Programme notes and touch tour content and delivery

- Many participants commented that the experience would be improved if the content of the programme notes and touch tour was more focused on the

essentials.

“The biggest problem was the amount of information given in the programme notes, there was a lot of detail, a lot to remember during the performance - too much really” (ASG3)

“I don’t think it absolutely necessary for me to touch everything unless the set is very ornate or if the prop is vital to the action” (ASG4)

“A little information is better than no information, but being overdosed by information is as useful as having no information at all” (ASG6)

- To support this, consideration should be given at the planning stage as to when the person responsible for writing the programme notes will have the opportunity to see the full production. This would improve their understanding of the show and also to reduce the impact on the company in terms of time needed to contribute to this element of the Enhance delivery.

“I would try and make sure that whoever was working with us from Extant saw the performance before” (CP5)

- For particularly complex productions, it may be helpful to build a recommendation that companies supply a film of the show in addition to ensuring that whoever is responsible for writing the programme notes is able to attend a full, final, rehearsal.

For this purpose, the film would not need to be a professional, polished, production as long as it includes the full production.

“The show was highly visual and therefore required copious amounts of detailed note taking. Thankfully there was a film to refer to for this production.” (E1)

“Having a film copy of the show, especially if there are a lot of costume changes or actions without dialogue, would really help with writing the programme notes” (E2)

- Sound cues emerged as a particularly useful tool in understanding the more physical aspects of a show, where there may be minimal or no dialogue.

“Including sound prompts and cues in all the performance notes would be good - where that happened it was really helpful and helped me to remember what was going on at different times in the performance” (ASG1)

- It is also clear from the responses that the participants would prefer to not be given ‘spoilers’ but that the content which gave information about character development and setting was most helpful.

“I don’t need to know everything - I don’t want spoilers, just the basics”
(ASG5)

- In terms of delivery of the Enhanced elements, it was commonly noted that it would be better to deliver the programme notes and touch tour elements together.

“It would be helpful if the notes were read as we do the touch tour” (ASG5)

“The description / synopsis was quite wordy and it was clear that people were not really listening because there was so much information - people wanted to come up and start touching parts of what was being referred to as we were talking about it, so we adapted it a little and did a scene-by-scene with the items which were part of that scene instead of separating it” (CP3)

- A frequently requested addition to the Enhance package was to have accessible notes made available prior to attendance, to support greater understanding and also allow for reflection after the performance.

“Being able to have a copy of the notes so I could read them before the show”
(ASG6)

“A copy of the programme notes in an accessible format ... to give me the opportunity to reflect on the performance” (ASG3)

Staff training

- The evaluation findings show that accessibility for visually impaired audiences is about the whole experience for attenders, not only the performance itself. With this in mind, Extant may want to consider including the staff training workshop as an integral part of the Enhance package.

Feedback

- Given the desire for feedback expressed by both companies and venues, Extant may find it useful to build a formalised feedback session or opportunity to share learning into the Enhance package; at least for those partners who are taking it up for the first time.

“It would have been helpful to have more feedback from the companies about

how the relationship was going with Extant, so we could feed this into our planning and learning to make sure any issues were flagged early and could be dealt with” (PV4)

“It would be good to have some follow-up from Extant in terms of what they thought worked well” (PV3)

Safeguarding consistency

The consistent delivery of the Enhance elements across the pilot programme emerged as an important aspect of its appeal to the Audience Steering Group; knowing what to expect of an accessible performance is an important factor in their decision to attend.

- With this in mind, Extant may wish to consider developing an accreditation scheme or other means of identifying and marketing the approach that could be applied consistently by companies and venues to promote Enhanced productions to visually impaired audiences.

“The main thing is that it’s good when theatres are consistent in what’s being delivered as an accessible performance, so I know what to expect and how it will work” (ASG4)

“I’d be more willing to spend money and time on going to the theatre if I know I’m more likely to get something out of it, I’d be willing to give different styles a go if I knew that it was an Enhanced performance” (ASG5)

“You know what to expect from an audio described performance, you need the same if something is flagged as an Enhanced performance” (ASG2)

- This would also support advocacy for Enhance across the sector, and potentially help to secure funding for companies and venues to create more and wider ranging programming for visually impaired audiences.

“Make yourself the benchmark for accessibility in that area and create a certificate, like Arts Mark for schools. Create a standard training and have some sort of mark or brand or certificate for it” (CP4)

Findings in full

The evaluation findings are set out in full below, grouped by participant type.

Audience Steering Group

The participants in the Audience Steering Group were engaged and responsive throughout the evaluation process, submitting thoughtful and detailed responses to each of the Enhanced performances they attended.

There was a high level of consistency in the responses, both to individual shows and to the Enhance programme as a whole.

A common theme throughout the feedback was the passion and enthusiasm for theatre expressed by the participants; and their hope that development of the Enhance programme would offer them greater opportunities for engagement in future.

“Everyone should at least feel comfortable with going to a theatre, everyone should be able to access it at some level. And everyone, sighted or not, should be able to feel good” (ASG3)

Motivations for participation

The motivations for participating in the Audience Steering Group for Enhance included both personal and community drivers; a hope that participation would not only offer them as individuals the opportunity to experience new and different types of theatre, but would also contribute to improving access for visually impaired audiences more widely.

To access forms of theatre not previously experienced:

“I hope to experience some theatre that I wouldn’t normally go to” (ASG2)

“It’s an opportunity to broaden my exposure to theatre” (ASG3)

“To see more theatre and more types of theatre and look at the accessible issue from a visually impaired perspective” (ASG4)

To play a role in helping to make theatre more accessible to visually impaired audiences:

“I hope to have my voice heard” (ASG2)

“It’s important that the theatre should be made as accessible to visually impaired people as possible ... I felt that joining this group would be useful in helping to achieve this” (ASG4)

“I can give feedback which will hopefully be used to create more accessible theatre, where visually impaired audience members can get just as much out of the experience as their sighted peers” (ASG5)

Interest in accessibility outside of audio description:

“I’m not necessarily a fan of AD, as it tends to take you out of the experience” (ASG1)

“I am interested because of the focus outside of audio description. As a partially sighted person I have experienced times when audio description is essential and others where it is not” (AGS2)

Overall experience

The participants were highly positive in response to the overall experience of attending the Enhance programme performances. In particular, they frequently made favourable comparisons with audio described performances; this was often the only experience they had of theatre with which to make a comparison.

Most of the group also said that participating in the Audience Steering Group meant that they were exposed to new forms of theatre that they had previously felt would not be accessible to them; indicating that the experience successfully delivered against one of their main motivations for taking part.

Where criticisms arose, this tended to be in connection with the quality of the performance or venue access rather than the Enhance programme itself; highlighting the importance of considering the whole attender experience when looking at improving accessibility.

Experience of Enhance

“It was enriching, and allowed me to experience performance in a different way” (ASG3)

“It helped me to understand that although dialogue-heavy theatre may seem to be more accessible, it’s more enriching to experience different types of performance.” (ASG1)

“It has given me personally more confidence and an altogether new approach to performing art” (ASG5)

“I felt that this was one of the more enjoyable and accessible performances I have attended” (ASG4)

Comparison with audio described experiences

“I don’t think that a production of this nature would benefit from audio description ... that would have created a barrier between myself and the performance and taken the shine off some of the stimulatory multi-sensory aspects of the piece” (ASG3 - Andante)

“The programme notes were clear and detailed as was the touch tour. Combined this structure works as a great alternative to audio description and other forms of additional support” (ASG1 - Declaration)

“Even though the production was very visual, I do not feel I personally missed audio description and do not think it would have added to the overall experience.” (ASG2 - The Marked)

Overall attender experience

“The opera at MAC represented a good experience, but there’s a long way to go before every trip to the theatre is just as good or better” (ASG6 - La Bohème)

“I have only attended a handful of performances where I felt that both the production company and venue staff were striving to make the performance as inclusive and accessible as possible and this was one of them” (ASG3 - The Marked)

Impacts of Enhance on accessibility of different performance styles

It is clear from the responses that, prior to taking part in the Enhance pilot, many of the participants felt that there were types of theatre performance that were not, and could not be, accessible to them.

Following their experience of the programme, most commented that they are now confident that, if it were Enhanced, they could have a meaningful and enjoyable experience of attending any style of theatre.

Changed perceptions

“Physical theatre companies might think ‘we can’t do this’ but this experience shows that different types of theatre can be made accessible to visually impaired people if the company is open to feedback and willing to try things out” (ASG3)

“I have a greater awareness of different types of theatre and different approaches to accessibility, it’s increased my experience and helped me to understand that things that might seem closed to me can be accessible” (ASG1)

“With creative thinking, I now feel that any style of theatre can be made accessible for me; although anything with minimal dialogue and lots of movement will always be more difficult” (ASG2)

“All theatre can be accessible if it stimulates all the senses, it can become more of a shared experience” (ASG5)

Enhanced accessibility

“Without exaggeration I have to say that this was one of the most interesting and most fascinating shows I have ever seen, as my knowledge of puppets is quite non-existent due the lack of accessibility of similar performances” (ASG6)

“It was rewarding to have the same moments of realisation about the plot development as the rest of the audience - getting it at the same time as everyone else” (ASG4)

“I think without the programme notes and touch tour I would have felt more isolated from the performances ... and wouldn’t have been able to fully appreciate the elements of the performance that evoked different senses such as the scents used during the show” (ASG3)

“The use of mask and puppetry along with the lighting effects means that this form of theatre relies very much on its visual aspects. As a partially sighted audience member many of these aspects would have been lost if it weren’t for the Enhance programme. I gained a greater understanding of how and why movements and body language are both amplified and slowed down when using masks” (ASG2)

“This type of performance lends itself to exploration using the senses because of the detailed set, use of puppetry/masks and stylised movement. The workshop in particular provided a space and time in which these aspects could be explored” (ASG3)

“I had reservations about this kind of performance [puppetry] as I was not sure how much as a totally blind person I would really get out of it. However, I was pleasantly surprised. The description of the show beforehand did help because I feel that had we not had that it might have been harder for us to follow. The touch tour also helped” (A2)

Drivers to attend future Enhanced performances

All of the participants said that they would attend Enhanced performances in the future if the opportunity arose.

