**Extant - Post Enhance - Evaluation Summary – 2024/25 (Year 1)**

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**Background**

Extant is the UK’s leading performing arts company that celebrates visual impairment. Our work widens representation of visually impaired people in the arts through groundbreaking productions, artist development initiatives and collaborations that inspire sector-wide action to open up the arts for visually impaired creatives and audiences.

Over the last 10 years we’ve created and honed the idea of ‘Enhanced Performances’, a form of affordable access provision to support small-scale touring companies to engage with visually impaired audiences where audio description is not possible. For Pre-Enhance, we support companies to integrate access at the start of the creative process, and offer tailored consultancy based on this concept. Post-Enhance supports companies to build in access post-production. A Post-Enhance show is preceded by a touch tour including programme notes written with access for visually impaired audiences at the core. We train the company to deliver touch tours and work with them on the creation of programme notes which encapsulate the visual aspects of the show (without giving away spoilers) and key visual action that could otherwise be missed.

Paul Hamlyn Foundation has funded a 3-year project (2024-27) which enables us to train visually impaired facilitators and access workers to deliver the Post-Enhance programme to up to 54 touring theatre companies and staff at up to 18 venues who’ll also receive Visual Impairment Awareness Training.

We commissioned the independent evaluator Matthew Cock to evaluate the project and agreed a plan based on 13 outcomes for different groups and have shared 7 here: visually impaired audiences (V), partner venues and companies (P), facilitators and access workers (F). Our Year 1 venue partners were: The Courtyard (Hereford), Camden People’s Theatre (London), The Lowry (Salford), Alphabetti (Newcastle), Derby Theatre (Derby) and Arena Theatre (Wolverhampton).

**Executive Summary**

“Extant have made a very good start to the Post-Enhance project, demonstrating a strong commitment to evaluation and learning in their running of the project, and making a strong start in achieving the outcomes. For those outcomes where the evaluation has taken place, good progress has been made. There is also strong evidence that lessons learned from Year 1 have been taken on board and will result in even stronger progress in Y2.” (MC)

“Delivering Post-Enhance across the UK has been a dynamic learning curve. With visually impaired facilitators and advocates at the core of what we do, listening and responding to facilitator needs and feedback has been paramount. Having recruited a new facilitator and access worker team drawn from across the UK, a key request early on was the creation of a Post-Enhance Handbook which they could use and refer to. The purpose of the handbook for us as an organisation allows us to articulate and encapsulate the concept and systems behind Post-Enhance and how we as a company can be confident that the facilitators and access workers are delivering the same, high-quality experience across different locations. Feedback from the facilitators about how it’s gone in this first year has allowed us to iterate the language and tasks allowing us to revise it for Year 2 (2025-26).” (CJJ)

**Summary of progress on Outcomes**

MC has used a traffic light system, where:

Red means that ‘little or no progress is evident at this stage of the project’. Note, this may be because the relevant part of the evaluation has not yet taken place.

Amber means that ‘some progress is evident, future improvement / progress is expected.

Green means that ‘good progress is evident, future improvement / progress is possible.

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| V1 | VI audiences feel their access needs were met by Post Enhance | Green |
| V2 | VI audiences experience greater frequency, range and geographical spread of shows that meet their needs | Amber |
| V3 | VI audiences expand their enjoyment and fulfilment of culture and the arts | Green |
|  |  |  |
| P1 | Partner venues / companies broaden their ambition to reach more VI audiences | Red |
| P2 | Partner venues / companies increase their confidence in how to approach and embed accessibility | Green |
| P3 | Partner venues / companies “upskill” in how to create and host enhanced shows | Green |
|  |  |  |
| F1 | Facilitators / Access Workers train with Extant on Enhance methodologies, gaining confidence, skills and paid employment | Amber |

**VI Audiences**

V1: Green VI audiences feel their access needs were met by Post Enhance

* 85% rated the quality of the Touch Tour as Good or Very good.
* 85% said that they Never or Rarely felt unsure about which character was speaking at any time during the production.
* 80% of survey respondents rated the quality of venue staff’s VI awareness and support as Good or Very good.

Overall, the response was very positive:

“It’s great to have the touch tour and program notes which really helps me to follow a show.”

“…the whole cast attended the beginning of the touch tour and enthusiastically engaged with the VI audience, going into quite a bit of detail about their characters, costumes and appearance, plus an explanation of what various sound effects would signify.”

However, some respondents still expressed a preference for different access methodologies:

“At this moment in time I prefer [traditional] AD.”

V2: Amber VI audiences experience greater frequency, range and geographical spread of shows that meet their needs

It’s not clear that Post Enhance will increase the frequency of the respondents’ theatregoing, since they are already frequent visitors, but there’s evidence from the comments that it opens the possibility to a wider range of options.

V3: Green VI audiences expand their enjoyment and fulfilment of culture and the arts

The average enjoyment rating was **8.1**, on a scale from 0-10 where 0 is “Did not enjoy at all” and 10 is “Completely enjoyed”.

“I enjoyed the performance more than I have ever enjoyed a theatre performance before. I felt invited by the characters to participate in their world like an ordinary audience member would, without feeling like something special/extra was being done for me. I felt involved!”

