

Shifting Perspectives

Opening up museums and galleries to blind and partially sighted people

CultureLink



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Preface – Shifting Perspectives and upping the game

By Marcus Weisen

The title Shifting Perspectives suggests that attitude matters. When we see things in a new way, changes follow naturally.

The museum experience of disabled people is beginning to be talked of as a human and cultural right. Indeed, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the UK in 2009, recognises the right of disabled people to take part in culture “on equal terms”. This is a major shift.

When we see rights where we previously saw a desirable but dispensable add-on, big changes will begin to happen. A world of opportunity will open up, sowing seeds of renewal across the board of museum practice: the design of text panels, touch tours of real cultural significance, exhibition design inclusive of people with a learning disability, deaf actors who present interpretive information for all, easy to find access information and the unfolding potential of multimedia for a shared experience for disabled people. Such myriad changes will eventually bring about the 21st Century Museum; a

museum for a new civility, a space for people to explore as equals, in which responsiveness to one specific audience nurtures design solutions for another and the elusive “public at large”.

Our day-to-day contribution as museum practitioners may often seem to go unnoticed. Yet we can draw comfort from the fact that it does contribute to embodying this new vision of the 21st Century Museum. What I say would certainly ring truer if departments for culture in the UK and elsewhere took a more energetic and strategic approach to disability equality in museums. So many of us keep needlessly reinventing the wheel year on year because our governments don’t show strategic commitment to support us managing, nurturing and sharing the sector’s knowledge.

Shifting Perspectives, seeing disabled people as part of the design solution and not the problem, will renew museums. As a museum collections officer bluntly said at a group interview, “If you don’t allow people access to your collections, your museum will die.”



Clear focus, wide scope

Shifting Perspectives is a user-focused report. That alone is refreshing and there is learning to be unravelled. The report tells us, for example, that many blind and partially sighted people still think that museums are not for them. And yet for the past twenty-odd years, I have seen so many museums willing to offer guided tours to blind and partially sighted individuals and groups given a few days or a couple of weeks advance notice. This facility can make for many memorable experiences.

Unfortunately, very few museums mention this service in their marketing materials. Very simple steps will help mend this major communication fault line. The information needs to get out there, on the web, at the reception desk and in local talking newspapers.

Shifting Perspectives gives us space to reflect on the value of touch. Is the touch taboo in our museums really grounded in proven scientific knowledge? Even some conservators are ready to chisel away at the stifling nature of this unquestioned consensus. There is consensus that audio description is a very potent and necessary way to bring blind and partially sighted people in touch with collections and their stories. Yet I cannot

escape the suspicion that it is being used in more than one museum as a smoke screen to deny tactile access to original objects for totally blind people, for most of whom touch is the gateway to the museum experience. Let's challenge and re-assess the touch taboo and joyfully shift the boundaries where they can be shifted.

Shifting Perspectives does have good news for the sector. One of its most important findings is that training engenders a confident workforce. The 40 per cent of volunteers who had been nervous working with blind and partially sighted people prior to taking part in training subsequently joined the 100 per cent of staff who felt confident or very confident by the end of training. This adds weight to the MLA Disability Survey 2002, which showed that organisations investing in disability training were three times more likely to score well in disability access than those who did not. Training can produce a dynamic shift.

The report acknowledges that staff often know so much already. Training helps draw out the knowledge and frame it. When it comes to audio description (a rather mystifying technical term for one of humanity's oldest skills), touch tours and handling objects, so many curators, conservators and educators know their objects

inside-out. And part of that knowledge has been endowed with the rich sensory vocabulary of material culture. Great skills and knowledge come into play here. Description and exploring by touch are a natural meeting ground for museum professionals and blind and partially sighted audiences. The knowledge of basic guidelines, such as those of Art Education for blind people (going back to 1996, alas) and audio description training can bring all this knowledge into focus.





Challenge of sustainability

How can we make services, resources and knowledge sustainable in a world of dwindling resources? How can we make affordable improvements? Publicising access information, building access into house style and reviewing the assumptions of restrictive policies are but a few examples of affordable changes. Training costs, but it is a sound investment.

A step-by-step, cumulative approach will always work. A museum that provides online audio description of ten objects year by year for five years will end up with an appreciable accessible web collection. In the process, the museum will develop and test skills and knowledge. This can be documented and made available to new staff. I don't see why larger museums shouldn't develop a second and third touch tour to break out of the suffocating limitations of choice blind and partially sighted visitors face. You can bet that a satisfied visitor will make a repeat visit. A wider accessible cultural offer makes the offer sustainable. The joy of a repeat visit is a right most of us enjoy. Why refuse it to disabled people?

And yes, sustainability can only be achieved through an organisation-wide approach championed from the top.

Access for disabled people needs to be within the script of every project and tender brief and in every budget. This is the trigger for small miracles of access.

A shared experience of museums, galleries and heritage is a right

Though *Shifting Perspectives* focuses on tailored activities for groups, the report neatly sizes up the whole challenge:

“If they [museums] were completely independently accessible from the front door until you are ready to leave, it would mean I could just drop into a museum if I had a free afternoon – go in, by myself, and come out again an hour later, walk home and just be able to reflect.”

The possibility of an impromptu visit offers improvisational dreamtime. It adds hugely to the quality of our lives. It is part of the museum experience.

Our minds have an awkward tendency to concentrate on limitations first. Take the Victoria and Albert Museum as an example, or indeed, the majority of all museums. Making these spaces entirely accessible for independent visits by blind and partially sighted people is

inconceivable. They are far too complex and the available resources too finite. Yet, by shifting perspectives we will begin to contemplate the full scope of what is possible. We can aim to get as close as possible to the unachievable – take it as our guide, spur and inspiration. “Inclusive design” is a work in progress. Yet, it is transformative. How can optimal conditions for an independent museum experience be created for visitors who are blind, partially sighted, deaf, hard of hearing, have a learning difficulty, have a mobility difficulty or are simply older?

There are many strategies to optimise orientation and these can be fitted seamlessly into the overall design. Confident staff who are available to welcome the impromptu visitor and meet their support needs help to overcome remaining barriers. Can staff meet someone at the bus stop? Last, but not least, how enticing is intellectual access to the collections and to the whole experience?

The little known Council of Europe Recommendation “R(92)6” called on governments and local cultural organisations to “develop comprehensive access policies and plans to bring significant and lasting improvements for all people with disabilities”. The recommendation

dates back to 1992. It went wholly unnoticed by departments for culture and local museums.

The UN Convention sets a utopian, aspirational goal. It recognises “access on equal terms” as a right. Sure, 100 per cent intellectual access to collections will never exist for blind and partially sighted people. There are simply not enough resources and the exercise might turn out to be pointless.

The UN Convention and the Council of Europe Recommendation call on us to reflect on the possible meanings of “access on equal terms” and “significant and lasting improvements”. And, of course, it calls on us to develop action after reflection.

My belief is that we need to anchor these discussions in the context of the whole museum experience and the significance of the collections.

It is simply not right that national museums, with their immeasurable wealth of collections, only provide a touch tour (often incorporating only the crumbs of collections) for blind and partially sighted visitors. Similar reflections apply, of course, to smaller museums.

The move towards equality requires considerable experience and insights into what makes a place and collection memorable. The concept of “representative cross section” may be of use. What is memorable in the venue itself or in its spatial design is barely ever mediated to blind and partially sighted visitors.

If, for argument’s sake, all major museums in London, Paris, New York (to give but a few salient examples) provided several quality touch tours, international cultural tourism by blind and partially sighted people could finally take off. This was the aim of “European Cities within Reach”, a project initiated in 1991 by RNIB. Progress has been dismal and this has much to do with a lack of a national strategic vision at government level.

As so often happens, progress starts from the bottom up. But governments need to take responsibility for the international policies they have signed up to, as well as national disability legislation to which they are subject. This is the message of the “In Touch with Art” Resolution on equal access to museums for blind and partially sighted people. 144 delegates from 22 countries, museum professionals and blind and partially sighted

people, passed the Resolution on 13 October 2010 at the V&A, at the end of the “In Touch with Art” Conference organised by St Dunstan’s – a national charity serving blind ex-service men and women and the European Blind Union. It was presented at European Day of People with Disabilities in Brussels on 3 December, on invitation by the European Commission.

When we see rights where we previously saw a chore, big changes will begin to happen. A world of opportunity will open up, sowing seeds of renewal across the board of museum practice. Wherever you work, whatever your role, you can play a part in building the Museum of the 21st Century.

Marcus Weisen

Marcus is St Dunstan’s “In Touch with Art” Content Director. He is Director of the Jodi Mattes Trust for accessible digital culture www.jodiawards.org.uk He was RNIB Arts Officer (1987-2002) and MLA Disability Adviser (2002-2007). The “In Touch with Art” Resolution and Marcus’s European talk can be found at www.st-dunstans.org.uk/itwa





Introduction

“Barriers can be intellectual as well as physical. These imperceptible barriers, often placed in the way of blind and partially sighted people by others, are far more complex and discriminatory than we first thought. But with planning, insight and understanding, they can either be removed or successful solutions can be developed. However, it is paramount that they are addressed in a strategic, manageable and inclusive manner.”

Zoë Partington-Sollinger, CultureLink

RNIB exists to challenge intellectual barriers and CultureLink has been an important step towards meeting that challenge. The remit of the 12-month programme was to study key areas in which people with sight loss access arts and culture leading up to significant events such as the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. Many barriers still exist for blind and partially sighted people, maintained by those who are unaware of the impact of exclusion. The CultureLink legacy aims to go beyond 2012 and create inclusion in all aspects of the museum and gallery sector, including venues, collections, websites, workshops, employment and attitudinal discrimination.

Working collaboratively to address and understand the needs of a select group has had some surprising results. A number of the programme’s key partners have opened up their collections to remove barriers and discriminatory practice, not only enhancing their venues, but also allaying any fears and negative assumptions the staff and participants may have had. More significant is the improvement in cultural access for blind and partially sighted people, along with many other benefits.

One of the functions of Shifting Perspectives is to offer an insight into the experiences, discussions and learning that took place during the programme. It is not about revealing the perspective of the blind but about collaborative thinking and a different approach to inclusive and considered access. It is about finding innovative ways to ensure blind and partially sighted people know what is available and can benefit from it.

With the help of seven different museums and galleries we have explored ways to provide a service that benefits everyone. The following chapters will give you a flavour of the breadth of ideas and suggestions from all involved.



Chapter 1 – The real experience

The responses of blind and partially sighted people are paramount to evoking change and innovation in thinking. Losing your sight inevitably changes your experience of visiting a museum, gallery or cathedral, and it can often be unclear what's on offer. But with improvements, the whole experience for visitors with sight loss can be enticing, intriguing and informative.

Our research has been extremely comprehensive and has provided a valuable insight into real users' experiences, particularly on issues such as audio description, wayfinding and information access, along with marketing to and engaging blind and partially sighted audiences. Many of the ideas in this publication can be adapted to your own in-house style and new projects.

Staff in seven museums across the West Midlands have offered their unique perspective and considerable expertise to shape the CultureLink project, and the training we provided gave them a greater understanding of sight loss and the positive impact of skill sharing. Communication between museums, galleries, RNIB and blind and partially sighted people is crucial to improving

the museum experience. Among many skills, staff have learned how carefully considered audio description can give visitors information about the building and its facilities, as well as explaining the significance of what's on display.