Many of them commented that the consistent delivery of the Enhance elements across the pilot programme was an important aspect of their overall enjoyment of the programme as a whole; knowing what they could expect of an Enhanced performance would certainly encourage them to attend in future.

Linked to this, a number of participants commented that they would welcome having some quality assurance associated with Enhance as this would increase their confidence and likelihood to attend.

Where participants expressed uncertainty about future attendance, this was largely connected with concerns about the accessibility of the venue and preference for specific programme times. Again, this emphasises the importance of considering the whole experience of attending when addressing accessibility.

“I am in love with Enhanced performances, so I do not need much encouragement to attend the next one” (ASG4)

“The experience alone was the best and it has influenced me to want to come back to see another Enhanced performance” (ASG5)

“If a performance was advertised as Enhanced I would be more likely to attend” (ASG2)

Consistency of the offer

“The structure of the Enhance performance is good as it creates a sense of familiarity and I find some comfort in that” (ASG3)

“I like the fact that the Enhance performances have taken on a similar structure even though the performances themselves are different genres” (ASG1)

“The main thing is that it’s good when theatres are consistent in what’s being delivered as an accessible performance, so I know what to expect and how it will work” (ASG4)

“I’d be more willing to spend money and time on going to the theatre if I know I’m more likely to get something out of it, I’d be willing to give different styles a go if I knew that it was an Enhanced performance” (ASG5)

“Developing it as a consistent approach would be helpful, it would boost confidence. You know what to expect from an audio described performance, you need the same if something is flagged as an Enhanced performance” (ASG2)

Accessibility of whole offer

“Both accessibility in regards to the performance itself and the support provided by the venue would both equally influence my decision to attend other Enhanced performances. In this case I enjoyed exploring the physical and expressive aspects of the play” (ASG1)

“The accessibility of both the venue and the performance influence my decision to attend” (ASG3)

“The main consideration for me isn’t accessibility in enjoying the show as much as the practicalities in terms of finding my seat, getting a drink ... eliminate these issues and the experience immediately becomes better” (ASG6)

Logistics

“The timing of the performance, I would prefer to travel to matinees rather than evening performances” (ASG2)

“Time of performance, topic (not too highbrow), seating (first two rows)” (ASG6)

“The main problem with Enhanced performances, and touch tours specifically, is that the tours happen early - leaving a massive gap before the performance” (ASG4)

Suggestions for development

Many participants commented that, although the Enhanced elements improved the accessibility of the shows, the experience would be improved if the content of the programme notes and touch tour was more focused on the essentials.

It was generally felt by participants that they did not need to know every detail and that a focus on elements crucial to understanding the show, such as important character developments, sound cues, intended impacts of specific movements, and the setting, would be more helpful than offering full plot details or handling every prop.

It was also commonly noted that it would be better to deliver the programme notes and touch tour elements together, to give an overall picture and aid recall during the performance by supporting the use of tactile and other sense memory.

A frequently requested addition to the Enhance package was to have accessible notes made available prior to attendance. This was both to aid understanding of the show but also to support reflection on the experience afterwards; in much the same way as a sighted audience might use a theatre programme.

Where the Enhanced elements were rushed due to timing issues, this had a negative impact on their effectiveness and was flagged up as an area for improvement.

Content and delivery

“The biggest problem was the amount of information given in the programme notes, there was a lot of detail, a lot to remember during the performance - too much really. Maybe having accessible notes available afterwards, to refer back to, would make it easier” (ASG3)

“Picking out the essential elements to cover in a touch tour, rather than having a scatter gun approach” (ASG4)

“Including sound prompts and cues in all the performance notes would be good - where that happened it was really helpful and helped me to remember what was going on at different times in the performance” (ASG1)

“Discussing the context, intentions, and any intended effects of the dance movements would have made the programme notes more meaningful and so easier to remember. Also hearing some of the sounds during the delivery of the programme notes would have made it easier to remember and keep track of what was happening and when” (ASG3)

“In the programme notes for Declaration, it would’ve been helpful to hear some of the sounds from the piece as the action was being described so that I could hear a song and then remember what was said about the action” (ASG2)

“It would be helpful if the notes were read as we do the touch tour” (ASG5)

“Where possible practical exploration of the stage / set should be during the verbal commentary as opposed to after” (ASG6)

Prior access to programme notes

“With the programme notes, it would be good to have a physical copy in large print or braille, so you could follow it yourself as well as listening - that would be really helpful” (ASG1)

“Being able to have a copy of the notes so I could read them before the show” (ASG6)

“A copy of the programme notes in an accessible format ... to give me the opportunity to reflect on the performance” (ASG3)

“It would have been helpful to provide some of the performance notes in an accessible format ... to enable me to explore the notes sometime after the performance for reflection” (ASG2)

Programme notes

Impact

The programme notes improved the experience of attenders across all of the productions, with many participants saying that they would have been unable to access the performance without them.

“The notes helped me to understand what was happening, especially in the beginning of the performance where there was not a lot of speech” (ASG4)

“If I did not hear the notes in advance as I did, it would have been extremely difficult for me to follow the opera” (ASG5)

“I was prepared with the knowledge of certain sounds and lighting changes and their significance throughout the play ... it gave me access to information that wasn’t available, which I feel is great” (ASG4)

“Without the programme notes it would have been very difficult if not impossible to follow the story as a blind person ... they gave me access to what was happening on the stage visually through a scene-by-scene description before the performance” (ASG3)

“As I am partially sighted the production notes gave me a good idea of how the different elements of the performance would come together. This was particularly important in regards to the visual aspects of the production and ... definitely improved my understanding and overall enjoyment of the production” (ASG2)

Content

The most frequently made comment about the content, across all of the performances, was that it was too long and that this made it difficult to remember all the details during the performance.

It is also clear from the responses that the participants would prefer to not be given ‘spoilers’ but that the content which gave information about character development and setting was most helpful.

“There was too much unnecessary information in the notes ... could have been much simpler without taking anything away from the performance” (ASG4)

“A little information is better than no information, but being overdosed by information is as useful as having no information at all” (ASG6)

“I don’t need to know everything - I don’t want spoilers, just the basics” (ASG5)

“Hard to remember everything from the programme notes ... it was hard to recall what was happening visually during the performance because there were no cues to help me work out where we were in the show” (ASG2)

Touch tour

As seen in the evaluation for *The Chairs*, the touch tours were universally popular, and all the participants commented on the value they add to the experience of attending theatre as a visually impaired person.

In line with comments on the programme notes, criticisms were largely made in relation to unfocussed content.

Impact

“This really helped as were able to understand which prop was used in each scene as he described it, rather than having to remember ... we had a tactile memory of each scene” (ASG5)

“For me, touching an object makes it real in the same way as seeing it does for sighted people. I did not need to think and guess during the performance” (ASG3)

“The touch tour was phenomenal. We were allowed to touch the balls and throwing one on the floor gave me an idea of how loud they were going to sound when it came to the performance” (ASG1)

“When I heard a character in a certain part of the stage, I knew where they were ... without the tour I would have no idea. The set gives clues and without hearing these clues in relation to where I was sitting, I wouldn’t have got so much out of the performance” (ASG4)

“There were a lot of props on stage in this piece that I wouldn’t have known about without the touch tour. Having explored the stage I had a much better sense of the environment in which the action of the performance took place” (ASG2)

“The touch tour was absolutely fantastic. It was my first opera, and the extra details about the layout of the stage, individual descriptions of cast members, their outfits, and where they would enter the stage, were really helpful” (A2)

Content

“I don’t think it absolutely necessary for me to touch everything unless the set is very ornate or if the prop is vital to the action” (ASG4)

Partner venues

Due to staff changes during the delivery of the Enhance pilot, it was difficult to identify any venue staff who had seen the project through from conception to delivery and could reflect on the programme as a whole.

However, the venue staff who took part in the evaluation interviews were engaged and positive about their organisation's participation in the project and gave insightful feedback on the experience of being involved.

Motivations to participate in the Enhance programme

The venues' main motivations for participation in Enhance were primarily connected to their existing commitment to increasing accessibility for everyone they engage with, including visually impaired audiences, and wanting to build on the successes of the previous work with Extant for *The Chairs* tour.

More specifically, they were interested in the opportunities offered by Enhance for building their in-house skillset and extending accessible performances across a wider range of their programme; including touring shows with a shorter run, where the cost of traditional provision such as audio description would be unfeasible.

