**Open Scripts: Report**

**July 2021 – March 2022**

1. **Research Methods**

The research methods used for Open Scripts have shifted over the course of the project. This is both due to a revision to the project timeline and aims in September 2021, and as a result of a planned progression from textual research, to individual meetings, to a collaborative working process.

Initially, it made sense to review and consolidate existing textual research, constructed from interviews, email exchanges, and feedback from Extant’s Roundtable conducted in March 2021. This material was supplied by Extant, and included research undertaken at Central School of Speech and Drama, emails between the team and various publishers, and Extant’s own evaluation documents. This provided a foundational knowledge about existing access technologies, resources for visually impaired users, and the deficiency of these provisions. Later on, questions were raised about how these findings interact with research on legislation, with particular focus on issues surrounding copyright and equality of access.

This textual research was then supplemented by conversations with industry contacts, ranging from visually impaired actors, to Access Managers at mid-scale producing theatres. These interactions confirmed that, fundamentally, resources for audio versions of scripts are extremely limited, and though some publishing houses offer scripts in PDF format and large print on demand for visually impaired consumers, these are not fully compatible with screen readers or suitable for practical use. These provisions do not constitute equal access for visually impaired artists, either as consumers or as employees.

As predicted and strategised, a collaborative, problem-solving model seemed an important next step. A Working Party was assembled, composed of industry professionals, representatives from new writing theatres, and visually impaired freelance artists (with crossover between these categories). The Working Party was consulted via email correspondence, video calls, and a full members’ meeting in November 2021. The central purpose of this meeting was to establish cooperation across the group, as well as set some aims moving forwards.

1. **Action Points from Roundtable, March 2021**
* Set some priorities for next steps – **Complete**
* Set up a working party to explore ways of moving forward – **Complete**
* Give clarity on what software/script formatting is needed for different individuals to access scripts – **Complete**
* Support VI theatremakers with advice and information (resources, technology etc.) – **IN PROGRESS**
* Look at legal issues – **IN PROGRESS**
* Work towards a potential monologue resource of new writing to help access auditions and drama schools (in partnership with theatres such as 503) – **IN PROGRESS**
* Produce a report on the current state of affairs, what can change, and why it must – **Complete**
* Distribute report to all stakeholders and decision-makers – **IN PROGRESS**
* Approach publishers to ascertain what can be done – **IN PROGRESS**
* Develop a specific ask of theatres/publishers so when they are providing scripts for sale, they can make these accessible in the formats needed – **IN PROGRESS**
1. **Limitations to Resources**

Existing resources – in the form of screen reader compatible documents and audio versions of texts – are limited, firstly in their availability, and secondly in their functionality.

* 1. **Audio**

Audio book services, such as Audible (Amazon’s audiobook offering) and Listening Books (a charitable audio book service for people with a print disability), have reasonable availability of classic texts but are very limited in terms of modern plays and new writing. Drama Online (a collaboration between several publishing houses) has a collection called LA Theatre Works, which offers over 400 recorded audio plays, including a selection by contemporary American playwrights. These are recorded by professional actors, occasionally in their original roles, and are accompanied by a sound design. Similarly, Bloomsbury is in partnership with the RSC, Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, and BBC Hollow Crown, providing access to live recordings of their performances and to their video library. Audio files available via Oberon Books are mainly those for training purposes and accent work. Neither Nick Hern, nor Samuel French offer any audio plays as independent publishers. The RNIB’s free Talking Books service does have some titles by Samuel French, since the publisher works with the RNIB on a request basis. The RNIB’s library, however, is otherwise extremely limited in terms of playtexts. Harper Collins have a partnership with the RNIB, in which whatever they produce in audio gets added to the library. However, these are mainly classic plays. The RNIB’s Ivybridge team records requested texts, providing there is no pre-existing audiobook. These are recorded by volunteers, rather than professional audiobook readers or actors.

* 1. **eBooks**

Scripts in ePlay formats are much more readily available than audio versions. These can be accessed via screen readers, though few are optimised for this usage. PDF tends to be the most common format; there are several issues with accessing these files via JAWS and other screen reading technology. Below is a summary of the current ePlay offering of major play publishers and reading platforms.