CultureLink has worked with each of the venues to create activity days for blind and partially sighted visitors. Our aim is to use the feedback from the participants to improve what's on offer. Like the Olympics, this project wants to leave a long-term legacy, so this book has been produced to be shared with other museums and art galleries throughout the United Kingdom.

But the people making the real impact are the blind and partially sighted participants who have shared their experiences. These interviews are a great chance to hear a blind user's perspective on their journey into cultural and heritage sites.



Telling it how it is

Tucked away in a tiny room behind Hereford Cathedral, a focus group of blind and partially sighted people were hard at work, sharing opinions about how an accessible exhibition should work. In this handling session, members of the group were touching, feeling and describing various materials.

“Feminine and she’s representing wind or something...”

“Her hair is going back – to me it’s hair anyway. And a lovely long neck. But she’s got no features.”

“There are other kinds of things happening here.”

“The veins. Too many veins!”

But getting up close isn’t something you can do just anywhere, as one member of the group explains:

“When you go into these places you often can’t touch – particularly in art galleries. You want to get up nearer the painting to see it and they send you back. I’ve been told off time and time again.”



Dominic Harbour, Head of Communications at Hereford Cathedral and Museum is keen to give blind and partially sighted people access to the richness of experiences the cathedral can offer.

“For a long time we’ve had this idea that we’d like to create an exhibition which told the history of the cathedral and the development of artistic style. We wanted to give people a flavour of the building

and make something that would be of interest to blind and partially sighted visitors.

We've got a really brilliant focus group who represent young people, older people, people who have experience of creative work, whether it's students in ceramics or people who have been painters previously. And all have varying partial sight or blindness.

What we need is for them to tear apart how far we've got already. We want them to tell us what's working, and throw up some ideas about different ways that we might be able to present information. We want to know how we might convey things that are truly difficult to interpret, like the size of the cathedral building, what it's like to be in it and how you can present that in a tactile way. It's really exciting just how outside of the box this thinking is."

CultureLink is keen to encourage museums to use the expertise of people with sight loss, not just at one-off events but also as volunteers. One such volunteer, Doug, leads group tours around Hereford Cathedral, introducing blind and partially sighted visitors to the

abundant ornate carvings and tactile sensations. After completing the tour, one member of the group told us:

"I taught art for 26 years and lost my sight almost five years ago. It felt like I was losing sustenance for life itself. I've been on a journey for the last few years and learnt a lot about sight. To touch things is always a privilege and touching those ancient chests and the facsimile of the chained books – that's a really lovely way into experiencing the library that you can't access totally through sight.

The CultureLink project has got enormous potential for all visitors. This group comes with a terrific range of expertise with so much to contribute. The initiative is really challenging and I think it's going to produce some very unexpected results. It would be wonderful to think of other places being able to pick up on some of the ideas."

The vast majority of our participants told similar stories. The project has given them the enthusiasm to try new things and an alternative perspective on the world that is of huge benefit to everyone. We asked many questions and received some enlightening answers.

CultureLink has opened many doors to local blind and partially sighted visitors about venues that are literally on their doorstep. Yvonne, one of the blind visitors, shares her thoughts and experiences:

Why is “having a go” so important? What impact does that have on you?

“I like proving that blind people can do everything. And why shouldn’t blind people do everything? It is important to involve blind and partially sighted people because it can become very isolating. You can stop going out and you start to feel very alone. Having a go keeps the brain active. Keeps me out of trouble.”

“People don’t see visual impairment; it is an invisible disability and people honestly don’t know how to treat it. They say, ‘Did you see the TV last night?’ then think ‘Ah, shouldn’t have said that’. I still say, ‘I watched X Factor last night’. Plus, the volunteers are also learning how to deal with people with sight loss. Everything is a learning curve for everybody. We are living in a sighted world, just coping with it our way. So you haven’t to be afraid; we are all doing it our own way.”

What made you think the volunteers were still learning? And was there any way they could have improved how they supported you?

“They told us they were all newbies! We said we had broken in the newbies! They’d had the basic ‘how to’ guide but I just said ‘describe it’ and that is what they were doing. The fact that they were just being themselves, wanting to be there for people like us, was wonderful. I am still learning to be blind and people will always be learning about visual impairment.”

What was good about the events at Bantock House Museum and Bilston Craft gallery?

“I didn’t even know Bantock House existed and I live in Wolverhampton. But the people there were great and I learnt a lot about the property and the life of the family that had lived there previously. We were allowed to handle the old dolls – one was over 200 years old. You imagine how it must have been loved and you start to wonder about the feelings of the child who had the doll. I learnt that dolls were collected back then like they are now, and you wonder how that life was so different to ours.”

“Another day we were allowed to handle kitchen implements. We even did a 40’s day, which I am not old enough to know about but it was great learning about the fashions and about how the war affected people in Wolverhampton.”

What difference does being able to do that make?

“I feel part of the community. When you can’t touch things you feel cut off from normal life. We are normal, we just cannot see! I learnt a lot from the activities and had a lot of fun. It was good being with people who could explain it because it was their field. And they described it in a way we could understand and had fun with it.”

What makes a really good audio description?

“Giving all the information and making it fun as well, not just monotone. When you can tell that someone is really living it and enjoying what they are telling us, you can hear their enjoyment and it is catching. You get more engrossed in it and you take more in.”

What would most motivate you to make more visits to museums?

“Knowing that there is going to be some help there. Getting the information and just being treated as a ‘normal person’ but with that little bit of tweaking of help that is required for looking at exhibits. I am me first and blindness is just a part of me. The person is the big part, not the blindness.”

Finally, is there one story that highlights the impact that getting access to museums would have on you?

“I was at Bilston Gallery going around touching some of the exhibits. One was absolutely fantastic – there were so many textures and feelings and shapes. I stood there for about 15 minutes and each time you went over it you found something different. They said my face was a picture because I was, ‘Ooh, I’ve found something different’, you know? It was brilliant to feel because a sighted person may not have taken in all of that. It was just a discovery.”



Chapter 2 – Doing it differently

CultureLink's prime objective is to open up debate and new possibilities: to share thinking, learning and programming from an alternative perspective. Inclusion is not a luxury, but a catalyst for change that can offer optimum access and innovative ways of working with new audiences. For curators, education staff and museums to create greater access, along with programmes that respond positively to the needs of blind and partially sighted visitors, it is vital they understand the impact of sight loss. Throughout the programme we offered this understanding in a number of ways.

Firstly, we provided visual awareness training to embed the common principles of sight loss. Being partially sighted, and with 20 years experience in this field, the trainer was able to address familiar fears and assumptions through a dialogue of equals and practical exercises. By leading museum staff through an important stage of "learning by doing" and allowing time for feedback and reflection, this training increased the felt knowledge of the impact that intellectual access can have.



The second phase was to back up the training by spending time in creative workshops with blind and partially sighted people. These activities provided a valuable opportunity to hear different perspectives. Many of the participants had been professionals all their lives prior to losing their sight and they had incredible skills and creativity to offer. What CultureLink has shown is that mutual trust promotes openness towards developing solutions together, and it is clear that the workshops gave staff at the venues a far deeper insight than training alone could offer. Repositioning future workshops as a means for venues to reinvigorate their practice would encourage positive engagement all round.

One major success of the CultureLink project was in providing an improved service for a broader range of visitors. Even where there was a will and initiatives were already in place, the project made a significant difference by bringing staff and blind and partially sighted people together to share knowledge and learn from each other. It may sound simplistic but how many of us actually embrace this properly and actively challenge our own assumptions about inclusion?

“Whenever we talk about intellectual access, people automatically assume you mean trivialise. But remember, when we first started doing audio description, one of the curators said, ‘That group were the most intellectually challenging I have ever had’, because people were asking questions and were constantly trying to get to the bottom of what was meant.”

Group interview

And where there was already a will, knowledge and experience, the project still had an impact.

“It has been a stimulus that has made me wake up from my stupor. Before, I had the thoughts, but sometimes you just need a kick up the backside to get going.”

Museum staff

Coventry Transport Museum was initially interested in opening up tactile opportunities but chose instead to develop a photographic activity for their workshop. This may seem an odd decision but what transpired was an opportunity for blind and partially sighted people to gain some key skills in photography, proving that even if you lose your sight you don't have to abandon everything

visual. Historically, artists with sight issues have continued to use visual mediums to develop their work: Impressionists Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh; British painter JMW Turner, who was myopic; Degas, Rembrandt and El Greco to name but a few.

Blind and partially sighted participants were initially sceptical about the relevance of photography but this soon changed. The activity opened up a discourse that generated a deeper level of understanding about the power of images to trigger memories. The workshop's experiential format seemed key in helping museums and galleries engage with their audiences, learn about other perspectives and develop a more informed insight into what they can offer to blind and partially sighted visitors.

"The positive responses from participants made us think in much more detail about what the museum can offer in the future and the different kinds of projects we can undertake to benefit wider audiences, not just blind and partially sighted people. Learning that taking photos can be just as meaningful to someone who is blind or partially sighted as it would be to a sighted person was invaluable."

Naomi Wilcox, Coventry Transport Museum



Recalling what is captured in a photograph is a fantastic insight into opening up what can seem to be just a simple visual record, but is really much more about a continuing opportunity to capture and experience a point in time. And this shared collective process is of benefit to everyone.

“A blind participant explained he would show somebody a photo, they could tell him what they are seeing in that photo and then he can recount all the memories of that moment. For example, he said he had been on holiday recently and there is a photo of him and his partner on a balcony there at the hotel on a Turkish evening. He said how Turkish evenings feel different to British evenings. Recounting that evening made him remember how that feels and he can re-live that experience with the person he is showing the photo to.”

Naomi Wilcox, Coventry Transport Museum

The participant took some high quality photos on his phone at the museum and gave them all titles. When recalling the title he will remember everything he experienced at the time: what he was touching, feeling, hearing and maybe smelling. More importantly, he can have a discussion with a museum professional in which a

whole new world can be explored and understood. The workshop culminated in a show of the participants' images, leaving the museum inspired to think differently and the participants with a new enthusiasm for photography as a creative medium.

“They thought that they could not share photographs with other people and family members anymore but some of the older ladies began to realise that they could; that all these collections of family photos, they could get them out of the attic or back bedroom and maybe enlarge them using computer technology and actually not throw them away. They could engage with their grandchildren in a much more meaningful way, using digital cameras. Things like that were just fantastic because it was in such a short amount of time that their thinking had changed.”

Amy Morgan, CultureLink

Museum staff also believed that blind and partially sighted visitors had a powerful voice. They felt changes were more likely to be made in response to visitor feedback. Putting participants at the centre,

and further positioning this project as an opportunity for museums to develop their services in consultation with blind and partially sighted people might also equip visitors with the skills and motivation to offer constructive feedback to venues.

“The only way things get done is if a visitor makes a complaint and then suddenly it is on the agenda. Once people who don’t work here start raising these points and being a bit vocal about it, that’s when it starts to have a flashing light about it. Believe me, when mobilised, blind and partially sighted people speak as one voice and you do tend to get results.”