Mission

“Access is a strategic priority for us and we deliver a lot of accessible programming but need to ensure that the resources available to us are used most effectively, so a lot of the accessible performances are for bigger shows that have a longer run and larger audience capacity” (PV1)

“Accessibility is a focus for us, it's high on the agenda. We do a lot, but there's a lot still to do and we are always challenging ourselves to do more ... if we're at silver standard right now we aspire to gold, that's our target” (PV2)

“Across all of our arts programmes we look for audience development opportunities and potential partnerships to support this. Extant have been and continue to be a key partner for us in developing access to our offer” (PV3)

“We aspire to being recognised as a safe space for different diversities of audience” (PV5)

Previous experience with Extant

*“As a follow-up to our work with them [Extant] for *The Chairs*, it seemed like a natural progression to build on the work we'd already done” (PV1)*

“It was the right approach to take from our point of view - our previous experience of working with Extant meant that we had a quality guarantee, and it fit with our approach to creating and building relationships with individual companies - specific and tailored, not taking a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach” (PV4)

“It was good timing, following The Chairs. That was a real eye-opener in terms of audience needs and thinking about communications - it was the first time we’ve delivered touch tours and we wouldn’t have otherwise” (PV2)

“Following the successful partnership for The Chairs we wanted to build on the momentum this created. It was good to have the opportunity to keep going with this work - we have a lot of tour companies coming into MAC and it was a rare gift to look at how we could work with them to make touring shows more accessible” (PV3)

Opportunity to extend provision

“The cost of accessible performances means that delivering this for smaller shows is not cost-effective, this project gave the opportunity to deliver access in different spaces and for different types of performance” (PV4)

Training opportunities

“It filled gaps in our own skills and knowledge, helping us to do what we can to address this by learning from experts and developing our own practice” (PV4)

Impacts

One of the key impacts identified by both venue partners was the opportunity to embed good practice in relation to accessibility for visually impaired audiences across the organisation as a whole; including developing partnerships with companies who are committed to accessibility, and a focus on access for visually impaired audiences in programming.

Other impacts included improved staff awareness and confidence through training.

Improved accessibility

“The project legacies for us are multiple - our staff are more aware of the needs and more confident in supporting visually impaired attendees, we now have experience of delivering accessible programming across a broader choice of shows, and it has extended our audience reach” (PV3)

“Although we are committed to improving access for all, this really focussed attention on the needs of this particular audience and consolidated the work we had done earlier for The Chairs” (PV1)

“It has raised questions for us around visually impaired audiences and has helped to start our thinking about each programme and how it can be made more accessible for this audience” (PV4)

“It really helped us to look at our own organisation and build empathy and understanding of how to deliver against specific audience needs, and explore the possibility of truly integrated programming” (PV2)

“For our staff it introduced them to the spectrum of needs within visually impaired audiences, and the training has helped them to be more confident in asking what support is needed, what will be helpful” (PV5)

“Working with Extant and learning from their expertise has helped us to recognise how we can make changes, sometimes quite small ones, which will benefit visually impaired audiences and, as a result, probably make access easier for other audiences as well” (PV5)

“I’m sure it’s no coincidence that we had visually impaired audiences for a different event unrelated to the Extant programme, and our daily report said ‘Operations manager received very positive feedback from 4 visually impaired customers with an assistance dog. They were assisted to/from their seats by BSS at the start, during the interval, and at the end. They said they had not received that level of assistance in any other venue’” (From audience feedback at MAC)

Organisational development

“Work like this raises the profile of accessibility within the organisation, in terms of internal communications and advocacy. The staff who took part in the training are able to deliver a better service to all our audiences” (PV1)

“Participation in the programme has really contributed to the theatre’s work towards building a creative case for diversity and how audiences can engage with a wide range of work. I see it as part of our approach to widening conversations about creative practice” (PV4)

“We’re a big organisation and projects can sometimes pass under the radar of most staff. Enhance definitely helped build staff awareness, putting access and

engagement with visually impaired audiences at the forefront of our minds - particularly with the staff training element” (PV2)

“Over the past 2 years 80 of our staff have taken part in access training, it’s been popular with staff and the feedback we get shows that it’s also effective in delivering a better service for our audiences - we’ve had visually impaired attendees say that ‘they’ve never felt so welcome’” (PV3)

“Inspired by the work with Extant, including the Enhance programme, The Chairs, and their Sight Village event, we’re looking at securing funding for a 3-year programme to develop volunteer support in the city. This will involve designing a ‘buddy’ system to train a pool of volunteers to support people with a range of access needs to engage with us more easily.” (PV3)

“The programme opened up new routes to making shows more accessible, and demonstrated the approach can be applied to smaller and different types of show” (PV5)

“We have started to build a shared body of knowledge and skills across the organisation, through the staff training and sharing information that has come out of the whole project, which will help us to continue to increase access and develop our offer for visually impaired audiences” (PV5)

New approach to partnerships

“We have more data about visually impaired audiences, and the potential to bring in new audiences through stronger and more focussed relationships with companies who have accessibility as a focus” (PV1)

“We will actively pursue companies that have access at the heart of their work, seeing it as a shared responsibility not just about physical access to the building and so on” (PV1)

“This project offered us a different way of having the conversation with artists about their work, giving us more of a platform to embed these approaches in practice and increasing our confidence in what’s possible” (PV4)

“We will put more careful thought into shared responsibilities for access and how we can help companies develop, putting access at the heart of our conversations and learning objectives - raising awareness and responding openly to issues and input from different partners” (PV4)

“Our conversations with artists will include discussions around how accessibility fits with their objectives, and will look to broker relationships between companies and Extant if relevant” (PV4)

“We’re looking at making a broader range of the programme accessible, taking this approach of building relationships with new companies - embedding accessibility and planting seeds for the future, building their and our confidence” (PV2)

Future planning

All the venue partner participants indicated that the experience of taking part in the Enhance pilot programme was highly positive, and that they would welcome the opportunity to be involved in the delivery of similar activities in future.

“It was a complete joy to work on” (PV3)

They also expressed an openness to the possibility of paying to receive this level of support, if it was offered as a clearly defined package. Linked to this, a number of suggestions were made as to how financial support for a paid-for offer might be generated.

Future Enhanced programming

“I would be happy if we had the opportunity to partner with Extant again - I don’t feel we’re upskilled enough as yet to deliver this on our own, and it’s important that access is delivered from a place of expertise and not just goodwill” (PV4)

“If it was presented as a package, and we had funding, we would certainly consider it. Long term it would be good to develop the skills in-house to deliver it ourselves alongside companies” (PV5)

Financial considerations

“We would consider paying for a package like this, we would be interested in doing it again” (PV1)

“Yes, I think we should pay but we need to identify the best way of doing this - I think it’s less about audience development and more about artists’ development. If we can make a strong case for paying for it, that’s what will make it happen - and that could be about building it into the company’s professional development budget or about building it into a package of support that could be applied as part of a wider programme for us as an organisation” (PV4)

“We would possibly pay for it, but rather than a set package it might have to be tweaked - to make sure it met our needs and took into account our objectives, so it’s a two-way process” (PV2)

“We would pay if it was possible within our budgets, but it would be good to look at how other funding streams might support it - ACE support or subsidy maybe?” (PV3)

Suitability for different styles of theatre

On the whole, the venue partners indicated that they felt the Enhance pilot approach could be used to improve the accessibility for visually impaired audiences of any theatre performance; albeit with some reservations about the level to which more challenging performance styles, such as dance, could be made accessible.

It is clear from their responses that venues view the commitment of participating companies, and consideration of accessibility during the creative process, as being essential to the successful delivery of any future Enhanced performances.

Potential

“With an open attitude it can be used for anything, I think. In the long term it would be great to see this approach become ‘normalised’ and applied to everything we do” (PV5)

“I’m not sure, but I think it could be used for pretty much any style of theatre - the key is being able to look at the work and identify how it could be made accessible, sometimes the artists don’t know where to start with this” (PV4)

“I don’t think there’s any style it couldn’t be adapted to, not really. It could be used for a lot of shows - plays, kid’s shows - especially the touch tours, they could be used for anything and all audiences!” (PV2)

Considerations

“I’m not really sure, but from what I saw of it the approach looks very adaptable. Maybe it would be more difficult for some than others, maybe audio description would be better for dance performances?” (PV1)

“Access and diversity are part of the creative process, not just applicable to delivery or facilities” (PV4)

“The ambition and commitment is good, but I’m doubtful that more challenging drama will encourage attendance by visually impaired audiences. It needs to include more popular shows too, like the Christmas and family shows” (PV2)

“I’m not sure how well it works for non-verbal performances, dance is so visual for example. But you don’t know unless you try, and if a company is open and up for it I think we could try it with any show” (PV3)

Process and partnerships

In deciding which of the shows in their programme to Enhance, the venues focussed on those which they would not usually have the opportunity to offer as accessible performances. To broaden the offer to their visually impaired audiences, they put forward smaller, short-run, touring shows which were more experimental in nature than the mainstream programming that might be expected to have some accessible shows during a run.

On the whole, the venues felt that the partnerships with Extant and the companies worked well and that communications were good; particularly for those who were in direct contact with Extant during the pilot development and delivery. Where problems arose, this was due to operational difficulties caused by staff changes and lack of clarity over responsibilities.

The training sessions for staff and the opportunity to engage with new audiences emerged as the most valued aspects of delivering the programme.