Whilst it wasn’t necessarily articulated in our original application to PHF, we quickly realised the need and value for visually impaired audiences hear about the productions and project from visually impaired peers (our Enhance Advocates) and to extend a trip to the theatre (Meet Extant) and creating a more social experience:

“Our Enhance Advocates get to the heart of audience development by leading on the Meet Extant events in the café bar prior to an Enhance show*.* For The Nurses Station at Alphabetti Theatre we welcomed 15 people including visually impaired people from VIEWS and Newcastle Vision. Alphabetti Theatre audience development, the support from Extant and a local Enhance Advocate worked well together and led a topical discussion before the show. There was a real buzz and a sense of ownership from the visually impaired community.” (CJJ)

**Partners**

P1: Red Partner venues / companies broaden their ambition to reach more VI audiences

This outcome will not be evident until after the Partner leader interviews. However, some of the early feedback and responses collected to date show positive signs:

“From my perspective it has been brilliant. We've been able to engage with new audiences, offer training to both staff and companies touring to the venue and support our overall inclusive offer.” Associate Director, The Courtyard

P2: Green Partner venues / companies increase their confidence in how to approach and embed
accessibility

Post training surveys:

Communicating with blind and VI people: 98% (venue staff) said that they felt Completely or Quite confident

Guiding blind and VI people: 88% (venue staff) and 76% (company) said that they felt Completely or Quite confident

Leading a touch tour: 84% said that they felt Completely or Quite confident

P3: Green Partner venues / companies upskill in how to create and host enhanced shows

Visual Impairment Awareness Training: 97% rated quality as Good or Very good.

Touch Tour training: 92% rated quality as Good or Very good.

Upcoming Post Enhance shows: 90% (venue staff) and 100% (company members) felt Completely or Quite prepared.

**Facilitators / Access Workers**

F1: Amber Facilitators / Access Workers train with Extant on Enhance methodologies, gaining
confidence, skills and paid employment

Would have scored Green, but low numbers of Facilitators completed the formal survey. We need more evidence to be confident that Outcomes are being met. Those who completed the survey said that they:

* Strongly agreed that the training had fully prepared them for the delivery of Visual Impairment Awareness Training.
* Agreed that the training had fully prepared them for the delivery of Touch Tour training.
* Agreed that the training had fully prepared them for the creation of Programme notes

We had been collating feedback from facilitators informally via email and in whole team reflection sessions across the year and we recognise the need to ensure a higher rate of survey completion in year 2 and 3 for a more accurate independent evaluation of this area of the work.

“The relationship between the facilitator and access worker is crucial to the project with the access workers primary responsibility being to respond to the facilitator’s access needs and provide written notes which the facilitator will write up into the final version of the programme notes. Feedback from the facilitator who delivered Touch Tour training at The Courtyard, Hereford said: ‘Working alongside an Access worker was invaluable and a really constructive and creative partnership. In a practical sense they can focus on ensuring accurate descriptions of anything that I would find difficult to access and we can then work together on testing the accuracy and wording. This gives me time to consider creativity during the process, allowing me to uncover the best fit for the company / artists in regard to their programme notes’.” (CJJ)

The Access Workers who completed the survey:

100% agreed that the training had fully prepared them for the delivery of Visual Impairment Awareness Training.

66% agreed that the training fully prepared them for the creation of Programme notes

**Conclusion and Recommendations for 2025-26**

“Extant have taken evaluation and learning very seriously within the project. In addition to this independent evaluation, they regularly request feedback and input from all freelancers, and they held an end-of-year reflection session, at which they announced a set of changes for the 2025-26 cohort to include:

Updated Enhance Handbook will be with an example programme notes, crib sheets / case studies covering specific elements (e.g., guide dog etiquette, dual-language shows, minimal set designs) and incorporation of experiential elements within touch tours.

Pay increase for Facilitators and Access Workers, and introduction of an hourly rate to ensure they can be paid for, e.g. extra prep or phone calls.

Budget for the 6 theatre companies to attend Visual Impairment Awareness training (VIAT) prior to the Touch Tour training.

The main discussion areas at the reflection session were: deepening collaboration between Facilitators and Access Workers; relationship building and early communication with Companies; creative Touch Tours with experiential elements; logistic challenges and access to materials.

Participants were evidently highly supportive of the programme – believing that it boosted participating organisations’ confidence in engaging with VI audiences, providing them with practical skills and knowledge, allowed them to absorb and act on feedback, and in best cases, brought about cultural shift and long-term change. As well as occasional challenges (time constraints, unclear roles and poor communication), participants cited many highlights, e.g. observing the programme’s impact first-hand, collaborative learning and insight and personal development and relationship building. They also identified personal ‘learning curves’ e.g. time management, communication and delivery skills.

In 2025-26 the independent evaluation will include more interviews with partner leaders, which will help assess more of the project’s Outcomes.” (MC)

“Year 1 of Post-Enhance activity has ensured that 100s of visually impaired audiences have been able to access touring theatre productions across the country that would have previously been inaccessible to them. Our highly skilled team of visually impaired facilitators have trained dozens of venue staff in visual impairment awareness training and shared their knowledge with 15 theatre companies of how to deliver a touch tour - which they used, not only on their current show, but it’s knowledge that be adapted when they create productions in the future too. One of the highlights of the year was when Caroline and Anthony (one of the Post-Enhance facilitators) shared details of the project and our learning to date at the March 2025 Members Matters meeting run by the Independent Theatre Council. For Extant it’s important to recognise that there’s still a hierarchy of access, and the awareness and understanding of the needs of visually impaired audiences is low, that’s why this project is so vital. (IA)