Group interview

If we explode the assumption that “collections are for looking at” and delve deeper into the idea that collections are for capturing and sharing cultural and intellectual life, we see some profound impacts. We not only increase access for a wide variety of groups, we increase the relevance of museums and galleries, which in turn re-invigorates and protects our cultural heritage. This ability to access one’s personal heritage and to reconnect with family is profound and must lead to a lessening of social isolation.

“One lady did say that she’d put a camera on her Christmas list now. And to see to how delighted she was, saying she did not want the day to end, and that she could carry on around the museum for another couple of hours was the absolute highlight of my day.”

Naomi Wilcox, Coventry Transport Museum





Photo: Peter
and Michael: The George Smith Award

Chapter 3 – Case study: Hereford Museum and Art Gallery

As well as raising awareness of accessibility issues, the project with Hereford Museum and Art Gallery presented a unique opportunity to experiment with modern technology by designing a mobile phone application to enhance the museum and gallery experience for blind and partially sighted visitors. The “TWENTY” exhibition, part of the 2010 Hereford Photography Festival, was chosen as the focus of the project.

Here, Katherine Andrew, Principal Heritage Officer at the Museum Resource and Learning Centre outlines the project and its outcomes and gives us her perspective.

“The CultureLink project offered the chance to update our skills, train a wider group of staff and volunteers and extend the understanding of blind and partially sighted visitors’ interpretation to exhibitors working with us on temporary exhibitions. This opportunity allowed us to really innovate, experiment and get our message about inclusiveness and access to a wider audience.”

Project

1. Working with Field of Vision, a local media consultancy, to create a mobile phone App linked to the “TWENTY” exhibition.

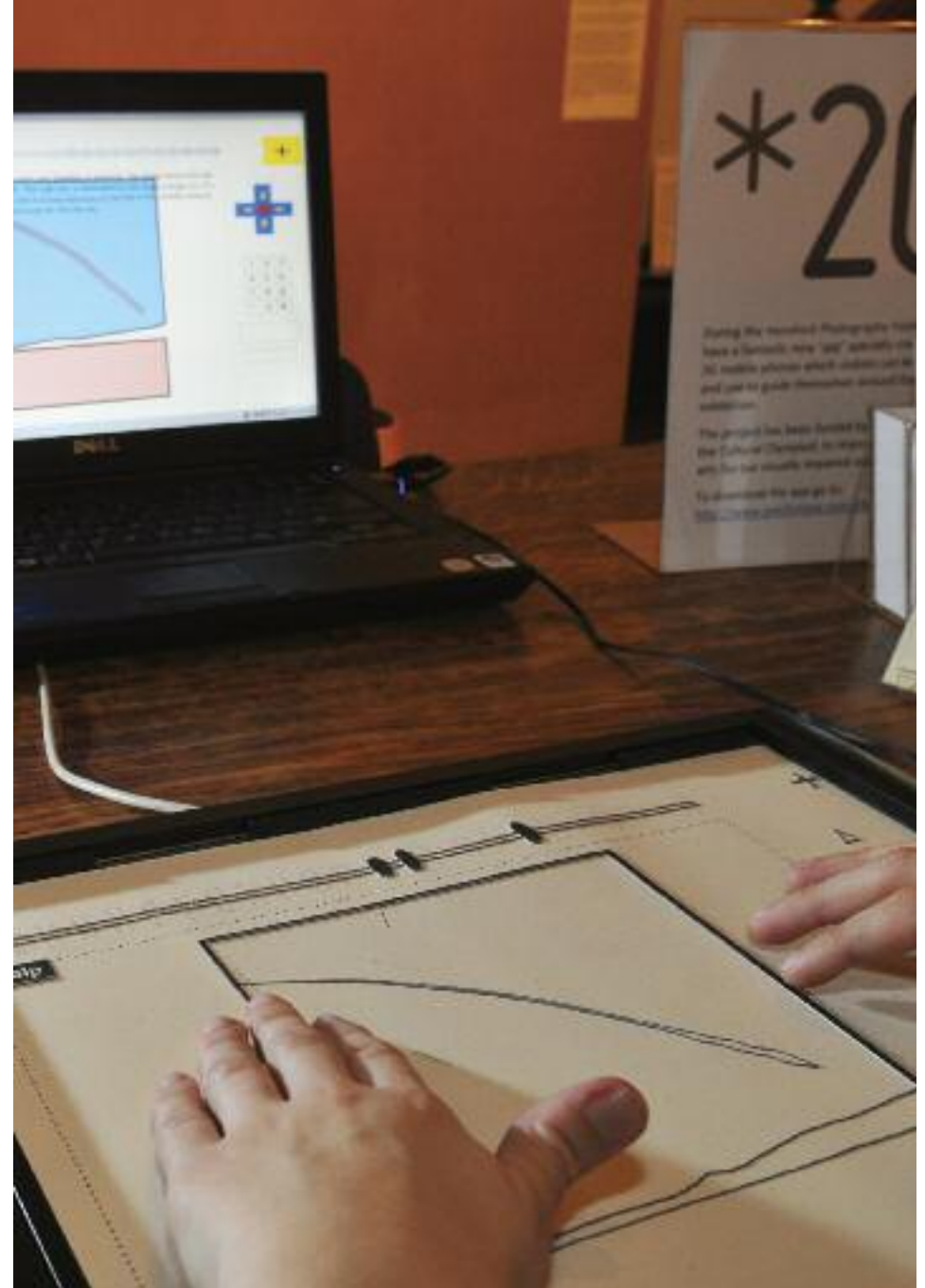
In terms of timescale, creating the App was the most challenging element of the project. The basic concept was to provide an audio guide with images, but it needed a navigation system straightforward enough to allow a blind or partially sighted person to move through a variety of screens with ease. Despite initial misgivings, testing with non-specific content showed that three simple buttons (forwards, backwards and home) worked most effectively and convinced us that the design was worth pursuing.

The next step was to develop the content and create audio descriptions. These were recorded and edited by museum staff, converted into MP3 files and linked to images from the catalogue provided by the Photography festival. Once the exhibition was hung, the content of the App could then be arranged in order.

2. Training in programming a T3 and creating tactile images.

A T3 (talking tactile tablet) is a touch-sensitive, multi-sensory device. Using swell paper to create 3D surface overlays, the T3 provides audio feedback when the overlays are pressed. Blind and partially sighted people can use the device to interpret visual data, such as diagrams, charts and maps. Audio zones can have up to 10 layers of audio per image, making a huge amount of information accessible through touch and sound.

The T3 was developed at the Royal National College for the Blind in Hereford in conjunction with a US software company and in 2005 Hereford Museum and Art Gallery became the first in the UK to invest in the technology. However, due to staff turnover, we have lost the capacity to create tactile images and this training offered a wonderful opportunity to reacquaint ourselves with that technology.



3. Interpretive skills training for museum and Hereford Photography Festival staff and volunteers.

Training was provided by RNIB using the h.Art Open Exhibition at our gallery as a starting point. Working in pairs, we covered the varied nature and types of sight loss before moving on to audio descriptions. We then created original descriptions for five of the images in the exhibition catalogue.

4. Field testing the App, audio descriptions, the T3 overlays and guiding skills, followed by time spent with collections in store.

The final session of the project involved a workshop tour of the Museum Resource and Learning Centre. This centre houses the 100,000-strong reserve collections and was designed to provide easy public access to stored collections.

Standard procedure for tours is to have groups comprising ten visitors and two collections of staff following a standard route through the four largest stores. We normally ask groups about areas of special interest so we can make a point of looking at related objects. Tours generally last between one and two hours.

For this visit, the ratio of staff to visitors was one-to-one and visitors were issued with surgical gloves so that touching was possible.

Outcomes

Our developers encountered some technical hitches with the App technology, which limited us to Apple products rather than a wider range of 3G devices. Indeed, it may be better for us to offer exhibition guides as downloadable MP3 files from our website, although this project did give us the freedom to try something that we simply would not otherwise have had the money to do. Nevertheless, the experience was invaluable in proving that with a range of interpretative assistance and technology, it is more than possible for blind and partially sighted people to enjoy a photography exhibition. Although staff are used to writing interpretative material, converting it into audio description necessitated some re-thinking and refining of techniques, but ultimately the results were very well received.

We also received very positive feedback from our T3 testers. Visitors were able to explore the interpretations independently and at their own pace – something that

blind and partially sighted people rarely have the chance to do. It was a big confidence booster and the response confirms the importance of our continued investment in this technology.

Thanks to the interpretive training, staff now have a greater understanding of all forms of sight loss. The process taught them about creating spatial awareness from audio clues and gave them significantly more confidence in describing and guiding blind and partially sighted visitors around our sites. So much so that we have now taken on a six-month commitment to host a blind person as a Positive Action Trainee within our service.

Much of the experience for our blind and partially sighted visitors was filled with the varying sounds, smells and feel of the storage areas. Two are very large spaces with ceilings about 5m high, filled with metal racking. In contrast, the natural history store is much more compact with a strong smell of mothballs. Over a two-hour period, visitors were guided through the different collections and allowed to handle material. Some even climbed up into an open Victoria carriage that had been in use until the mid-1960s by a Hereford GP for his rounds.

Items as diverse as a Bully Beef tin opener and a lion skull were enthusiastically received, and while experiences differed between those who had had some sight and others who had very little, visitors enjoyed enhanced sensations of smell, sound and atmosphere that we were also delighted to rediscover. Facilitating this form of access required good description skills on the part of the museum staff, confidence to pick out suitable items to handle, a willingness to allow access and careful guidance on how to handle items. Access on this level would not have been possible in our previous stores and it was a joy to see it being delivered effectively.

Staff and volunteers from across our service, from the Photography Festival and the wider Cultural Services team who were involved in this project very much enjoyed working together with staff and students from RNIB and RNC. The Hereford Photography Festival team are keen to work with us in this area next year and we will seek in future to ensure that interpretation is on offer in all types of exhibitions.

Katherine Andrew FMA PACR

Conclusion

What is required is balance. It was clear from some of the activity days during the CultureLink project that curators were being forced to question their instincts. During one handling session, participants began touching some particularly fragile items. Torn between preservation and equal opportunities, the curator had given the matter some thought and swayed towards allowing access. Yet immediately, her principles and responsibilities were challenged and a look of concern appeared on her face.

Given these items had never been handled by the general public, it was a rare and unforgettable moment for these participants, if a somewhat nerve-wracking one for the curator. While it is great to have layers of access for everyone, audio and verbal descriptions of an item, tactile models and maybe handling a separate piece of material used in its production could all add to the experience without jeopardising the integrity of the piece. Tate Modern has created replica sections of paintings to give blind and partially sighted people access to the artists' techniques and the feel of canvas and paint.

CultureLink aims to improve access for blind and partially sighted people but we are realistic and understand that

some exhibits and collections are delicate and their preservation is paramount. Still, it is crucial that collections are not hidden away and that their history, story and significance leave a lasting legacy and energise discussions and understanding in the present. What we suggest is that curators and museum staff think about access in a more holistic and creative way using new technology and new methods of engagement. Collections should be opened up, but opened up with caution as we all wish for these precious pieces to be available to everyone for many years to come. One of our participants was very excited about the idea of using haptic technology to gain more tactile access. This seems a very interesting way forward as delicate and historic artefacts could potentially be touched virtually by everyone.