Decision making

“In terms of what shows to include in the Enhance programme, it was largely based on expanding the offer - it’s not usually cost-effective to offer accessible performances for shows in the smaller, studio, spaces with emerging companies, so this was a good opportunity to test” (PV1)

“The offer to take part went out to companies that we knew had an existing commitment to access and were a good fit for the programme - we wanted to ensure buy-in from the outset, so there was a real commitment not just box-ticking” (PV4)

“We had a lot of internal debates about which shows to Enhance, but ultimately we focussed on shows which we wouldn’t normally be able to offer accessible performances - smaller, short run, more experimental. Usually our accessible performances tend to be the longer running shows, those with family audiences, or things that are ‘must-see’. We also wanted to have a range of different shows in the Enhance programme, to make the offer as broad as possible and not make assumptions about our visually impaired audiences and what they would be interested in attending.” (PV3)

Communication

“Having Maria work directly with the companies has helped to demystify the process of making a show accessible for visually impaired audiences, and has strengthened our relationships with both Extant and the companies involved in this programme” (PV3)

“The partnership worked quite well from what I saw, we all benefitted from the relationship with Extant and the companies” (PV1)

“I didn’t hear much about it really - we are a very big organisation and there wasn’t much opportunity to connect directly after the initial set up” (PV4)

“There were some challenges for us in terms of staff changes from the start to completion of the programme, and this impacted on the communications I think - it was difficult to keep things on track and meet both the project and our organisational deadlines.” (PV3)

“The partnership was massively supported and driven by Maria’s commitment, taking a ‘let’s keep talking’ approach to the whole process. The Extant team ensured that everything was on track, and their support meant that little input was needed from me once it was up and running.” (PV3)

“It all worked, although I was at a distance from it really, but I knew conversations were going on and felt confident in the relationships between Extant and the companies. For bigger, longer running shows, I think more direct communications would be better” (PV3)

Delivery

“It all seemed to work really well, and there was a good feel about it amongst the staff involved” (PV1)

“With its focussed and packaged approach, including the training element, helped us to reach new people” (PV2)

“It was great to open up performances that wouldn’t normally be made accessible, with the budget restrictions” (PV4)

“The workshop activity delivered directly with the company was most useful for me” (PV4)

“The touch tours and staff training sessions were particularly useful. Ann’s sessions were practical and insightful, specific and relevant to us and our venue” (PV2)

Suggestions for development

The two areas where venue partners felt that Enhance could be improved were around better project management and planning on their part, in terms of clarifying responsibilities internally and having a contingency plan in place to mitigate against the impact of staff changes, and a formalised feedback process which would support shared learning and evaluation from Extant, the companies, and the audience.

Project management

“I think more support for Extant from us would have been helpful - there were a lot of staff changes and I think we should have communicated this better” (PV1)

“In future I think it would be helpful to have a central point of contact from our end, a project lead, to help communications from our end with Extant and the companies” (PV1)

“In terms of the workshop facilitation, it would have been helpful to have been given some guidance to support the company with best practice in working with visually impaired participants before the activity, as some last-minute changes had to be made due to a lack of confidence on the company’s part” (PV4)

“It would be good to have more direct communication with Extant, to know that we were setting out on a path of shared understanding and build in some time to share learning” (PV4)

“For future projects I would build in more time to brief staff internally, with so much going on this didn’t quite land. For the staff involved in the training it worked well, but as a overall project I don’t think everyone was aware of what was going on - it would be good to have the opportunity for staff to ask questions of Extant directly, perhaps a project briefing session at the start?” (PV3)

“It would be brilliant to have a shadowing element to the staff training, having an expert oversee our day-to-day activities and give us pointers on what would help us improve our approach to support better provision for visually impaired audiences” (PV5)

“For shows with a wider appeal, it would be good to have support with audience reach and building awareness of our accessible programming with the networks that Extant have” (PV2)

Feedback processes

“It would have been helpful to have more feedback from the companies about how the relationship was going with Extant, so we could feed this into our planning and learning to make sure any issues were flagged early and could be dealt with” (PV4)

“It would be great to have a shared learning day at the start of the programme - bring together everyone in the venue who has a role in the delivery of the project, give them a brief overview of the project and why it’s happening and ensure everyone has the skills and confidence to talk with audiences and the companies involved” (PV4)

“It would be good to have some follow-up from Extant in terms of what they thought worked well” (PV3)

Staff training participant feedback

A broad range of staff took part in the training programme at each venue, including the catering team, front of house, retail, programming, marketing, and senior management at MAC and gallery assistants, gallery interpretation, and hospitality teams at the Lowry.

28 completed evaluation forms were received in all; most of these were from MAC participants (19 - 68%).

For over half (54%) of all the participants who responded this was their first experience of training in relation to engagement with visually impaired audiences. A further 29% had undertaken some, but not comprehensive, training in this area.

Motivations for taking part

The main motivations for staff taking part in the training were around professional customer service objectives, in line with organisational aims to increase accessibility and deliver excellent customer service, and also more personal drivers to better understand the needs of others, through developing a deeper appreciation and awareness of the issues facing visually impaired attenders.

Organisational aims

“To improve how I serve customers in the [venue] café” (PSV2)

“Important that I recognise the needs / experiences of our audiences / professional artists and staff” (PSV2)

“Interest in developing existing skills and opening up the visitor experience” (PSV1)

“I regularly meet customers with different access needs and want to provide the best customer service to all” (PSV1)

Personal objectives

“Interested in the needs of others and how I can effectively assist and communicate with them” (PSV1)

“Interested - may be useful in my role but also in life in general” (PSV2)

“Increase personal knowledge and communication skills for work” (PSV2)

And even those with some prior training and experience were driven to participate by a keenness to know more, and gain a better understand best practice in this area.

“I wanted more advice as we work with a wide range of needs” (PSV2)

“Need more in depth and up to date training - particularly in supporting visually impaired young people to take part in projects” (PSV1)

Impacts

The respondents indicated that the training impacted on them in highly positive, and sometimes profound, ways. The main benefits expressed in the feedback related to increased confidence when engaging with visually impaired audiences, and better awareness and understanding of both the everyday and theatre-attendance specific issues they face.

“After today, if a visually impaired customer is alone I can confidently approach them” (PSV1)

“A huge one! [impact] Hearing first hand stories was excellent and gave me a much better and clear practical knowledge of how to behave around people with a visual impairment” (PSV1)

“Great impact on my confidence - I now feel confident communicating and assessing the needs of others” (PSV2)

“I’m more aware of the spectrum of different needs, especially on an everyday level” (PSV2)

Most useful elements

The physical guiding exercise, scenario presentations, and Q&A emerged as the elements which participants found most useful.

“It’s extremely important to empathise with others and so to experience a temporary lack of vision helps you to experience things from a different perspective” (PSV2)

“The scenarios, time to ask questions, and the guided tour were all very useful” (PSV1)

“Hearing personal experiences ... was especially helpful [and] the practical guiding around the building” (PSV2)

“Going through the scenarios and learning from lived experience” (PSV1)

Suggestions for development

Most respondents commented that they found the training very comprehensive, and did not identify any areas where they thought the session could be improved. Where suggestions were made, these were often in relation to the inclusion of more practical examples, and addressing specific aspects of accessibility provision, such as audio description, in more detail; this may be due to the current provision of the venue, and / or the role or interests of the individual respondents.

Another common request, somewhat related to the other suggestions, was to make the session longer; particularly in reference to the guiding element, where it was felt that a longer experience would have put a greater emphasis on the issues faced by visually impaired audiences.

“Possibly more scenarios and practical examples” (PSV2)

“Maybe more advice on online accessibility” (PSV2)

“Maybe longer than 5 minutes doing the sighted guide - to really understand the stress and anxiety that visually impaired people may have” (PSV1)

“I think the training was very well structured, but even more time for discussions after each session might have been beneficial” (PSV2)

The Extant access workers who attended the training raised the possibility of exploring different levels of visual impairment in more detail.

“The discussion around different levels of visual impairment were extremely valuable, could this be expanded on?” (E2)

Touch tour experience

Very few respondents had participated in a touch tour, although almost all took this question as an opportunity to say that they thought touch tours were an excellent idea

and felt it would Enhance the attender experience for both visually impaired and sighted audiences.

Of those that had attended a touch tour, almost all had been developed and led by Extant.

Other provision

This question was left unanswered by around three-quarters of the responders, a higher proportion than for any other question, and many who did respond said that they did not know. This indicates a lack of awareness amongst staff of the resources for visually impaired audiences which are offered by their venues.

Those that were aware of other supporting activities, from both MAC and the Lowry, generally identified audio description and large print materials as the ways in which their venue increased access for visually impaired audiences; little detail was given as to whether this was a regular or periodic part of the offer.

“Fully accessible marketing materials available on request” (PSV1)

“Large print guides and menus, audio described performances etc” (PSV2)

“Audio description, both film and theatre. Friendly staff that will offer guidance / assistance” (PSV2)

“Audio description, large print, accessible website” (PSV1)

Training suggestions

The suggestions for further training and resource development were largely centred around embedding the training within the organisation. This included thoughts on programming more frequent provision or refresher training, ensuring that new starters would benefit from the knowledge of more experienced team members, and also more detailed training / guidance related to specific activities, to ensure that all aspects of the offer are accessible; not just the performances themselves.

“More frequent training / refreshers for all staff and volunteers” (PSV2)

“New staff to shadow trained staff, pending actual training” (PSV2)

“More training like this, and advice on what we do well and less well” (PSV1)

“Perhaps some ‘best-practice’ guidebooks as a tool to reference” (PSV2)

“Particularly with regards to the café / bar, having procedures for providing food / drink during intervals / before shows, as well as at busy times” (PSV2)

“Online accessibility advice and specific marketing training” (PSV2)

Other comments

Most respondents took the opportunity of being asked for any other comments about the training to thank Extant, compliment the facilitators, and generally offer very positive responses to the training programme.