**Routledge**:

* eBooks are all accessed through the VitalSource Bookshelf application, which provides online access, mobile and eReader access, as well as offline computer access
* VitalSource eBooks must be viewed through the Bookshelf website or application; Routledge do not provide standalone PDF/EPUB files

**Nick Hern:**

* Most titles are available in EPUB format, but they are also usually able to provide non-printable watermarked PDFs of their titles to visually impaired customers who are unable to access texts in either EPUB or paperback format. These are not generally available to the public as they are less secure than eBooks; they are only offered when they are required for access purposes, or where both the paperback and eBook are unavailable (out of stock etc.).
* To protect authors and retain control over distribution, Nick Hern deals with customers directly rather than in collaboration with the RNIB
* Do not currently collaborate with any specific text-to-speech software

**Bloomsbury:**

* Share all eBook content with the RNIB – so if a theatre/play text is available in an eBook format (PDF or EPUB), it will have been sent to the RNIB
* Also share eBooks with many trade vendors, including Amazon

**Samuel French:**

* Work with the RNIB – users can go via the RNIB website and request a title
* Plays are available online as ePlays. This is a paid service and all plays are unadaptable, in PDF format.

**Concord Reader+:**

* Formerly called Abbott, this is an interactive ePlay reader service, with access to Samuel French’s catalogue
* Scripts are uploaded as EPUB files
* Available titles are those that publishers have electronic rights to only, with an ongoing project to expand the number of Samuel French publications available in digital format
* Nick Hern have made a limited selection of their titles available to sell on their website for use with Concord Reader+ - about 80 or so titles at the time of research, with access to the rest of the catalogue under negotiation
* At the time of research, they are close to finalising a deal to add Methuen Drama ePlays to the catalogue (potentially another 2000 or so titles), and aim to add other publishers over time

**Bookshare:**

* When a publisher shares their work with Bookshare, any text can be made accessible for the customers
* Bookshare is available to institutions under the learning banner, supporting 20% of schools at the time of research
* Publishers are comfortable with this arrangement because it is used for education purposes only
* EHUB/RCM files can automatically be converted into a Word document, a Daisy file, or an audio file
* If the file is ingested as a PDF, there are limited options. When Bookshare upload PDF files they make sure it is an OCR PDF file.
	1. **Large Print**

Some of these electronic resources are available in large print versions. For example, Oberon provides large print copies when requested, in addition to some large print scripts they already have; Nick Hern can create large print versions of most titles, except those published more than 15 years ago; and Faber and Faber have some availability of large print texts. In a similar process to their audio recording service, the RNIB can convert texts to large print on demand, but this is often a lengthy process. Anecdotally, it frequently becomes the responsibility of visually impaired performers to type out lines in an adequate font size for line-learning. There are specific issues with the creation and distribution of large print scripts, not least the fact that page numbers are not standardised between original and enlarged copies. This makes live, efficient navigation difficult for visually impaired users.

It is worth pointing out that large print copies of plays are not accessible for some users, while others may prefer to use these scripts throughout rehearsals. The focus of this research has therefore been on provisions in the form of screen reader accessible documents and audio versions of texts.

* 1. **Functionality**

As mentioned above, despite the electronic resources listed, the vast majority of these do not provide fit-for-purpose (i.e. for use in creative preparatory or rehearsal room work), or even complete and adequate access for visually impaired artists. Users find that screen readers have significant issues processing and delivering the text contained within these files. As shown above, scripts are most frequently offered in PDF format. It is difficult to generalise across different screen reading technologies, but here are some challenges raised by users of various software, particularly in regard to script reading.

* The structure of the text cannot be modified directly from a PDF file, in order to optimise for screen reading software
* Some entire sections may be skipped depending on how the text is formatted
* Any annotations will not be read out consistently
* Some software reads all stage directions first and then returns to ‘spoken’ text
* Some software will read the header and footer (often copyright information) on every page, interrupting the text
* Screen readers have a variety of synthetic voices – these are preferred by some users, but they do not distinguish between different characters or stage directions
* The reading of character names before each line of spoken dialogue breaks up delivery
* Texts are difficult to navigate, which makes the use of screen readers in rehearsal problematic
* Any experimental formatting by the writer, e.g. words spread across the page or text arranged in columns, is not represented accurately
* In OCR (optical character recognition) PDF files, images can be read as text. This format is not necessarily well-adapted to scripts, however, and files are not always converted into an OCR by the publisher.
* Some eBooks are protected with Digital Rights Management (DRM), which can prevent text-to-speech software from accessing eBook content
1. **Recommendations**