“It would be unfair and unrealistic of us to tell museum curators that the way forward is to allow complete access for all to their collections. We respect that for preservation purposes certain materials, objects and exhibits cannot and should not be overly handled. All the blind and partially sighted participants on the CultureLink project understood and respected this.”

Amy Morgan, CultureLink



Chapter 4 – Seeing more

One of the most positive features of the CultureLink programme has been the opportunity to broaden everyone's thinking, fire up discussion and gain an insight into how we can all work towards a more inclusive offer.

Workshops and tours that provide physical contact with works of art, audio descriptions of paintings and a more involved experience of the buildings themselves can be incredible catalysts for conversation and intrigue. In our everyday lives we often overlook the positive effects of spending time understanding the lives of others. Yet, the chance to reflect through seemingly simple activities allows us also to learn about and understand ourselves.

Seeing goes far beyond mere observation: it can offer a much deeper and more fundamental approach to understanding. With the support of everyone involved, from the seven museums and galleries to all of the participants, CultureLink has shown that inclusion can be offered on many levels and this is paramount to keeping the nation's collections alive, relevant and fascinating.

In this chapter we hear from one of our participants, who taught art for 26 years but lost her sight five years ago. Marian is passionate about retaining access to museums and galleries for all visitors.

“Four blind and partially sighted visitors spent a day at the Barber Institute of Fine Art, Birmingham University in the company of three volunteer guides, one of them also partially sighted. A short explanation accompanying the exploration of a selection of objects literally opened our eyes to seeing more.

We spent time looking closely at an ancient Persian limestone fragment of a spear bearer. With magnifiers we noticed the fine craftsmanship; the delight in pattern, stylized coils for the beard and hair, a small earring, the almond shaped eye and long delicate fingers. An animated terracotta bust conveyed the complex inner life of the poet Alexander Pope and hinted at his struggle with failing health, while a neo-classical sculpture of a

‘society beauty’ – her eyes lowered and her expression demure as she fingered the fabric at her breast – was linked to stories about her life. A sighted guide pointed out some tiny repetitive dots indicating a woven pattern barely visible to the human eye, causing one visitor to remark how it ‘beautifully evoked the transparency of fine muslin fabric’.

‘At first you look and it’s a blur and then with an explanation you see much more’, said one visitor. Another agreed, ‘Points of interest were only really noticed when a detailed explanation was given’. Much of the difficulty and frustration experienced with sight loss can be overcome and we gain impetus and enthusiasm from each other.

From sculptures of the 18th and 19th centuries, including work by Auguste Rodin and Edgar Degas, we went much further back in time to Middle Kingdom Egypt and the exhibition ‘Sacred and Profane’. Small-scale objects would challenge even those with good sight and one partially sighted visitor said it would not have been any good without discussion. Another said it brought to life objects that she could barely see.



Enlarged reproductions made visible the subject of a faience pectoral and a raised line drawing exposed the naturalistic details of a funerary boat with its oars and rowlock. Objects seemed less mystifying as we realised the sculptures invariably stood in for the thing itself.

Two visitors were enchanted by the brilliant blue faience chalices and the stylish designs inspired by the lotus flower opening at dawn each day. We talked about the ancient ceramic material which preceded glazed ceramics by thousands of years and we looked at a cosmetic spoon depicting a musician playing in the papyrus reeds – a popular genre in Egyptian Art, symbolising what was referred to as ‘making oneself a happy day’. Raised line drawings made it easier to grasp details difficult for the naked eye to see and the purpose and function of each object became clearer.

The museum experience is something none of us wants to give up. Objects don’t move in a museum; if you can get close up with the aid of magnifier, audio-guide, or sighted companion you can come close to appreciating things as sighted people do. Galleries are actually more sympathetic

environments for blind and partially sighted people than much of the outside world and they offer a condensed experience – one that enriches and inspires.

Looking requires enormous effort now and much is simply not feasible. But the insights that are gained are invigorating and sustaining. One visitor with severe sight loss on his first visit to a gallery put it perfectly; ‘Museums are places for the imagination’.”

Marian Edwards, 2011





Chapter 5 – Shaping the future

“If you don’t allow people access to your collections, your museum will die.”

Collections Officer, Participating Museum

After receiving training in sight loss awareness, guiding, audio description and tactile image making by the RNIB trainers, museum and gallery staff, with the support of trained RNIB volunteers, led tailored interactive activities. Participants provided feedback which gave rise to far reaching outcomes that would not have been possible without this project. Improving cultural participation for blind and partially sighted people in the region also enabled participating museums to improve their services overall. One member of museum staff said that along with noticing a marked increase in bookings, the project had given her a fresh perspective on how many other groups’ needs might be met by initiatives designed for blind and partially sighted participants.

“The photography workshop won’t remain as something just for blind and partially sighted people – that was a really great starting point but I think we would be able to extend it to other

groups. We have a lot of older visitors on coach tours and I don’t think we do anything specific for them. There is nothing on offer.”

Museum staff

In some museums, excitement generated by these initiatives has spread to different departments, leading to the set-up of a museum-wide Access Group, further increasing sustainability and decreasing the barriers experienced by people with sight loss. But not all of these barriers exist on the part of the museums. Some of them relate to blind and partially sighted people’s perceptions of museums.

“There is a whole psychological kind of barrier that partially sighted people tend to have that it [the museum] is not for them, and I suppose I am hoping that we can overcome that. I think to some extent we have started and now we can build on that initial thrust and take it forwards.”

Museum staff

The CultureLink project has shown that existing museum and gallery staff already possess the necessary skills to

improve access. This is particularly encouraging as it suggests that not only can increased access be achieved using existing resources, it also has the added benefit of developing the professional integrity of the staff. When questioned, museum staff chose further training as the resource most likely to improve their venue.

“The highest point for us has been the impact that the participants have had on my staff. They’ve come away with so much more confidence and have really enjoyed it. One particular person, she has just blossomed and wants to do more. She wants to work in Outreach now, which is brilliant.”

Museum Outreach Officer

The guided tours and activities seem to have had the strongest impacts, particularly for those blind and partially sighted participants who had made no other museum visits that year: 58 per cent reported that the activity “made them feel part of something”.

“For partially sighted or blind people it’s a real boost to discover that there are more opportunities out there. Maybe you have closed some of those opportunities down because you’ve been protecting yourself from the fear of failure or the

fear of not being able to do something because it seemed inaccessible. But actually, when you go on a programme like this and you meet other partially sighted people, blind people, curators and others dedicated to giving you access to all the stuff you’re really interested in, it has a phenomenal impact – more than you realise.”

Zoë Partington-Sollinger, CultureLink

Disability awareness training

Promoting the work of blind and partially sighted artists and consultants by recruiting them to deliver workshops and bespoke training is important in providing employment and professional development. In addition, their presence in the museums, coupled with their non-judgmental attitude, will further lessen the fear that surrounds disability awareness training: the fear of saying the wrong thing, the fear of being branded as “bad” as opposed to “lacking in knowledge”. One museum has already set up a training post for a blind participant and significantly, 25 per cent of the staff reported their biggest area of learning as “awareness of the challenges, issues and needs of blind and partially sighted people”.

Where museums were already engaged in access initiatives, it's important that galleries keep up-to-date and continually update themselves about new approaches otherwise real contemporary change is unlikely. Sometimes people do not fully grasp the difference between intellectual and physical access, and also make assumptions about who should take responsibility for providing access.

"We had an inclusion and access officer say, 'Oh well, artists are very difficult and they wouldn't change things for us'. They'd already decided it was not worth having that conversation with the artist and flagged it up as an organisational policy. That's blocked thinking. There is a barrier there that actually might not exist – it's just a perception."

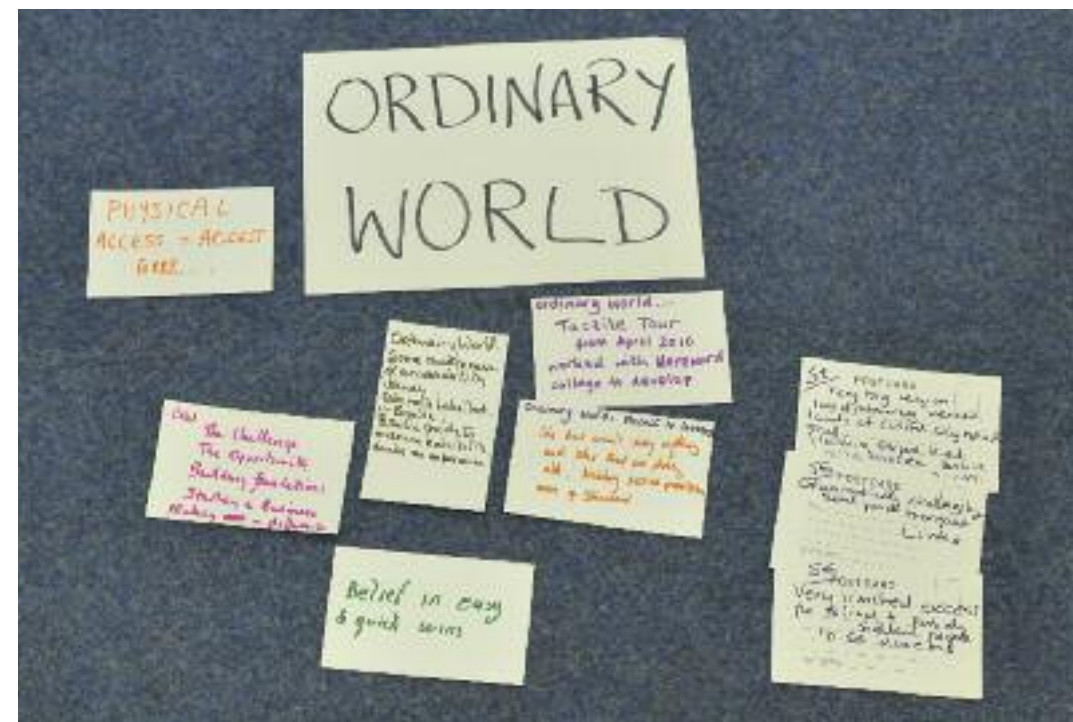
Zoë Partington-Sollinger, CultureLink

Throughout the programme, nearly all of the interviewees, both blind and sighted, agreed that people often avoid contact with blind and partially sighted people either because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing or because they make negative assumptions about what it means to be blind. Even where museum staff are well-meaning or officially positioned to increase

access, these fears and assumptions form an impenetrable barrier, leaving the blind or partially sighted person isolated.

"People don't want to communicate with blind people. Honestly, the answer you get back to 'why didn't you say something to them?' is 'I didn't know what to say'. Well, actually, they have lost their eyes: not their ears, not their brain."

Participant



CultureLink has been extremely successful in removing this fear, partly by providing knowledge and partly by positioning blind and partially sighted people at the centre. Training and the provision of information allowed volunteers and museum staff to be more confident that they wouldn't say the wrong thing. Informal feedback sessions put the emphasis on learning and allowed museum staff to explore their fears and assumptions. They were left much freer to engage with blind and partially sighted participants, enabling positive change to take place quickly and cheaply.

The combination of providing knowledge, replacing negative experiences with positive ones, bringing blind and partially sighted people and museum staff together with the mutual goal of improving access, and enabling both parties to gain a more accurate view of one another's reality, has been extremely powerful and should be used as a model for future rollouts. Prolonged contact with reality is often instrumental in the dismantling of negative assumptions.