“Excellent, really helpful. A new window of knowledge I’m now much more aware of” (PSV2)

“I really appreciate it. It’s so important to have some level of knowledge on the needs of others. Thank you” (PSV1)

“Really enjoyed it and really beneficial to me. Much more confident in doing my job. Liked the informal nature of it as it made for a more relaxed atmosphere.” (PSV2)

“Great speakers - thank you so much for your patience and openness” (PSV1)

Company partners

Telephone interviews were conducted with the directors / producers of each of the 6 partner companies.

The comments were highly positive and indicated a high level of consistency in terms of motivations to participate in the pilot, considerations of the partnership working and the impacts of participation, and the potential for future Enhanced activity.

Overall

Access to expertise in terms of creating accessible theatre for visually impaired audiences was seen as the most valuable aspect of taking part in the Enhance pilot.

“We were delighted to take part ... it’s quite hard for us to access experts in particular fields, especially around accessibility and diversity so it was a fantastic opportunity and we’re very grateful” (CP1)

“It was brilliant - I hope it continues. It’s just invaluable to small companies and I think it has genuinely changed our practice for the better” (CP2)

“The programme really supports people to grow professionally, once you’ve received the training you can then go forth and deliver that across your countless productions” (CP6)

“They’re [Extant] all wonderful people - they’ve been incredible and we feel really lucky to have worked with them” (CP6)

Motivations to participate in the Enhance programme

Almost all the partner companies cited a commitment to making their shows as accessible as possible as an important organisational objective, and this was a key motivation for taking part in the project.

Extant’s reputation as experts in the field of accessible theatre for visually impaired artists and audiences, amongst both those companies who had not worked directly with them previously and those who had, was another key driver for companies wanting to take part in the project.

Also, the exploratory and experimental nature of the project appealed to the companies who welcomed the opportunity to test the boundaries of what is possible within a framework which provided expert guidance and potential for shared learning.

Contribution to objectives

“We’re a company working with learning disabled artists and we devise work in an inclusive way” (CP3)

“It’s very very rare for us to be given an opportunity to work with experts in that particular field and it [accessibility] is something we’re committed to ... it’s incredibly important to us as a company that we are looking at ways in which we could be making our work accessible in the widest possible sense” (CP1)

“We’re very keen as part of our core aims to be invested in well-being and equality. We are absolutely open and want to become more accessible as a company” (CP2)

“We aspire to make our work as accessible to as many as we can so it was a useful exercise in putting on this performance that was kind of specifically aimed at attracting a visually-impaired audience” (CP3)

“Accessibility is something we’re really passionate about ... so when Extant approached us it was like wow! I mean, it could go horribly wrong but we’d love to give it a try” (CP4)

“Where there is an opportunity to have an accessible performance in the longer run, we would always take it” (CP5)

“As a company, one of our core aims is to make our work as accessible as possible - often we feel like the barriers that are perceived to be in place are often actually put up by the people making work or the company / theatres themselves” (CP2)

Extant’s reputation and expertise

“We are a touring company based in London, but we tour all over the UK. I think our main challenge in creating accessible performances is probably that we don’t have access to the venues that we would if we had our own space. Most of the time we’re only there for one night and it’s difficult to fit something like this in. If the venue has the kind of accessibility in place to run accessible performances, it’s easier” (CP5)

“We want to learn from the best people and they’ve got such a fantastic reputation ... the opportunity to work with a company who are renowned for this kind of work was one we couldn’t not take up” (CP1)

“It was something we hadn’t done before, and we’d always wanted to do, in terms of working with visually-impaired people. We’d heard about Extant and we just wanted to look at how we might adapt our work in the future to work with those

audience groups and to run a touch tour for the first time and to learn from Extant. It felt like a really open, honest opportunity” (CP2)

Exploratory learning opportunities

“We were really excited by the idea and by them as well. It felt like an exciting opportunity to be a part of something that accounted for the risks and was kind of about testing the boundaries ... that was really exciting for us to be involved in” (CP4)

“We hadn’t even considered working with blind and visually impaired audiences before but they [Extant] were really pushing the limits and wanted to see where it worked and where it didn’t. It wasn’t like they were delivering a model for us, they were teaching us as a company how to be accessible” (CP4)

“I feel like part of their model was to train companies to do this work themselves, and I feel that this is really forward thinking of Extant, because they weren’t just thinking about this project, they were thinking about long-term impact” (CP4)

“Extant was offering a completely new option in terms of the way accessibility is worked into your processes ... it felt like what they were doing was really exciting and it was a moment of collaboration on all sides - keeping accessibility in mind alongside the creation of the show.” (CP6)

Barriers

There was a lot of consensus amongst the participants in terms of the perceived barriers they face in delivering accessible shows, with the main ones being cost and time constraints. With a touring show that may only have a short run, often one or two nights, at each venue, and different levels of access being available at the different venues across the tour, the companies identified significant operational challenges. Within this context, another key motivation to taking part in the Enhance project was to learn how they might overcome some of these barriers to creating truly accessible work.

“It’s very hard for us to put into place the necessary infrastructure- to have additional activities for people who might require additional support ... is challenging and so are the cost implications” (CP1)

“We’re a small company - everything in two people - and we work across performance work ... small-scale pop-up performances ... and a lot of participation work. Our capacity to develop in new areas is very limited - and that’s down to time, but mostly money” (CP2)

“We were keen to look at making our shows accessible but there are some obvious challenges, the routes we’d heard about [audio description and BSL] were quite few and far between and we didn’t have the time or financial resources to pursue them” (CP6)

Impacts

All of the participating companies expressed positive impacts as a result of taking part in the programme; from increasing their confidence in how to approach and embed new approaches to accessibility, to broadening their ambition to reach visually impaired audiences.

“Certainly we feel like it’s been a hugely valuable part of our process this year. And the connections that we’ve made with audience members have felt incredibly special. It will be something we look at in the future with an actual amount of knowledge which we didn’t have before. It’s been a positive experience that we want to replicate” (CP6)

A number of the participants commented that they had not previously considered that their work might be accessible to visually impaired audiences, and that participation in the Enhance programme had opened up new possibilities for them - potentially changing the way they thought about access during the whole production process, from creation to performance.

Increased confidence in creating accessible work

“I think sometimes you look at what people like Graeae do and you think ‘that’s really complex and I’m not equipped to be able to do that’ so going it alone is really scary. But when you’ve got the support of a group of people and artists who are really committed and really experienced that just makes it so much easier” (CP2)

“I think just demystifying it ... when moments and parts of the performance that Maria picked out that we might not have seen as being something significant” (CP2)

Reaching visually impaired audiences

“It’s highlighted that a few very simple things could make the whole experience better for everybody - it opens it up to this audience but also Enhances it for the whole audience.” (CP1)

“What we learnt from just taking members of the Extant team on a touch tour, on how we would describe things and how interactive parts of our programme would be perceived by a visually impaired audience, was fascinating. We were able to see how even tiny changes in how we might form a certain section or write a section of script can just make our work instantly more accessible - it was an opportunity for us as theatre makers, as creatives, to look at how we might make work which is just genuinely more accessible for the future” (CP2)

“It gave us the tools to continue thinking about how to reach an even wider audience ... we didn’t have tools to work with visually impaired audiences. We hadn’t ever thought about how to reach more blind audiences because of the nature of our work” (CP4)

“It’s changed a lot - first I think it’s just the fact that I think of visually impaired audiences. As a physical theatre company, I don’t think I ever dreamed that anybody in my audience would be visually impaired.” (CP4)

“I think the first time that you start to do things that are accessible is when you have your steepest learning curve ... it’s about expanding our understanding and our focus for dealing with that audience [visually impaired] specifically” (CP4)

“It’s really changed the way we think about our audiences. I know that there was some nervousness from some people in our sphere of influence that maybe dance isn’t necessarily as accessible as theatre or music for blind and partially sighted people, but I think for this show it felt like that’s not the case at all” (CP6)

“We knew that blind and visually impaired people were part of that [accessibility] spectrum but I think we didn’t properly consider how we would work with people and how they would receive our work so yes, this has really changed our approach to accessibility” (CP2)

Embedding access in creative processes

“We applied our brains a little bit more ... it absolutely started internal conversations that needed to happen and which we will continue” (CP1)

“This is definitely something that we feel we could advocate more to other companies to use in the future - something which is a really useful tool for us to be able to talk to other companies about how we create a more accessible scene and how it doesn’t need to have that much money attached to it” (CP2)

“After this experience, I’ll think about sound design even more - so that the story is playing out through the soundscape as well.” (CP4)

“We are more open to looking at how we can run these kind of events and performances on tour, more than we would have been before” (CP5)

“It’s something that as a company we’ll be thinking about ways we can facilitate the approach for our other shows - it’s in discussion at the minute. But it’s quite liberating to have the idea in mind” (CP6)

“We hadn’t really approached accessibility before, and I think we’ll certainly want to continue developing what we’ve been doing with the Enhance programme - it feels liberating in a way that perhaps others might not be, in the sense that as a small independent company we can now create these access points in a way that we might not be able to so easily with the others [audio description / BSL]” (CP6)

“I think that, potentially, it would be something now that we are able to do when we send out our touring pack to get bookings from venues, a part of our information could include that if desired the company can run a touch tour and a kind of description to help if they have visually-impaired audiences ... it’s certainly something we can add as something we can offer to venues” (CP3)

Future planning

All the companies indicated that they would consider accessibility for visually impaired audiences in their future show development, based on the learning outcomes from participation in the Enhance pilot.