The lack of plays available in (fully) accessible formats renders several aspects of the research and preparatory business of play producing and performing extremely challenging for visually impaired artists. In a training environment or in the research phase of a rehearsal process, a teacher or director may make recommendations of material for wider reading and comparative purposes; most of the time, these scripts are inaccessible for visually impaired artists or students, especially when the demand is to cover several texts over a short period, or when recommendations fall outside the canon. Prospective drama school students struggle with their monologue choices without access to contemporary plays; potential directors have a meagre selection of titles from which to develop a project. Without access to wholly accessible and properly navigable resources, suitable for use within a rehearsal room context, it is incumbent on visually impaired performers to arrive off book on day one. This is rarely a necessity for their sighted counterparts. Some visually impaired performers, students, directors, and artistic directors – who have persisted and are currently practising in the industry – have responded with recommendations for the delivery of genuinely accessible material.

There is some stated preference for audio recorded plays wherever possible, and for a human voice over an AI voice. Again, it is important to note that this is not by any means universal, and some users prefer voices at the more robotic end of the synthetic spectrum. The RNIB’s synthetic voice technology, IVONA, has a natural sound, whereas Eloquence, which comes with some screen readers and can sound robotic, is widely liked by many visually impaired users because it remains intelligible at very high speeds.

There is a degree of consensus around neutral delivery being preferable for audio recordings. This means that, though archive performance audio is a valuable resource, it is not ideal, especially in terms of access for performers. It is essential that visually impaired actors are able to receive text with as little prior interpretation as possible, should they prefer it, in order to be able to more easily make their own choices about character and performance. In one example, an actor’s access worker records – and re-records – material onto a device. The access worker reads the text once with full punctuation and stage directions, a second time with all character names included, and finally records the script a third time with only the characters’ lines read out. The access worker reads in as neutral a tone as possible, resisting interpretation and performance – again, only as far as is possible when recording with a human voice. Another user stated some satisfaction with the idea of a single actor reading the entirety of the script, differentiating between characters with vocal modulation.

There are conflicting accounts of preference in regard to when and how character names ought to be placed within a script. Similarly, if all punctuation is read it can become unhelpful and interruptive, but it was also acknowledged that at least some punctuation is important. This is especially the case when working with writers that pay special attention to grammar and notation. The ability to annotate scripts is important to lots of creatives, but poses another challenge, both in terms of how to keep notes in line with the correct section of the text, and how a screen reader might best respond to such annotation.

Based on the feedback summarised above, it seems that a document optimised so as to provide the user with choices for how the text is navigated and delivered would be ideal. There is some uniformity of preference for audio recordings of texts, such as the use of a neutral tone of voice but, similarly, it seems crucial that there are options for visually impaired artists. This is the only way that a recording would provide genuinely fit-for-purpose and equal access across different creative environments and usages.

1. **Legal Issues & Implications**

There are two separate but related pieces of legislation with which this project engages. The first is the Equality Act 2010, which has implications for the kinds of challenges this project might make to service providers – publishers in this case. The second legislates on exceptions to copyright, specific to the creation and supply of accessible copies of artistic works for disabled people. These exceptions allow scope for an educational or non-profit organisation to reconfigure, record and distribute scripts in the format that best suits visually impaired theatremakers, as per the discoveries made through this research project.

* 1. **Equality Act 2010**

Section 20 of the Equality Act 2010 focusses on ‘duty to make adjustments’ for disabled people. In the quote below, ‘A’ refers to the person on whom the duty is imposed.

*The first requirement is a requirement, where a provision, criterion or practice of A's puts a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage in relation to a relevant matter in comparison with persons who are not disabled, to take such steps as it is reasonable to have to take to avoid the disadvantage.*[[1]](#footnote-1)

The issues with accessing scripts that have been detailed in this report can be said to put visually impaired artists, or potential artists, at a substantial disadvantage. This is particularly stark when one considers the preparatory and practical work undertaken by visually impaired theatremakers, alongside their sighted colleagues and contemporaries. The obstacles met by visually impaired people when there is a failure to provide accessible versions of scripts are numerous and significant, as shown above. This research has also demonstrated that the formats currently considered to be fully accessible (i.e. ePlays and audio versions) do not provide an access equal to that of ‘persons who are not disabled’. There is no doubt that these disadvantages amount to ‘more than a minor or trivial disadvantage’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Service providers, in this case publishing houses, have an ‘anticipatory duty’ to comply with this legislation. This means that:

*The service provider should not wait for a particular disabled service user to encounter a problem before they make adjustments. Instead, service providers should anticipate the requirements of disabled people and the adjustments that may have to be made for them. Failure to anticipate the need for the adjustment may create additional expense, or make it too late to comply with the duty.*[[3]](#footnote-3)

Demands are often rebutted with claims that these provisions would be too expensive to institute at this stage, and that organisations do not have the resources to make the necessary changes. Whilst it is acknowledged that a too late consideration of these adjustments might ‘create additional expense’, this seems to be the responsibility of the service provider, and also that such expense may have been avoidable, should these needs have been previously considered and users properly consulted.

Service providers are not expected to be able to predict the individual needs of every single person who might require their service, but it is their responsibility to think in advance and, crucially, on an ongoing basis about what disabled people might reasonably need.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is logical that a publisher specialising in theatrical texts should consider not only the broad implications of visual impairment, but also the needs of the intended audience of their services and the context in which their goods (i.e. scripts) are frequently used. It is not enough that scripts are legible to a screen reader *to a degree*, when equal access would actually constitute a version optimised for use within a professional artistic practice.

This project has the potential to bring the deficiency of current provisions and the need for improved access to public and industry attention, and:

*Once a service provider has become aware of the requirements of a particular disabled person who uses or seeks to use its services, it might then be reasonable for the service provider to take a particular step to meet these requirements. This is especially so where a disabled person has pointed out the difficulty that they face in accessing services or has suggested a reasonable solution to that difficulty.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

The Working Party consulted for this research has not only proved that the barriers for visually impaired artists in accessing scripts and significant and widespread, but the group has also begun collaborating on discovering a ‘reasonable solution’. It does not seem that alterations to provisions would need to be radical or wildly expensive from the publisher’s point of view in order to effect meaningful and largescale improvements to the ability of visually impaired theatremakers and students to access scripts – and, simply put, to do their work.

* 1. **Copyright (Visually Impaired Persons) Act 2002**

The relevant section of this act is titled ‘multiple copies for visually impaired persons’, under which:

*(1) If an approved body has lawful possession of a copy (“the master copy”) of the whole or part of—*

*(a) a commercially published literary, dramatic, musical or artistic work; or*

*(b) a commercially published edition,*

*it is not an infringement of copyright in the work, or in the typographical arrangement of the published edition, for the body to make, or supply, accessible copies for the personal use of visually impaired persons to whom the master copy is not accessible because of their impairment.* [[6]](#footnote-6)

This is the legislation under which the RNIB’s service functions, as described above, whereby any visually impaired person may request that a title be recorded or transcribed. The RNIB falls into the category of ‘approved body’ due to its charitable status; the term in this context refers to ‘and educational establishment or a body that is not conducted for profit’. Extant, as a non-profit organisation, would fall under the same banner.

There is some qualification to this exemption, which states that there must be no other commercially available copies of the copyright work that are ‘in a form that is accessible to the same or substantially the same degree’. It feels a straightforward enough task to squash any claim that the PDFs provided for, say, new writing texts can offer the same degree of access that a screen reader compatible version might. Bolstering this defence further, the legislation states that:

*A copy of a copyright work […] is to be taken to be accessible to a visually impaired person only if it is as accessible to him as it would be if he were not visually impaired.*

It seems hardly worth repeating here that provisions from publishers as they stand do not pass this simple test. Extant would not require any permissions to create, for example, a bank of audio plays, to be made available to visually impaired artists.

1. **The Working Party**
	1. **List of members**

The Working Party is made up of both freelancers and representatives from organisations, and includes both sighted and visually impaired members in those roles.