"There is no substitute for rolling your sleeves up and getting on with it. That is where you learn stuff."

RNIB Volunteer

How to increase access

Increasing access benefits all visitors and can revitalise collections. Revitalised collections protect our heritage during difficult economic times when locating access initiatives elsewhere would leave them vulnerable to cuts and render sustainable change unlikely.

"Do it on the same level as the next big show. It can't be badged as something that is purely about access or purely about communities because immediately people will shut down and put it in a pigeon hole, 'Well, I'm curatorial, so that's my job, and you're communities so that's your job'. It must be badged as something they need to know about."

Group interview

From a marketing perspective, blind and partially sighted visitors need just as much consideration as other visitors, but powerful word-of-mouth networks do exist. New media such as Twitter and Facebook are extremely accessible and should be included in any marketing campaign. Above all, working directly with blind and partially sighted people and involving them in feedback

sessions has been key to the project in many ways, such as:

- motivating volunteers and blind and partially sighted participants
- addressing fears and negative assumptions
- supporting real learning and changed behaviour through “learning by doing”, feedback and reflection
- increasing the felt knowledge of the impact of intellectual access.

Sustainability is a much larger question but the CultureLink workshops have been powerful in their ability to capture hearts and minds. Participating venues are planning future events and have made significant changes to wider aspects of their practice. Many are collaborating to share resources and have even set up access groups.

“If they [museums] were completely independently accessible from the front door until you are ready to leave, it would mean I could just drop into a museum if I had a free afternoon – Go in, by myself, and come out again an hour later, walk home and just be able to reflect.”





Chapter 6 – Volunteering

Recruitment and management of volunteers

Volunteers can increase the impact and value for money of a service. They are an invaluable resource to RNIB that enables services to extend beyond their normal reach and meet the needs of customers where it would be otherwise impossible.

CultureLink is centred on the “buddy” principle, with one-to-one volunteer support forming the backbone of the project. Beyond specific tasks, volunteers also act in the wider community as advocates for the needs of blind and partially sighted people. The CultureLink project officer was responsible for recruiting volunteers using the most appropriate methods and potential sources, while RNIB volunteering services provided a link to their volunteers.

Ideas for recruiting and managing volunteers

The project adopted a layered approach to recruiting. This involved using a combination of general and

targeted recruitment, recruiting through relevant intermediaries and assistance from other partners such as local societies for blind people. Further recruits came from similar projects across the UK, along with existing museum and gallery volunteers. By following these key criteria, it is possible to draw upon a great range of expertise:

- Recruit volunteers who have some interest or experience in cultural activities.
- Consider the requirements of the role and identify sources of possible volunteers who can be matched with blind and partially sighted partners.
- Carry out a general recruitment campaign annually, such as leaflet distribution, posters, radio and newspaper advertising and presentations to local groups and voluntary organisations.
- Ensure in advance of the project start date that you have detailed application forms. Provide guidelines for the role of the volunteer, along with practical issues, such as training, expenses and CRB checks.

- Adopt a flexible, informal attitude to the interview process, as it can seem daunting to prospective volunteers.
- The volunteer induction should include general information on the scheme and on sight loss issues. It should also cover supervision arrangements, confidentiality, equal opportunities, health and safety issues and disciplinary, grievance and complaint procedures.
- Training sessions should give a clear understanding of what a volunteer has been recruited to do, together with the boundaries to which both parties should adhere. An information pack can be distributed to volunteers explaining the types of inclusive arts approaches that will help them understand the needs of blind and partially sighted people.
- Adopt a system of recognition to thank volunteers for their contribution and show that their efforts are valued.

In Focus – CultureLink Volunteer

Alistair volunteered at several events during the CultureLink programme, including Hereford Cathedral, Bantock House in Wolverhampton and Birmingham's Pen Room. Here he shares his thoughts and experiences of the project.

How do you normally receive information about volunteering opportunities?

"Typically I have done it online. This is my first time volunteering so it was my first port of call and from there I was referred to RNIB through the Community Council of Shropshire."

Why is volunteering important to you?

"What's important now is having something meaningful to fill my time. I spoke to a couple of friends in public health and they confirmed that RNIB was a good charity, involved in research as well as helping those with a need. So a combination of factors confirmed that RNIB was an organisation I wanted to get involved with."

And why choose the CultureLink project specifically?

“It was suggested to me as a volunteering opportunity in the West Midlands, and it’s an unusual project, quite challenging to start with, so I thought ‘Why not?’”

What outcomes do you think the CultureLink project will have?

“Short term I think it’s a two-way thing. Participating museums get a little more clued up on what’s required and blind and partially sighted people don’t feel excluded from those places. Longer term, and probably more important, is raising awareness amongst the community of museums and cultural places.”

What has been good about the project?

“Personally, my first contact with working with the RNIB was a positive one. Also, fundraising is all well and good but you need to understand what it is actually like for blind and partially sighted people. There are different experiences; some people are blind from birth and some are only recently blind. Some can see light and dark and not

much else. So practically, it was a good entry point into RNIB. Seeing how people connect to their emotions through art or their surroundings was a real eye opener.”

What kind of impact did you see it having?

“Seeing people connect with the pieces or the sculpture they were touching and finding out more about the story behind it; observing that was quite a positive experience. On the other side, seeing museum staff getting input on how to design their museums – for me, that was people’s perspectives being opened up a little bit.”

What do you feel that you have learnt?

“It boils down to how to deal with blind and partially sighted people, how to communicate, how to deal with things sensitively but also meaningfully, so you are giving them the right level of support. It was quite a challenge because you have to look at some fairly abstract things, particularly in art galleries, and try to describe them to somebody who cannot see. That in itself makes you appreciate the art in a different way. You go back

to square one. You come to re-appreciate what you're looking at."

In terms of people connecting with art, is there anything that stood out?

"At the Hereford museum we all sat down and talked. People were saying what they could see, what they couldn't see. Just getting that insight really made a big impact. It gave it more meaning because people were disclosing stuff that you would not ordinarily get if you were asked to guide them."

What kind of things were they disclosing?

"There was a girl who had been blind from birth so she had no sense of colour or form. And she was trying to explain a heart in pure emotional terms. So where I would say it's two little pear shaped objects put together, she said it means comfort, love, security; that's how she sees her heart. It creates a picture purely by emotion. It changed my view of things."

And in terms of accessing museums, what lessons for the future do you think we can learn?

"I think the staff at the museums have a duty to take the legacy forward. But where the volunteers fit in would be in terms of feedback. Keep us informed. I guess we have all, to a greater or less extent, played a part in it and it would be nice to see where it ends up."

Do you have any plans to volunteer in museums and galleries again?

"I would do CultureLink again because it's RNIB but I am going to be on the move so it does not make much sense for me to commit to a museum or art gallery. I chose RNIB because I want to be involved with and help blind and partially sighted people. If I wanted to volunteer for a museum I would go to that organisation."

What is it about the CultureLink Project that makes you keen to do it again?

"Well, it was quite well organised. And it was intellectually challenging at times. I am not belittling any other forms of voluntary work, which

are absolutely as essential. The boring stuff is just as essential as the non-boring stuff. But this is one of the easier ones to volunteer for. And if you want to develop your appreciation for history or art or whatever, I really think this is a pretty plum opportunity."

Would you be interested in making further visits with the person you supported?

"Yes, I would. With one-off visits you don't develop a relationship to the same extent."

What do you think it takes for those kinds of relationships to develop?

"I think you kind of need to organise it on a more personal basis rather than on a venue basis because at every museum I went to there was a different set of people."

How is volunteering on the Culture Link project different to volunteering you have done elsewhere?

"I think the more specific you get in a voluntary position the more meaningful it is. You can have a deeper experience because it's a very personal

project. The way you perceive art is very personal and you're trying to get an understanding going between the blind person and the piece of art. If you want them to connect, you have to let them in to what you're feeling about what you're seeing – things you would not ordinarily tell somebody you've never met before."

What impact does that have on you or on the blind or partially sighted person?

"It depends if they like what you're seeing. It could really form a bond quicker than if they were doing more routine tasks. So your guider becomes maybe more than someone who just leads you around the place. It's part of a shared experience and a shared emotion, whereas walking them up and down the stairs or taking them over the road is functional."

Anything else you want to add?

"Amy did a good job. She is very easy to approach. You can ask stupid questions and you don't feel stupid because she understands someone who has never guided before and helps you into the task very easily."



Chapter 7 – Marketing to blind and partially sighted people

“I think some venues have realised that blind and partially sighted people are not necessarily going to just turn up at your door. You have to work really hard to identify where those people are, how you get information to them and how you make them feel welcome.”

Zoë Partington-Sollinger, CultureLink

Blind and partially sighted visitors, participants, employees and volunteers need to be recruited and marketed to just as vigorously as others. Marketing takes time and resources, and not all approaches will work for all venues. However, consistent commitment has been shown to result in regular audiences at events, excellent links with local societies and other community groups, and increased visitor numbers. A well-planned and imaginative approach will ensure that everyone, visitors and staff alike, will reap benefits.

Before even thinking about strategies it is useful to reflect on why people visit a venue. Motivations can range from a spontaneous visit during a day out to a more specific interest in the building or event. It is also

important to understand the reason why people choose not to visit a venue. Anything from a general lack of interest to a feeling that the venue has nothing to offer somebody with sight loss will impact on the decision.

Information does not reach people with sight loss easily. It takes time, hard work and a very pro-active approach to develop strong relationships. All our participants said that they would consider making a visit more often if they were made aware that a venue had facilities such as audio guides, specialist talks or objects they could touch.

Marketing and promoting your services to people before a visit

Most blind and partially sighted visitors will appreciate access to information in advance. Local contacts are invaluable; a good place to start is by establishing links with local societies for blind and partially sighted people, self-help groups and social workers for people with sight loss. Consider also local radio stations and talking newspapers.

Some venues are developing pre-visit packs aimed at blind and partially sighted people. These may contain information in braille, large print or audio format. Some pre-visit packs, such as those for Ely Cathedral in Cambridgeshire, are available to borrow from RNIB's National Library Service and local societies, as well as from the venue itself.

For those blind and partially sighted people who may be interested in your services but will not use any of the networks mentioned above, there are other creative avenues to explore. It was suggested at one of the CultureLink sharing days that museums and galleries take full advantage of modern social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook to attract the younger generation to museums and galleries.

"I took part in the CultureLink Project in 2010. I attended the event at Coventry Transport Museum because I am interested in photography as a blind person. The event turned out to be superb; very eye opening, pun intended, to see how many sighted people were prepared to listen and take onboard points of view and ideas from the blind people at the event.

I was, however, by far the youngest person there. I see myself as part of a younger generation of gadget-lovers; I take photos with an 8MP camera on a mobile phone with software installed that makes the phone talk to me. Everyone else relied on cameras that were handed out by the museum. I suggest that museums and galleries look towards modern technologies to make their services more accessible.

I'm talking of Twitter first of all. This allows quick, pointed messages of no more than 140 characters to be sent out. These appear on that person or organisation's Twitter page. Businesses worldwide use it for marketing, publicity and promotional chat messages.

Millions of people have accounts and you can follow anyone if their tweets are open to the public. Alongside other social networks like Facebook and MSN Live, it's an essential part of anyone's day-to-day running of an organisation or event.