Most participants said that they would certainly consider the resource needs, both in terms of time and budget, of delivering accessible programme notes and touch tours in their future programming and development plans.

Although many companies expressed a willingness to pay for this type of support package in principle, their tight budgetary constraints mean that they would most likely need to access external support or partnerships to fund this. It is clear from the comments that clarity over the costs and content of the package would be essential and that creating an accreditation standard for Enhance would increase confidence in its effectiveness and potentially attract more support from external funders.

Some companies suggested that approaching venues to pay for this type of support was likely to be more effective.

Developing accessible work

“Knowing that it’s just about keeping it all a little bit human and actually giving it a go - it gives us confidence to look at ways in which we’d be able to build that into our programme of work. Having gone through this process with a company who are leaders in that field, it’s given us the confidence to be able to look at ways in which we can make a few small changes to our programme which will open up our work to the widest possible audience - it needn’t be complicated” (CP1)

“It feels like something that much more accessible now and something we might be able to implement - feels a lot more achievable which is a massive legacy for a company our size. And we’re able to plan for that as well - so when we put in applications to funders or when we talk to venues about projects we are able to say to them that we’ve had this experience. (CP2)

“Looking at how we might work together in future to ensure that we can continue that relationship would be really useful ‘cos we feel like we’ve started something and then we’d feel like we’ve got the second stone for working together with them or developing our own work in future” (CP2)

“Being able to experiment with it for the first time being free has meant that we’re now in a position where we’ll go yes - we can absolutely see the value of how that fits into our work” (CP2)

Budget considerations for future Enhance activity

“When we’re looking at budgetary things, and when we’re looking at programming where we are in a place for more than one night, to be able to factor in having touch tours and pre-show descriptive conversations with the cast - we would now look to be doing for the future, without doubt.” (CP1)

“If I had the budget, 100% I would pay for this type of support” (CP1)

“I would love to pay for it, I think we should, but I don’t know how. It would have to be through a grant, we’d need to get a grant to pay for it. What would be really useful is to be able to find out honestly how much those services would cost” (CP2)

“We’re quite a small company, in terms of what we do. So the honest answer would probably be no [wouldn’t pay for this type of support]” (CP3)

“I don’t think, realistically, that we would be able to. If it was on offer and if we were maybe a less visual company, I could certainly see myself paying for that sort of thing right now - like for a BSL package. I think if you’re looking at it as a paid-

for package you need to go to venues, I wouldn't try and get it out of small companies.” (CP4)

“I think they need to try and wrap it into people's NPO applications ... make yourself the benchmark for accessibility in that area and create a certificate, like Arts Mark for schools. Create a standard training and have some sort of mark or brand or certificate for it” (CP4)

“For [us] probably not. If it's something shared with the venue, then maybe ... we're an unfunded company so our touring is where we make the majority of our income and we're not able to flex the budget too much” (CP5)

“It depends on what the final package looks like, it might need a bit of repackaging but then we surely would [pay for this type of support] - especially given the kind of 'bags for life' thing going on with it” (CP6)

Suitability for different types of theatre

Many of the companies expressed the feeling that, although some theatre styles are more naturally accessible to visually impaired audiences, with creativity and thought the Enhance model could be applied to any style of theatre to make it more accessible.

A commonly expressed feeling was 'if we can do it, anyone can', reflecting the diverse nature of the performance styles of the companies involved in the pilot programme.

“I think it can be used for any production - if we can do it, any company could do it” (CP1)

“I would argue any production. In terms of my own experience of BSL interpretation, a lot of things are only delivered for main house or musicals where in actual fact it could be done for a lot of smaller productions” (CP2)

“I think it can be adapted for any production. Obviously, some productions are naturally more accessible for visually-impaired audiences than others. But there's no reason why the model couldn't work anywhere. “(CP3)

“I don't know - the fact that it worked so well with us makes me think it can be used for any production, [but] I don't think our shows could be fully accessible unless there's a wraparound programme like the one Extant helped to deliver. A physical visual theatre thing, it sounds like a really hard sell” (CP4)

“I think it can be used in any production ... what's typical is that not much action actually happens on stage that can't be followed within the programme notes” (CP5)

“As long as the companies have a real sensibility and are really invested in it, then there are no styles that it couldn’t be used for.” (CP6)

“We had a lot of people who were maybe a little bit nervous about specifically pushing our work to introduce blind and partially-sighted people to our shows, thinking that it wouldn’t work for them - but the experience and feedback that we’ve received through Enhance is that it’s the opposite, that it was a really valuable experience for them” (CP6)

Process and partnerships

Most participants expressed very positive responses to the process as a whole and to the partnership with Extant in particular.

In some cases, the communication and partnership with the venue was not quite as successful. A number of companies expressed the feeling that wider awareness of the project across the venue teams would have been beneficial; particularly in terms of operational issues on the day of the performance.

For the companies, the training and support offered by Extant emerged as the most useful aspects of the Enhance pilot; empowering companies to deliver their own accessible performances was seen as a unique and highly advantageous aspect of the programme.

Use and responses to the Enhance programme guidelines provided by Extant was mixed and many companies were not aware that the guidelines existed. Those that had seen and used them gave generally positive feedback.

Partnerships

“It was fantastic that Maria was able to come down. The simplicity of it and the actual speed at which it worked was fantastic. They [Extant] were there when we needed them” (CP1)

“Brilliant - we could focus on the doing, rather than the planning. I almost felt like it was too good to be true and I was waiting for the catch, but the catch never came. It was a really simple, easy relationship where we were both really invested in it and [Extant] were really supporting us in developing it” (CP2)

“With the Lowry, everything was fine up until the day but they didn’t flatten the stage properly and we weren’t told until the last minute, so we had no prep for it and I had to come up with a ‘this is what we could do’ scenario - but I rang Elizabeth and we talked it over, came up with a plan, and she was really calm and really brilliant” (CP2)

“When it came to the Lowry, there were a few cross-wires as to who was dealing with who - we’re associated with the Lowry and are sometimes considered in-house by members of staff, so things get a bit confused. If we had been on tour somewhere else, it might be a challenge” (CP2)

“A lot of it worked well, I was really surprised by how well it worked. There was an enormous amount of trust, they [Extant] were very very open” (CP4)

“It worked well, everyone was very open and able to make sure this programme took place and went well ... we all shared responsibility, it was fine” (CP5)

“The level of real personal care that they [Extant] have over their work felt really good to us - the team were very open and attentive and really caring” (CP6)

“With Extant specifically, the partnership was a good one. With the Lowry, they were really excited about it, but I think if more members of the team could be involved we would have had a better sense of what worked well. I have asked for feedback on that” (CP6)

“I would have liked more clarity on whether Extant are there [at the performance] to lead you through the process or whether it’s about you delivering something on your own - it would be interesting to have Extant provide more of a supportive role as opposed to simply an audience role” (CP6)

Communication

“It was really easy - very simple, very quick. There wasn’t communication for the sake of communication, we just got on and did it - it fitted into real life touring” (CP1)

“It seemed to be very well managed. The communication seemed very good and they [Extant] were very responsive to emails” (CP3)

“What was really cool was that in the emails back and forth they [Extant] were really supportive. It was amazing, they went out of their way and basically worked within our touring schedule” (CP4)

“We already have really clear channels of communication with the Lowry ... they are incredibly supportive of artists and artists’ development, that’s their passion” (CP4)

“General communication and everything I was involved with for the project worked well” (CP5)

“Extant were really reassuring, really encouraging and really supported us on how to have better dialogue with venues. They [Extant] were incredibly communicative throughout - so we had our first meeting almost a year ago now, and we’ve had semi-regular communication over the past year” (CP6)

“We were only there for one night and hadn’t performed at MAC before and there was a bit of confusion trying to find out who knows what, where, in the building. The end result was that the synopsis and touch tour were a bit rushed” (CP1)

Delivery

“The guidelines were great! Really simple - 10 out of 10.” (CP1)

“I think having time with Maria, and for her to see the rehearsal, and then speak to Elizabeth and meet the group on the day - all of that build up - was really helpful. Being able to experience the touch tour and to understand that these are the things that are really helpful, this is the language we need to use - that really helps equip you not just to make performances more accessible but for your work and life in general” (CP2)

“I don’t even know what the guidelines were” (CP2)

“I didn’t get any formal written guidelines. We had a lot of email exchanges but not written guidelines that I’m aware of” (CP6)

“We did a workshop before the show with pretty much all of the audience that were there as part of the Extant project and I think that was really useful ... it was a chance for people to really get an idea of exactly how the mechanics of that [the puppetry] work which hopefully helped them visualise what things looked like on stage. We also had a touch tour before the show and I think elements of that were also useful” (CP3)

“We haven’t actually had the opportunity to run a touch tour before, so it was great for us to be able to do that. That’s something we can quite easily incorporate in the future” (CP3)

“The workshop ... part of the reason it worked well was because it felt like a really safe space to do an enormous amount of on-my-feet improvising and readjusting and rethinking” (CP4)

“There was a lot of peer support there [in the workshop] and it worked out, that model of taking a lot of time with the masks and the puppets” (CP4)

“There was something quite nice about the sense of collaboration on it - the idea of skills sharing, giving us the tools to then carry forward” (CP6)

“The Enhance programme is really empowering companies to lead with the tools that they give you” (CP6)

“Maria’s assistant created a set of notes for us, which was really good given that we hadn’t really seen what accessible programme notes looked like and what that meant exactly. Them providing that for us meant that we could carry it forward and start applying it to our other shows” (CP6)

“I had thought the [Extant] colleague who was there on the night would guide me through a little bit or provide a bit of support or even provide a bit of leadership over holding the night together, given that it was our first time to do it, and that didn’t happen - it would have been good to know that.” (CP6)

Suggestions for development

Two main themes emerged in terms of developing the Enhance programme - the importance of allowing time for and getting the preparatory stages right, including clarity over the expectations and responsibilities of all those involved, and a request for some feedback in terms of how the Enhanced performance was received by the audience.