**Karina Jones** Actor (VI)

**Samuel Brewer** Actor and theatremaker (VI)

**Amelia Cavallo** Theatre practitioner and academic (VI)

**Ian Rattray** Audio producer (VI)

**Margo Cargill** Actor (VI)

**Michelle Felix**  Actor (VI)

**Morag Sims** Actor and audiobook artist (S)

**Tom Latter**  Director (S)

**Maddie Hindes** Editorial and publishing assistant at Nick Hern (S)

**Sam Nicholls**  Editorial assistant at Methuen Drama (S)

**Steve Harper**  Literary manager at Theatre 503 (S)

**Jane Fallowfield** Literary manager at the Royal Court (S)

**David Bellwood** Access manager at the National Theatre (S)

**Catherine Alexander** Director and course leader at CSSD (S)

**NB ‘VI’ stands for visually impaired, and ‘S’ for sighted.**

* 1. **Role**

Ongoing feedback from the working party will be crucial: in continuing to build a publishable report; in advising on approaches to the publishing industry, theatres, and other stakeholders; and in sharing in our campaign.

Based on discussions in our November meeting, we have decided that, in the short-term, Open Scripts will be considered as a pilot project; the working party will collaborate to set up a model of best practice, which will be used to propel these ideas into a more formal framework with a widened impact later down the line. Facing challenges around ownership of scripts and ideal formats on an initially microlevel, working with just a few partner organisations, will give us space to work out solutions before trying to effect change on a larger scale.

Both of these targets involve collaborating in sub-working groups. One such group has already been initiated, and is currently working towards establishing best practice in file formatting for compatibility with screen readers. In order to demonstrate this, the group is attempting to create an example script, a template for which can be delivered to partner publishers for assessment. Maddie Hindes, representing Nick Hern’s contribution to the project, has indicated that publishers are not necessarily informed about how successfully assistive technology interacts with the PDFs they are able to supply.

Another such project for the working party to take on would be to organise and deliver an audio bank of scripts, in partnership with the theatres involved: the Royal Court and Theatre 503. Steve Harper, Theatre 503’s Literary Manager, has suggested that it may be possible either to extract audio from 503’s filmed performance library, or integrate a recording of the table read that almost always starts off a rehearsal process. These proposals will involve consultation with visually impaired members of the working party to come up with a model of best practice for audio recordings of scripts.

We are also currently looking at ways of launching the project, thinking about effective ways of disseminating the knowledge we’ll gather together, and working out how to maximise buy-in from the industry at large.

1. **Mid- and Long- Term Aims**

The first phase of Open Scripts has been to research and initiate a pilot project, in which we have worked to establish best practice for publishing and sharing scripts as document files, in collaboration with a volunteer working party composed of freelancers, as well as representatives from new writing theatres and publishing houses. At this stage, we are focussed on launching the project so as to disseminate these early findings, spreading awareness of the central issue of access to scripts for visually impaired artists.

Having delivered a template for accessible documents to our partner organisations, with those texts available on demand to visually impaired artists, we will collaborate with the established working party to develop a bank of texts in accessible formats. A focus on new writing will match the output of existing members of the working party – with representation from Theatre 503 and the Royal Court – as well as compensate for the current lack of accessible material in that area. This resource will be primarily audio-based, and should provide complete plays, as well as a variety of monologues and duologues for auditioning and actor training. Again, this will provide a resource, as well as a problem-solving opportunity, on an initially microlevel, with the intention of effecting change on a larger scale later down the line.

Long-term, we plan to publicise both the limitation of current provisions, as well as the discoveries and success of the pilot project(s), in order to maximise buy-in from the industry at large. Having worked through issues (surrounding copyright, for example) and provided grassroots resources on a small scale, we will be in a position to demonstrate both the necessity and potential for access to scripts at source, and to garner support from industry leaders. This will hopefully see radical shifts in publishing practice, with accessibility – in both screen reader friendly formats and audio versions – considered on first publication, built into the publishing process, and worked collaboratively between writers and editors.

1. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/20> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/equality-act-guidance/disability-quick-start-guide-for-service-providers-html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paragraph 7.21, [EHRC Services Code](http://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-010-9032?originationContext=document&vr=3.0&rs=PLUK1.0&transitionType=DocumentItem&contextData=(sc.Default)). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Roads, Underhill LJ at paragraph 11 and page 11, [EHRC Guide](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/what-equality-law-means-your-business). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Paragraph 7.26, [EHRC Services Code](http://uk.practicallaw.thomsonreuters.com/w-010-9032?originationContext=document&vr=3.0&rs=PLUK1.0&transitionType=DocumentItem&contextData=(sc.Default)). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/33/enacted> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)