Younger people love things to be short and sweet and to the point – Twitter is perfect. It's easy to

use and accessible with specialist software like Jaws for Windows, Talks and many more. Messages and promos can reach thousands of people in seconds.

I have already seen Coventry Transport Museum take these comments onboard and they're now a regular Tweeter. I follow and get lots of info on upcoming events, competitions and more. I highly recommend that others follow their example and use Twitter, Facebook and social networking to attract the younger, and some older, generations to their doors."

Gavin Griffiths, CultureLink Participant

Blind and partially sighted people often receive information from sighted family and friends. Mentioning the services you offer for people with sight loss in all your visitor information will help raise awareness of the ways in which blind and partially sighted people access leisure activities. Advertising in specialist press and publications, such as RNIB's Vision or NB magazines is also worth considering.

The most time and expense will be spent securing a first visit to your venue. Once that first visit is secured, it is

then important to build a mailing list. With the individuals' permission, a telephone or email database can serve as a quick and effective marketing tool for keeping previous visitors informed about forthcoming events and exhibitions. In theatre it has proved to be a very welcome way of letting people know about audio described productions.

→ **Further information:**

Arts Council England has commissioned "Marketing and Disabled Audiences: A Guide for the Arts". From their website you can find this and many other useful publications – www.artscouncil.org.uk

There are over 500 talking newspaper groups throughout the UK. For information on your local talking newspaper contact National Talking Newspapers and Magazines on 01435 866102 or email info@tnauk.org.uk

Marketing and promoting your services to visitors at the venue

Marketing is also about letting people know what is on offer when they get to the venue. Several participants involved in the research recalled situations in which staff were unaware of services offered to blind and partially

sighted people. Some had been told no services existed, even though that was not the case.

“An important thing is that when an organisation has produced an accessible audio guide they should tell their staff. They need to communicate this information so that whoever you get when you ring up that day will know.”

Participant

All members of staff need to be regularly updated on services and projects provided for blind and partially sighted visitors. A checklist of all services should be displayed in reception and at all points where staff members answer the phone. Prominently featuring the internationally recognised shaded eye symbol in your publicity and at reception will alert visitors to the availability of services for blind and partially sighted people. This symbol for visual impairment, developed by the Partially Sighted Society, will also be helpful to visitors who have a sight problem but who do not consider themselves blind or partially sighted.

→ Further information:

To obtain a Shaded Eye symbol, or for any other related queries, see the Partially Sighted Society on page 78.



Developing an access guide

Many cultural venues are now developing access guides that contain information on services for disabled people; some specifically for blind and partially sighted visitors. Such guides should contain the following information:

- Practical information: address, opening times, concessionary rates, your welcome to guide dogs.
- A general description of the building.
- Brief details about collections and events.
- Information about the assistance that can be provided and how much advance notice is required.
- Places where visitors can obtain information and guides in alternative formats. Mention also if this information can be borrowed in advance and taken away or purchased afterwards.
- Any other services available to blind and partially sighted people: for example, touch tours or collections, accessible ICT equipment.
- Details about audio guides; include those for the general public (which may be enjoyed by many people

with sight problems) and those specifically developed for blind and partially sighted people. Mention cost if applicable.

- Details of any events that are specially targeted at people with sight problems.
- Telephone numbers of specific departments, members of staff, useful organisations or numbers for booking exhibitions and restaurants.
- A contact name and number to call for more information if required.

In addition, detailed travel information is essential. This should include:

- Nearest train, underground or tram station.
- Which number buses to take and where they stop.
- How to get to the venue from the bus, train, underground or tram station.
- Car parking facilities and their cost, including which coins may be needed.
- Concessions available to blue badge holders.

Writing

Equipment



- What to tell the driver if coming by taxi.
- The approximate cost of a taxi from the station.
- Travel information telephone numbers.

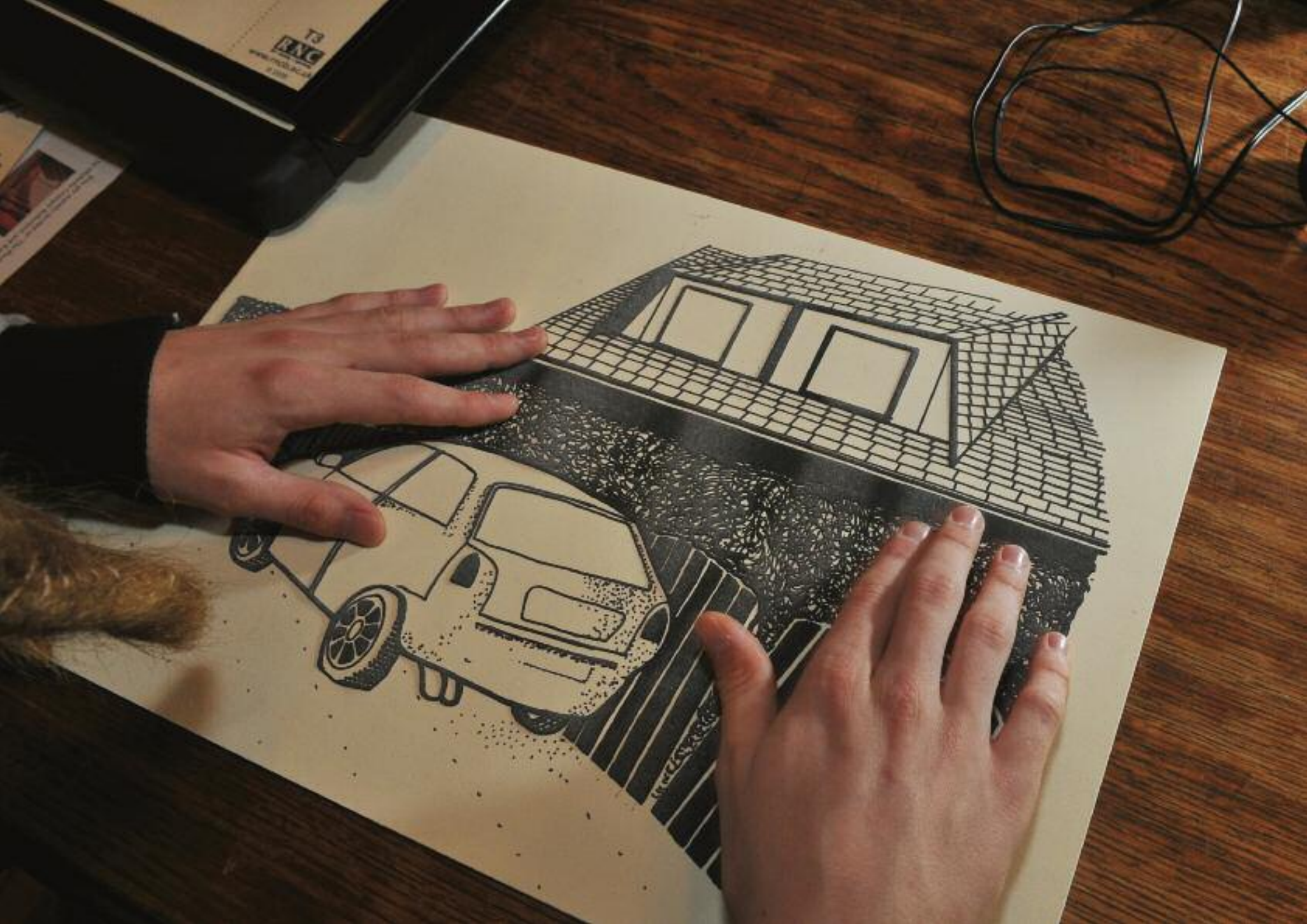
When producing an access guide, consultation with visitors with sight loss is vital. Find out about their experiences of travelling to your venue. If you are suggesting a walking route from a station to your venue, try it out in advance with someone who has a sight problem to make sure you are providing all the information they need. Produce your guide in accessible formats and ensure it is widely publicised. Distribute copies to local societies for blind and partially sighted people and make it available at the venue, local libraries and tourist information centres. It should also be available online and advertised in all visitor information.

Finally, consideration should be given at the outset to how your guide can be updated simply and effectively, so that it continues to be a valuable tool.

In summary

In order to effectively promote services and events:

- Consider why people do and don't attend your venue and develop a creative marketing plan.
- Develop links with local contacts, local radio, talking newspaper services and specialist national publications.
- Use Twitter, Facebook, MSN and other digital platforms.
- Ensure services are promoted to visitors at your venue.
- Consider developing an access guide or user group to gather relevant feedback.



Chapter 8 – Accessible information

“Literature, ranging from advertising leaflets to websites, is not always available to blind and partially sighted people. My sight loss means it can be very frustrating visiting exhibitions with my children. They are both sighted and I’m not always able to assist them and explain things. I tend to find interactive displays quite difficult.”

Alison, Museum visitor and mother

Adopting an accessible information policy and plan

For blind and partially sighted visitors, information must be accessible through mediums such as interactive displays, touch screens, display text, captions and guidebooks. Consider how someone with a sight issue will access information at every stage of a visit, from reading a leaflet or planning a visit online to taking literature home. Key to developing a successful accessible information policy is consultation with local blind and partially sighted people. Their involvement should also form part of any house style policy. Information should be produced in a range of formats of

equivalent quality that are available at the same price. And it is important to plan the production of all formats at the same time as planning standard print information.

Once you have your range of formats, customers need to be made aware of its availability. Many blind and partially sighted people have low expectations of getting information in a way they can read, so they don’t ask for it. This is often misinterpreted by organisations as lack of demand. A clear, large print statement displayed in reception about the availability of large print, audio or braille can make your venue a more welcoming place. Customers contacting a venue prior to attending an event, workshop or conference should also be made aware of accessible formats. Time should be allowed to have it transcribed into all the formats your participants and visitors require. It may be that you can distribute information electronically in advance of the day at very little cost.

People often like to take home a guide or other information. Copies of your audio guide, the script of the guide, or copies of raised images could be made

available at the end of a visit. Many museums and galleries include podcasts and other contemporary media in their formats.

It must be remembered that many people with sight loss use different forms of information in different situations. For example, it should not be assumed that if prior to their visit, someone requests information to be prepared in braille or audio file, that they would want information in the same format during the visit. It's important to check with blind and partially sighted people before they visit to confirm their format preferences.

Facts:

- Around two million people in the UK are unable to read standard print with ease.
- 75 per cent of partially sighted people can read large print.
- 36 per cent of blind people can read large print.
- There are around 20,000 fluent braille readers in the UK and many more people able to use braille labelling and signage.
- 24 per cent of blind people use audio information.

Forms of accessible information

Standard print

When compared with how much is spent on standard print information, making information accessible is often cheaper and easier than people think.

RNIB's See it Right guide gives publishers and designers clear print guidelines to help make their information accessible to as many people as possible. For example:

- Use a minimum 14 point font size.
- Ensure there is a strong contrast between text and background colour (black on white and black on yellow are among the strongest contrasts but there are a range of options).
- Don't run text over pictures or diagrams.
- Use paper that minimises show through and glare.

Adopting these guidelines can be done immediately and at virtually no cost. Producing all your visitor and collection information using clear print guidelines and a 14 point font immediately maximises the number of people who can access it.