In the preparatory stages, a number of companies commented that having the opportunity to experience an Enhanced performance ahead of delivering their own would have been beneficial; although that would not have been possible in this instance, due to this being a pilot project, it may be something to consider in future.

The need for whoever is writing the programme notes to attend a full performance was also highlighted, both because this would improve their understanding of the show and also to reduce the impact on the company in terms of time needed to contribute to this element of the Enhance delivery.

Preparation and project management

“I think the only thing that would have helped more is for Elizabeth to have come to see it [the show] in advance - potentially it would have made her job easier” (CP2)

“Potentially, to see one of Extant’s performances, to see something that they’ve done would be really good - to get more of a gist of where they’re coming from” (CP2)

“I think that if you wanted to do a safe version of that [the workshop] there might be a world in which the person facilitating got to go and see another workshop or participate in a workshop for visually impaired audiences elsewhere, just to have that first experience of it” (CP4)

“People are, when they’re on tour especially, very focussed on their own schedule and getting them to come out to another activity might be difficult. To get a theatre company to invest in that front-end and taking time to learn, it feels like the way you should brand it is, ‘you’ll get 8 hours of training, 4 hours of observation, 4 hours of workshop delivery and you’ll come out with a certificate’ or something” (CP4)

“I wasn’t aware of how much work would be needed from me for this project. I ended up having spend a good few hours writing up the programme notes to be read out at the beginning of the touch tour. When we have a rehearsal on tour, we’re generally just working with the technical difficulties ... Maria didn’t manage to watch the show as it would be, so that’s why I had to do a lot of the notes - to fill in the blanks” (CP5)

“I would try and make sure that whoever was working with us from Extant saw the performance before” (CP5)

“Maria came to one of the venues where we were developing the work, to get a sense of the work and meet everyone. And that was good but what didn’t work as well was that I hoped they [Extant] might come in another time closer to the date of the show, so that we could get a clearer sense of what the show was - in hindsight it would have been more useful for us to simply put in a date that was closer to the show’s premier” (CP6)

“The main things would be to get a member of the team [Extant] in maybe a couple of times, if that’s possible, to get them in closer to the show date in order for us to create something that feels more concrete.” (CP6)

“If there’s the possibility for future people who are learning about this programme to experience it with other companies, experience programme notes and touch tours being delivered by the companies I think that would be a really good opportunity for people to really get a sense of what it’s all about” (CP6)

Delivery

“The description / synopsis was quite wordy and it was clear that people were not really listening because there was so much information - people wanted to come

up and start touching parts of what was being referred to as we were talking about it, so we adapted it a little and did a scene-by-scene with the items which were part of that scene instead of separating it” (CP3)

“It was helpful to have a format, something to go with, and we tried to adhere to the guidelines but when it became clear that it wasn’t working we kind of improvised in the moment” (CP3)

“I think it would only be working out how to best present the synopsis and the touch tour and how to couple them together without losing interest” (CP3)

“They [Extant] delivered a really phenomenal set of notes that I just had to read ... it was very long, it was too long ... we had to delay the house opening because I had to talk for so long just to deliver the notes ... [but] I honestly don’t know a way around that in such a visual show” (CP4)

Shared learning and feedback

“A more formal process for how we get feedback from the participants through Extant” (CP2)

“I’d love to be in better contact with Extant in the future in terms of what they thought ... how it [our performance] sits within the landscape and Extant’s aims” (CP4)

“It would be good to know what the audience thought - that would be interesting for us” (CP5)

Extant

The CEO, access workers, and an Extant intern participated in the evaluation of the Enhance pilot from Extant's perspective.

It is clear from their reflections on the process and delivery of the pilot that Extant have a clear understanding of what worked well and which areas offer an opportunity for improvement.

Outcomes

The impacts for Extant as an organisation appear to be highly positive, particularly in terms of developing new relationships with touring companies and demonstrating that Enhance, as a working model, has the potential to improve theatre performance accessibility for visually impaired audiences. The findings also indicate that the pilot programme offered some internal development opportunities for the organisation.

Relationship building

“Meeting some lovely companies and having access to their productions, which it’s unlikely I would have caught if not for being part of this project.” (E1)

Increased access

“Feeling that Enhance has the potential to develop into a workable method for main-stream companies to engage with meaningful access within their productions for visually impaired audiences that could really change the culture on a grass-roots level.” (E1)

“I think we have created an exciting template for supporting small-scale touring productions that should be repeated, widened, and grown with some improvements built into the next stage of roll out. It’s hard work and definitely needs a part time project manager dedicated to the setting up, delivery and evaluation process.” (E1)

“The project approach is really strong, it just needs time to embed” (E2)

“I hope the programme continues!” (E3)

Internal development

“I thought the touch tour I took part in was really great and I understood how it could help the audience get a sense of the set and the show” (E3)

“The experience certainly added to my understanding, the project was very useful and very informative in that way - looking at visually impaired audiences and what they get, what’s missing, and how that can be helped” (E3)

“It’s great what they [Extant] are doing. Whether it’s about visually impaired or not - Maria is a talented theatre practitioner and has good insights to offer.

“Supporting the evaluation of the Enhance project has not only rewarded me with much insight into what the visually-impaired perspective can bring to experience of art and how theatre companies view this notion, but it has also helped me to hone my skills in conducting qualitative research. I have developed a better understanding of how to write discussion guides, how to carry out research interviews, and how to transcribe conversations quickly” (E4)

Process and partnerships

Extant’s responses indicate that the pilot worked well in terms of the process and partnership working. Where difficulties arose this was largely due to operational issues such as the disparate locations of the companies, venue staff changes and corresponding communication breakdown, and the fact that each of the productions was at a different stage of development.

Partnership working

“The companies on the whole were easy and enthusiastic to work with” (E1)

“I found that some companies were very enthusiastic and thorough on initial contact - wanting agreements in place - and other companies were much less formal, understanding the nature of the pilot” (E1)

“When the project started it was interesting to learn that the steering group were not clear from our explanation of the project ... I had to intervene and clarify that Enhance should be compared to other performances that had no access in place for visually impaired people ... as the types of show we were Enhancing could never have audio description in place as they were only visiting venues for one or two performances” (E1)

“Some lack of clarity within the steering groups ... where there was some resistance from individuals to the rules of engagement we had set in place which slightly compromised the process.” (E1)

“Maria’s feedback for the company was interesting, some of it was more general - not specific to visually impaired audiences so the process was helping make a better experience for everyone” (E2)

Communication

External

“Most of the companies recommended by the venues ... were interested and responsive. This was because the venue had made the first step in introducing us to them and each company was invested in maintaining a good relationship with the touring venue” (E1)

“There was a frustrating lack of communication with no explanation and no other contact at the venue who could take over ... this contrasted with [other venue] who had a change of staff ... their hand over to a new person was smooth and we found them responsive and understanding of the project” (E1)

“Input and communication from the company was very helpful” (E3)

Internal

“I would have liked a clearer outline of the project and my role, what would be expected on the day, in advance. I’ve been asked to deliver different things on different occasions but I hadn’t really done note taking in this way before” (E3)

“The support from Extant was good. I was working directly with Maria and if I had a query I could ask her directly so that was very helpful.” (E2)

“At the start I had no idea what I was doing, this was a new type of work for me. Although it was initially unclear, it didn’t matter in the end as I had the opportunity to discuss the project with Maria and it became a shared learning experience” (E3)

“Having more experience of this approach would help, and I’d like the opportunity to do it again” (E2)

“The communication with both Extant and the Audience Agency was very helpful indeed- I felt I could reach out to either of them whenever necessary. I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience and I look forward to reading the final report.” (E4)

Delivery

“I know from directing productions myself how stressful things are and how focussed everyone needs to be during rehearsals and production periods - which is the very time we are needing to engage with them for this pilot” (E1)

“I quickly realised that I would have to be very flexible to fit in with the companies’ touring/rehearsal schedules” (E1)

“Some shows hadn’t even been created, whilst others barely had a rehearsal that we could visit as it was so familiar to the company ...there was a real need for me to tweak the plan ... as I realised that everything couldn’t be set up or thought of at the very start” (E1)

“I found that we were at the mercy of external factors in our planning, as with [company] - they had booked a venue for rehearsal and we planned to take notes there on a particular day. But the company found that the venue had double-booked so everything had to be rearranged” (E1)

“It was difficult to follow and write down everything seeing it just once. If the action was fast it was possible to miss the next cue for action” (E2)

Learning and development

For Extant, the main learning outcome to emerge from the Enhance pilot is that clarity from the outset in terms of responsibilities and expectations of all involved is key to successful delivery of this approach; this is applicable to all stages, from initial contact and communication through to delivery.

In addition, it is clear that any future iterations of Enhance would benefit from some form of inbuilt contingency planning to allow for unexpected timing or logistical issues.

Clarity

“Establish at the start what the exact parameters are of working with the companies and what Enhance comprises of, so expectations on both sides are clear and understood” (E1)

“The first lesson learnt was terminology ... ‘tech rehearsal’, I assumed, would run the same way as our Extant tech rehearsals but in this company’s case it was only a partial look at certain scenes ... so it was hard for us to get a clear understanding of the whole show to write the notes ... and therefore we had to ask the producer to fill any gaps” (E1)

“One thing we should have established at the start with the steering group members was their different levels of vision as this had an impact on their seating preferences during the performance” (E1)

“One of Extant’s partner theatre companies, outside of Enhance, learnt about the pilot and asked whether we would Enhance their production ... as a one-off favour. We agreed and it turned out to be a mistake - the show was incredibly complicated and almost impossible to write supporting programme notes for. Also Extant had no relationship with the venue so lots of miscommunication happened ... it was a good lesson in what not to do in order to make Enhance work!” (E1)

“Venue Front of House staff need to be aware when Enhanced performances are taking place so that they are ready to facilitate visually impaired audiences ... for the pre-show notes and touch tour ... this is something that the touring company will need to ... lead on if Enhanced performances are going to develop outside of this pilot.” (E1)

“Make it absolutely clear that Enhance is not a substitute for audio description but a way of enhancing a show that would other-wise have no visually impaired access” (E1)

“Future project managers for Enhance need to have experience of describing for visually impaired audiences and have experience writing succinct descriptive notes where possible. Also that they ... are sensitive to companies’ touring and rehearsal processes, understanding ... the best stage to engage with Enhance.” (E1)

Contingency planning

“There is need for both a lead contact and a deputy at the partner venue, in case of illness, sudden increased work-load, and unexpected staff changes which can interfere with channels of communication.” (E1)

“The show was highly visual and therefore required copious amounts of detailed note taking. Thankfully there was a film to refer to for this production.” (E1)

“One company found that they were pressed for time and the tech ran over, meaning that the touch tour ended up taking place during the plotting of the lights. This affected some of the visually impaired group whilst they were up on stage” (E1)

“A rehearsal with companies to deliver their programme notes and touch tours would have been beneficial ... but is a logistical issue. Maybe one way to solve this would be to film how it can be done in different ways and send to the company as a resource.” (E1)

“Having a film copy of the show, especially if there are a lot of costume changes or actions without dialogue, would really help with writing the programme notes” (E2)

“The workshops ... were a late development in the process ... and dependent on the companies’ availability during their tour, and level of interest. But those who could were very enthusiastic about this element” (E1)

Appendix - Audience experience show by show

What follows is a brief summary of the audience responses to each show, with illustrative quotes from the Audience Steering Group participants.

1. *La Bohème* - Opera Up Close

MAC

9-11 February 2017

Although still largely well received, this production received the most negative comments from the Audience Steering Group participants. This was largely due to a sense that the Enhanced elements, the programme notes and touch tour, were rather rushed and their importance not fully understood by the company.

The experience of accessing the venue appeared to be inconsistent, with differing levels of support described in the audience feedback.

“I feel La Bohème was reasonably accessible, but I’ve been to better performances”
(ASG4)

“Act 2 was performed in the café where the audience was serenaded while sitting at their tables. This worked brilliantly” (ASG5)

“They [the programme notes] were not handled well. The reader didn’t seem to understand the importance of them” (ASG4)

“It felt like it [the touch tour] was thrown together on the day, not prepared in an orderly manner ... props were not handed out to people despite it being ok to touch them and there were no descriptions of the piano” (ASG6)

“I found it difficult to navigate around MAC. In other venues people are at hand and always willing to support me, when coming into the auditorium the people on the door were brilliant but when not in that area I had no idea where anybody was”
(ASG6)

“I feel that theatre staff tried very hard to help make the performance as accessible as they could” (ASG5)

“I really like the fact we’ve been accompanied from the train station to the theatre as it made our journey much smoother and less stressful. I love how nobody made any complaints about Pingo staying with us in the auditorium - everyone was really kind and professional” (ASG4)

2. Meet Fred - Hijinx Theatre

MAC

9 May 2017

This production received highly positive responses from the Audience Steering Group, with the opportunity to experience puppetry being noted as an enjoyable and exciting first for all the participants.

Many commented on the openness and adaptability shown by the company, who were commended for their active listening and the inclusive approach they took to the Enhance elements and workshop.

“This was easily the most enjoyable performance. Staff were very welcoming and helpful. The choice of seat was excellent, and I was able to follow the play with no audio description” (ASG4)

“I found this performance innovative, energetic and exciting ... the actors guided us around the stage, discussed their characters, their roles in the show, and were always open and willing to adapt if we needed an explanation or a different form of support to what they expected” (ASG5)

“Hijinx have created this so cleverly that I could have sat anywhere in the theatre and enjoyed this experience. I have just been to see a Ramps on the Moon piece which as a visually impaired person I couldn't even work out what was going on when sat two rows from the front” (ASG5)

“I would consider meeting Fred again, lol” (ASG6)

“They [Hijinx] were willing to take our ideas on board and were really inclusive in trying to get everyone involved” (A2)

3. The Marked - Theatre Témoign

The Lowry

20 May 2017

A sense of commitment to accessible experience from both company and venue was evident from the responses to this show, but a little inconsistency in support from the venue was also apparent; with box office staff noted as being less helpful than other front of house staff.

The sound cues included in the programme notes were considered to be particularly useful. The pre-performance workshop was particularly beneficial in this instance; as a very visual piece, the detailed exploration of the puppets was helpful.

“The venue staff were very helpful and empathetic ... the box office staff were not particularly helpful in guiding us to the right place ... with other members of staff the help was fantastic” (ASG3)

“Staff at both the Lowry and the Royal Exchange, where the workshop was held, were very helpful and friendly. They made sure we knew where we needed to go and accompanied us to the rooms and our seats” (ASG2)

“The whole experience was thorough and committed to by the theatre company and staff at the Lowry” (ASG3)

“The sounds in this play were very evocative, making it easy to understand the mood the current scene was conveying in addition to being cues that helped me understand what was happening in the play, they were a large part of the aesthetic experience” (ASG2)

“It was my first masked theatre experience and the first time I’ve participated with Extant. It was really moving and I understood more than I thought I would. There were moments when I lost the story but was brought back by sounds that I could link to the spoken introduction. Overall it was an enjoyable theatre experience” (A1)

4. Declaration - Art with Heart

Lowry

23-24 June 2017

The response to this performance was generally positive, with the touch tour being regarded as particularly useful due to the variety and importance of the large number of props. The workshop was also well received and the venue was regarded as welcoming and accessible.

“The touch tour was more detailed for this performance, and that helped because there were so many things on the stage” (ASG3)

“The workshop covered some of the themes of Declaration and was a great addition as it gave me further understanding of the play and its central character. The workshop was delivered to a high standard and I was made to feel comfortable and at ease throughout” (ASG1)

“The venue staff were friendly and made me feel like I could go back unguided and still feel comfortable” (ASG1)

“Lowry staff guided us around the stage, they assisted in a professional manner that made me feel comfortable and improved the ease of the whole process, which also improved my enjoyment of the tour” (ASG2)

“Art with Heart and the Lowry staff made a great effort to make me feel at ease” (ASG3)

“We were also given leaflets about ADHD at the end of the performance, and again, had they been in an accessible format I would have enjoyed reading them on the way back” (ASG3)

“I don’t think this performance would have benefited from audio description because of its conversational and intimate nature. The audience had a special role to play in this performance and in many ways, this made it more inclusive and accessible” (ASG2)

5. The Third Policeman - Miracle Theatre

MAC

8 July 2017

There were mixed reactions to this show. The workshop and Enhance elements were regarded as vital to being able to follow the performance but the programme notes would have benefitted from being more focussed.

The venue staff were welcoming and supportive but the outside setting, being unfamiliar, led to some confusion as to how to access the performance area.

“Without knowing the very basic basics it would have been more difficult to follow. The staff were excellent.” (ASG5)

“The workshop presenter was excellent, and the improvisation exercises were enjoyable and very useful” (ASG5)

“The staff at MAC were excellent and very professional and helpful” (ASG6)

“It was an outside performance, so we thought we could access the play from outside when in fact we had to go through the bar. That was confusing” (ASG4)

6. *Andante* - Igor and Moreno

The Lowry

19-20 October 2017

Delivering dance as a sensory experience was considered to be an interesting approach, and offered a different route to access the performance, but had mixed responses in terms of how it was received by the audience; as a highly experimental approach, some felt that they needed a bit more information about the artist's intent to fully appreciate it.

The programme notes and touch tour were considered to be most helpful in the context of the discussions that happened as a result and the venue staff received high praise for their support.

“This was a harder style of theatre to make accessible and the accessibility Enhancements were not entirely successful for me because I had very little sense of what was happening visually” (ASG5)

“This was an experimental piece and so it's hard to evaluate. I missed out on a lot of what was happening visually, but perhaps I still had the intended experience just from the sounds and smells” (ASG2)

“This style of theatre was very different to any other performance I've attended and the challenges of making it accessible are different ... but the sound and smell was an experience in itself” (ASG1)

“The accessibility at the Lowry is exceptional, not once did I feel uncomfortable. There were staff members all around who were willing to help you get from a to b ... they thought about steps and they also ensured that there was clear access to lifts at all times” (ASG1)

“Venue staff were professional and made me feel at ease ... with the assistance provided I could navigate the theatre with ease and confidence” (ASG2)

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