→ Further information:

The See it Right guide contains guidelines, tips and advice on producing information in a wide range of formats. It can be purchased from RNIB's Online shop rnib.org.uk/shop. Alternatively call RNIB on 0303 123 9999 or email helpline@rnib.org.uk

Large print

Large print is considered to be anything in a 16 point font or above. Using a 16 point font allows many more people to access your information, including older people who don't necessarily see themselves as partially sighted. Large print users will each have unique requirements in terms of text size, making it impossible to produce information in one size that will satisfy everyone. One simple solution is to produce an electronic text file with adjustable font size, which can then be printed instantly for the customer. When producing large print it is still important to follow the RNIB print guidelines.

Facts:

- Nearly three quarters of organisations surveyed for RNIB's publication "Talking Images" provided visitor guides to their permanent collections in print.
- Less than a quarter provided this information in large print.

Braille, audio files and PenFriend

Braille is a system of raised dots that are read by touch. With the right software, training and an embosser (braille printer), it can be produced in-house. Although, it is more common for it to be produced by a transcription agency, as accuracy is crucial.

Audio files can be produced in-house, by a transcription agency, or with the help of a local talking newspaper or radio station. Agencies often lend a more professional feel to standard literature,



which makes longer documents easier to listen to. The in-house approach would be better suited to material aimed at individual customers.

The RNIB PenFriend audio labeller is a low cost solution for smaller venues that lets you record a small label for everyday items. Users stick the label on any item then tap it with the PenFriend to hear it read out.

→ **Further information:**

RNIB can transcribe information into braille, audio and large print as well as providing details of other national and local transcription agencies. Call our Helpline on 0303 123 9999.

VocalEyes (www.vocaleyes.co.uk) can transfer information into audio format and will undertake all kinds of audio description projects.

The PenFriend is available to buy from RNIB's Online shop. For feedback on the PenFriend in action, contact the Museum Learning Officer at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery on 0117 352 5613.

Electronic text

This can be a very cheap way of distributing information. A growing number of blind and partially sighted people have access to computers, and email or computer disks are an easy way to provide this service. Information can be accessed through the use of large screens or access technology such as programmes that enlarge text on the screen. Screen readers can convey the information on screen to the user via speech or braille. Individuals may also be able to create their own documents from the electronic file. There may occasionally be compatibility issues but as a basic rule simple text files will work well for all forms of access technology.

Online information

The growth of the internet means that people with sight loss have the opportunity to enjoy a wealth of information and services not previously available. As with the production of electronic text, web pages must be appropriately designed to allow blind and partially sighted people access. RNIB campaigns for good website design and urges designers to take responsibility to ensure that online information is accessible to all. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), published

by the W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), should be used in the development of all websites. In addition, RNIB offers an audit service to websites aiming to hit accessibility targets. The Surf Right logo is awarded to those sites that meet to the requirements.

Facts:

- Over two-thirds of the venues surveyed for "Talking Images" stated that they have a website. Of these, less than 30 per cent were accessible to blind or partially sighted people.

→ Further information:

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) are available online at www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT and RNIB has many useful tips on designing an accessible website.

Accessibility Consultancy Services
Royal National Institute of Blind People
105 Judd Street
London WC1H 9NE

Telephone: 020 7391 2178
Email: webaccess@rnib.org.uk
Website: rnib.org.uk/WebAccessCentre

In summary

Ensure that all information you produce is accessible to people with sight problems by:

- adopting an accessible information policy
- producing information in a range of accessible formats
- ensuring that your website is accessible.

With a clearer understanding of these issues, implementing accessibility will become second nature. Your accessible information policy should be built into your planning and delivery schedules early on. This will reduce costs and ensure you are prepared to offer the maximum number of customers a valuable and inclusive service from the outset.



Chapter 9 – Approaches beyond accessibility

“Our tactile tour was developed with blind and visually impaired people in mind but it’s also excellent for groups of disabled young people or children with learning difficulties who are more hands on. An interactive tour is much better and we have already seen an increase in bookings for it, so that’s really good.”

Museum staff

There are many ways to interpret artwork, environments and archives. Greater access to collections not only benefits blind and partially sighted people, it is also vital in developing staff skills, building confidence and improving the experience for all visitors. Most venues use a combination of the following methods:

- descriptive events and tours
- participatory sessions and the use of “handling” objects
- allowing original art or features to be touched
- offering representations of objects, tactile images and multi-sensory exhibits

- providing access to collections online via resources such as i-map: a computer-generated interpretation of works from the Tate collection – www.tate.org.uk/imap

In addition to the use of i-Map the Tate Modern has developed a guide for their staff to support their tours. Producing this type of guide means responsibility can be shared across teams and volunteers. Many venues in the United States have found that there is no substitute for a person delivering the audio tours. However, podcasts are a very useful way to make your web content more accessible, more appealing and more useful to a wider audience.

What is audio description?

Audio description is putting visual images or events into words. It is used in theatre, in cinema, on television, in sporting events and on DVDs and videos to improve access for blind and partially sighted people.

Descriptions might be pre-recorded or presented live.

A number of venues, such as the National Gallery, offer regular sessions where a large reproduction of a work of art is described with detailed background and contextual information. Some sessions are open to all and others are specifically for disabled users so it is worth enquiring.

Larger venues employ professional audio describers while others train their staff internally. Blind and partially sighted people will also have preferences so it is important to find out what your audience prefers – some require more insight from a combination of audio description and intellectual access.

“What we want is for people to paint a picture for us; to describe the art as they see it so that we are using their eyes. You can’t be completely objective, it wouldn’t mean anything – it would be clinical. But also you can’t be too interpretative. You need to give the information so that I can draw the conclusions.”

RNIB participant

Some tips on describing a painting to get you started:

- Begin with the artist and date, medium and size. It is sometimes best to leave the title until after the description.
- Describe the painting in a couple of sentences and follow with a detailed but objective description.
- Your description should cover content, style, mood, colour, perspective, composition and use of light.
- Use straightforward language and explain any unusual terms.
- Be consistent when using measurements. Sometimes it is useful to use a relative scale: knee height, arm’s length etc.
- Use appropriate nouns and lots of adjectives with active verbs, eg “surging forward”.
- Described the style and content in a clear order. Clockwise, for example. Do not dart around the painting randomly unless the viewer requests this.
- Make sure the delivery is clear, enthusiastic and pleasant to listen to.
- If possible, research your audience in advance and ask specific questions about their interests in order to ascertain their level of knowledge.



Touching the real thing

A combination of live description and touch tours can be incredibly beneficial to blind and partially sighted users. Many will enjoy the opportunity to touch objects as a way of gaining access to collections. Touching can give people the opportunity to explore items for themselves and to make their own discoveries rather than relying on a third party. There are two main ways for blind and partially sighted visitors to touch: touching original artefacts (covered in this section), or touching representations such as tactile images or models (covered in the next section).

There are a number of approaches to providing visitors with the opportunity to touch real objects and artefacts in your venue. These include:

- a guided touch tour
- providing people with the information to undertake a touch tour independently, such as those offered by the Victoria and Albert museum, the Imperial War Museum and the British Museum
- handling sessions including artefacts from your collections.

Visitors could also be encouraged to touch objects that are not from collections but enhance the tour experience; for example, objects that demonstrate the functioning of a mechanical article, materials and tools used in the production of artefacts, or objects which convey concepts used in art works.

“One idea we’ve been talking about is to have a tactile display for everybody to touch which has examples of canvas, sized canvas, over painting, under painting, different types of oil painting, glazes, whether the glaze is cracked. So that you could feel and they could be referred to in any description.”

Museum staff

When developing a touch tour, it might be useful to think about developing a selection of themed objects. Objects that contrast in terms of materials, date and style may be useful for visitors. For example, you could include busts made of bronze and of marble, sculpture that is realistic in its representation alongside abstract pieces.

To address any conservation issues, visitors could be provided with hand wipes or invited to take rings off

their fingers. Whenever possible, people should be allowed to touch the object directly, though gloves may be appropriate for certain exhibits. According to one participant, food preparation gloves work well and provide good sensitivity.

→ Further information:

Art Beyond Sight (www.artbeyondsight.org) provides a useful overview into how people read tactile objects. Further insight can be found at Disability Arts Online (www.tinyurl.com/6hpzhwy), including this from Siegfried Saerberg’s *Blinde und Kunst*:

“All the time, my fingers keep shaping new words. My imagination keeps coming up with new interpretations for the stone until I have pieced together a mosaic, made of myself and the sculpture. The names formed by the hands try to speak their own language. Bubbling at first, they endeavour to grasp their new continent.”

Tactile images

A tactile image is a raised representation of a two or three-dimensional image which is explored using the fingertips. Tactile images give people with sight loss the

chance to appreciate and understand material and information that would not normally be accessible to them. They can be used in a number of diverse ways:

- to complement audio guides
- in conjunction with guided tours
- in educational sessions
- off-site before or after a visit.

They might represent:

- two-dimensional works of art
- architectural features and building facades
- designs on fabric or printed designs such as wallpaper
- information that is provided in visual formats, eg diagrams.

Any visual image has to be redefined in order to produce a tactile image that a person with sight problems can use. This redefinition may mean simplification, alteration, adaptation and sometimes distortion to convey the important features contained within the visual image.

This often results in the tactile image looking completely different from the visual image.

For a variety of reasons, not everyone will want to interact with tactile images. They may have had a negative experience in the past, they may not have been shown how to use tactile images or they may have poor sensitivity. Tactile exploration is a gradual and sequential process that is most successful when accompanied by information in braille or audio.



Before embarking on the production of tactile images, consider why they are needed. Not everything will translate into a meaningful tactile image. Consider what information the images will portray, how someone would use them and how to get the images into the hands of users. It may be best to send the tactile image to the user prior to the visit. The Living Paintings Trust run a free library service for blind and partially sighted people. Packs containing raised images and accompanying audio descriptions of famous paintings, sculpture and architecture are distributed from their library via post.

Other methods include thermoform and embossed graphics. The thermoform method, sometimes called the collage method, requires the making of a relief master from which plastic copies are taken – The Living Paintings Trust uses this method. Embossed graphics are produced by a special embosser that builds up an image using dots punched into paper.

Methods for producing tactile images

Swell Paper: also known as Minolta, microcapsule or hot spot. This is the most common method of producing tactile images. It requires the transfer of black and white artwork onto special paper impregnated with

microcapsules of alcohol. The paper is then put through a heat diffuser. The black areas absorb the heat and the microcapsules burst, causing these areas to rise up, thus creating the tactile image.

German Film: a thin plastic embossing film, which is placed on a soft rubber mat and drawn on with embossing tools or a ball point pen.

Wikki Stix: waxed coloured yarns, which stick to almost any surface. Especially good when working with children.

Tacti-Mark: a liquid plastic that sets hard after a short period of time.

Thermoform: this method involves the production of a relief master, which is built up using a cut and stick collage method from a variety of everyday objects, eg crepe paper, sand paper etc. A thin plastic copy of the relief is taken using a heat and vacuum process.

Tips for producing tactile images

- Think with the fingertips, not the eyes.
- Take off the “clutter” – strip the image to its bare bones.

- Don't be too detailed; lines less than 6mm apart are not easily distinguished.
- Make sure there is enough space for braille text. A braille cell takes up approximately the same space as a letter in 24 point Arial font.
- Do not use label lines as you would in print.
- Where possible, keep the image to proportion and not exact scale. Although some idea of scale for maps is important.
- Be consistent with the positioning of titles and page numbers.

Someone accessing an image by sight will see the whole image instantaneously. Someone using touch to access an image will rely on their brain piecing together many snippets of information. Making sense of that information and organising it into a complete image can be quite a task. Additional information, such as audio description or braille, will help create a mental picture. Consider also the use of sound: period music, readings of literature describing scenes in classical art and recordings of natural and urban environments all contribute to a far more rewarding experience.



"It's great that you're able to touch and feel things. So many art galleries are 'don't touch' and everything is sign posted, but it's our history and unfortunately we can't see it, so it's nice to learn about your past in a different way."

Participant



Further reading

Websites

RNIB publications on sight loss

rnib.org.uk/shop

Conferences

www.st-dunstans.org.uk/about_us/in_touch_with_art

Access to work

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/Employmentsupport

Audio description

www.vocaleyes.co.uk
www.mindseyedescription.blogspot.com

Products

www.visualeyesuk.com

T3 Tactile Image machine developed by RNCB Hereford Specialists Products and Training Services:

Telephone: 01432 376391

Email: info@rncb.ac.uk

www.rncb.ac.uk

Organisations supporting blind and partially sighted people

www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk

www.guidedogs.org.uk

www.nfb.org

www.partsight.org.uk

Publications

Access Prohibited? Information for designers of public access terminals, Dr John Gill (2000)

Available online: www.tiresias.org

A Guide to Inclusive Design, Disability Rights Commission (2002)

Available from the Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Art Beyond Sight: a resource guide to arts, creativity and visual impairment, Art Education for the Blind and American Foundation for the Blind (2003)

Available from RNIB's Research Library:
rnib.org.uk/researchlibrary

Code of Practice: Rights of Access – goods, facilities, services and premises, Disability Rights Commission (2002)

Available from the Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com

Magical Mystery Tour, University of Bristol Disability Unit (1999)

Available from University of Bristol Disability Unit: accessunit@bristol.ac.uk

Partnerships for learning: a guide to evaluating arts education projects, Felicity Woolf, Arts Council England

Available from the Arts Council England: www.artscouncil.org.uk

Painting from a New Perspective, RNIB (2001)

Available from RNIB: 0303 123 9999

See it Right guide, RNIB (2011)

Available from RNIB: 0303 123 9999

Sign Design Guide, Sign Design Society, JMU Access Partnership (2000)

Available from RNIB: 0303 123 9999

Talking Images Research. Museums, galleries and heritage sites: improving access for blind and partially sighted people, RNIB and Vocaleyes (2003)

Available from RNIB: 0303 123 9999

Talking Images Guide

Available from RNIB: 0303 123 9999

rnib.org.uk/museum

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, World Wide Web Consortium (W3C)

Available from: www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT

What Colour is the Wind: insight into art and visual impairment, National Society for Education in Art and Design (1992)

Out of print but available from RNIB's Research library: rnib.org.uk/researchlibrary

Contacts

Contact details are correct at time of going to press and are not exhaustive.

Disability Arts Online

9 Jew Street
Brighton BN1 1UT
Telephone: 01273 77 18 78 or 07411 82 44 58
Email: info@disabilityartsonline.org.uk
www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk

In Touch with Art

www.st-dunstons.org.uk/about_us/in_touch_with_art

Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

National Arts Development Officer
National Leisure Services Team
Telephone: 0121 665 4249
Email: leisure@rnib.org.uk
rnib.org.uk/culturelink

RNIB products and publications

PO Box 173
Peterborough PE2 6WS
Telephone: 0303 123 9999
Email: UK customers – helpline@rnib.org.uk
Email: International customers – exports@rnib.org.uk
rnib.org.uk/shop

Tate Modern

Bankside
London SE1 9TG
Telephone: 020 7887 8888
Email: visiting.modern@tate.org.uk
www.tate.org.uk/modern

Vocaleyes (Nationwide audio description producers)

First Floor
54 Commercial Street
London E1 6LT
Telephone: 020 7375 1043
Email: enquiries@vocaleyes.co.uk
www.vocaleyes.co.uk

Funders and advisors

Arts Council England

14 Great Peter Street
London SW1P 3NQ
Telephone: 0845 300 6200
Email: funding.feedback@artscouncil.org.uk
www.artscouncil.org.uk

Cadw – Welsh Historic Monuments

Welsh Assembly Government
Plas Carew
Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed
Parc Nantgarw
Cardiff CF15 7QQ
Telephone: 01443 33 6000
Email: Cadw@Wales.gsi.gov.uk
www.cadw.wales.gov.uk

English Heritage

Customer Services Department
PO Box 569
Swindon SN2 2YP
Telephone: 0870 333 1181
Email: customers@english-heritage.org.uk
www.english-heritage.org.uk

Historic Scotland

Longmore House
Salisbury Place
Edinburgh EH9 1SH
Telephone: 0131 668 8600
www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Other charities and organisations

Action for Blind People

14–16 Verney Road
London SE16 3DZ
Telephone: 0303 123 9999
Email: helpline@rnib.org.uk
www.actionforblindpeople.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss (formerly RNID)

19–23 Featherstone Street
London EC1Y 8SL
Telephone: 020 7296 8000
Email: informationline@rnid.org.uk
www.rnid.org.uk

Audio Description Association

c/o AMH
Suite 1
35 The Hundred
Romsey SO51 8GE
Telephone: 01794 510343
Email: ADSE@hants.gov.uk
www.developingaudiences.com

Audio Description Association (Scotland)

c/o Edinburgh Festival Theatre
13/29 Nicolson Street
Edinburgh EH8 9FT
Telephone: 0131 662 1112
Email: enquiries@adascotland.com
www.adascotland.com

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)

Freepost RRLL-GHUX-CTRX
Arndale House
Arndale Centre
Manchester M4 3AQ
Telephone: 0845 604 6610
Email: englandhelpline@equalityhumanrights.com
www.equalityhumanrights.com

Shape

Deane House Studios
27 Greenwood Place
London NW5 1LB
Telephone: 020 7424 7340 (voice)
Email: info@shapearts.org.uk
www.shapearts.org.uk

The Group for Education in Museums (GEM)

54 Balmoral Road
Gillingham
Kent ME7 4PG
Telephone: 01634 853424
Email: office@gem.org.uk
www.gem.org.uk

Guide Dogs for the Blind

Burghfield Common
Reading RG7 3YG
Telephone: 0118 983 5555
Email: guidedogs@guidedogs.org.uk
www.guidedogs.org.uk

Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity (IMSPA)

SportPark
3 Oakwood Drive
Loughborough University
Loughborough
Leics LE11 3QF
Telephone: 01509 226474
Email: info@imspa.co.uk
www.imspa.co.uk

Museums Association

24 Calvin Street
London E1 6NW
Telephone: 020 7426 6910
Email: info@museumsassociation.org
www.museumsassociation.org

RNIB National Library Service

PO Box 173
Peterborough PE2 6WS
Telephone: 0303 123 9999
Email: library@rnib.org.uk
rnib.org.uk/reading

The Partially Sighted Society

7/9 Bennetthorpe
Doncaster DN2 6AA
Telephone: 0844 477 4966
Email: info@partsight.org.uk
www.partsight.org.uk

Sense

101 Pentonville Road
London N1 9LG
Telephone: 0845 127 0060/020 7520 0999
Email: info@sense.org.uk
www.sense.org.uk

Audio guide producers

This list of producers is not exhaustive and the inclusion of a producer does not constitute a recommendation from RNIB.

Acoustiguide

2–3 North Mews
London WC1N 2JP
Telephone: 020 7269 5150
Email: info@acoustiguide.co.uk
www.acoustiguide.co.uk

ATS Heritage

1 South Lane
Clanfield
Waterlooville
Hampshire PO8 0RB
Telephone: 023 9259 5000
Email: enquiries@ats-heritage.co.uk
www.advanced-thinking.co.uk

Antenna International

85 Great Eastern Street
London EC2A 3HY
Telephone: 020 3365 8600
Email: uk@antennainternational.com
www.antennainternational.com

Black Box AV Ltd

25 Aberafan Road
Baglan Industrial Park
Port Talbot
West Glamorgan SA12 7DJ
Telephone: 01639 76 70 07
Email: sales@blackboxav.co.uk
www.blackboxav.co.uk

The Dog Rose Trust

83 Greenacres
Ludlow
Shropshire SY8 1LZ
Telephone: 01584 87 45 67
Email: information@dogrose-trust.org.uk
www.dogrose-trust.org.uk

Fieldsman Trails

Fron Deg
Clayton Road
Mold
Flintshire CH7 1SU UK
Telephone: 01352 75 62 02
Email: fieldsman@fieldsmantrails.com
www.fieldsmantrails.com

Producers of tactile images, maps and models

The Dog Rose Trust

83 Greenacres
Ludlow
Shropshire SY8 1LZ
Telephone: 01584 87 45 67
Email: information@dogrose-trust.org.uk
www.dogrose-trust.org.uk

Living Paintings Trust

Queen Isabelle House
Unit 8, Kingsclere Park
Kingsclere, Newbury
Berkshire RG20 4SW
Telephone: 01635 29 97 71
Email: info@livingpaintings.org
www.livingpaintings.org

RNIB National Centre for Tactile Diagrams

Centre for Accessible Information
58–72 John Bright Street
Birmingham B1 1BN
Telephone: 0845 257 2587
Email: info@ntcd.org.uk
www.nctd.org.uk

RNIB Tactile Images

RNIB Peterborough
PO Box 173
Peterborough PE2 6WS
Telephone: 01733 37 53 70
Email: businesslink@rnib.org.uk

Accessible environments

Centre for Accessible Environments

70 South Lambeth Road

Vauxhall

London SW8 1RL

Telephone: 020 7840 0120

Email: info@cae.org.uk

www.cae.org.uk

RNIB Access Consultancy

PO Box 173

Peterborough PE2 6WS

Telephone: 01733 37 53 70

Email: businesslink@rnib.org.uk

rnib.org.uk/accessconsultancy

National Register for Access Consultants

www.nrac.org.uk



Accessible information

Confederation of Transcribed Information Services (COTIS)

67 High Street
Tarporely
Cheshire CW6 0DP
Telephone: 01829 73 33 51
Email: administrator@cotis.org.uk
www.cotis.org.uk

RNIB Disability Access Services

PO Box 173
Peterborough PE2 6WS
Telephone: 01733 37 53 70
Email: businesslink@rnib.org.uk

RNIB Web Accessibility

105 Judd Street
London WC1H 9NE
Telephone: 020 7391 2178
Email: webaccess@rnib.org.uk
rnib.org.uk/webaccessibility

National Talking Newspapers and Magazines

National Recording Centre
Heathfield
East Sussex TN21 8DB
Telephone: 01435 86 61 02
Email: info@tnauk.org.uk
www.tnauk.org.uk



This CultureLink publication identifies approaches to key aspects of service delivery which can help improve access to museums and galleries for blind and partially sighted people.

**For more information about CultureLink contact
RNIB on 0121 665 4249, leisure@rnib.org.uk or
visit rnib.org.uk/culturelink**

RNIB is working towards and beyond 2012 to develop
a lasting legacy for all museums and galleries.

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