Including All Improving Arts Accessibility for People With Varying Visual and Hearing Ability

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“The strange power of art is sometimes it can show that what people have in common is more urgent than what differentiates them”

John Berger
• Promoting social inclusion and cohesion through the arts
• Changing perceptions of disability and accessibility
• Inclusive arts, integrated accessibility: embracing diversity, including all.
• Arts access facilities for people with varying visual and hearing abilities and disabilities
• Rapid advancements in arts accessibility due to technological progress
• Urgent need for continual reappraisal and training in arts accessibility
• This call to action responds to:
  - Northern Ireland Disability Strategy 2012-2015
  - EU Disability Strategy 2010-2020
  - UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
• Impact on wider discussion about disability policy in health, culture and education
Accessibility as a human right

• Legislation:
  - Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948
  - European Audiovisual Media Services Directive, 2010
  - The Northern Ireland Act, Section 75, 1998.

• Society:
  - slow response to accessibility implementation
  - advancements needed to overcome linguistic, sensory, socio-cultural barriers
• Growing number of people with sight and hearing loss
• Ageing population
• Hearing loss:
  - over 10 million people in UK
  - by 2031 more than 14.5 million (Action on Hearing Loss 2011)
• Sight loss:
  - More than a doubling in numbers of people in UK
  - Nearly 4 million people by 2050 (RNIB, Access Economics 2009)
1) How can we review our approach to accessibility to empower people with varying visual and hearing abilities and disabilities so that they can fully enjoy their rights as citizens?

2) How do we endorse equitable access and good practice in the implementation of legislation?

3) How can we ensure that arts venues are proactively reaching out to include everyone and achieve greater equality of opportunity?
Arts accessibility facilities for patrons with varying visual and hearing ability

• Raised public expectations for inclusive, interactive, multisensory arts experience due to exposure to multimedia

• Increasing range of access facilities due to pioneering technology

• YET access provisions remain limited
• Audio description
• Touch tour
• Braille provisions
• Audiosubtitling
• Large-print materials
• Provisions for guide dogs
• Thermoforms
• Haptic technology solutions

Picture by Terry Braun /Braunarts
Photos courtesy of Opera North
Number of events per year at which audio description and touch tours are available at the venues
• Sign language interpreting
• Subtitles/surtitles
• Captioning for the deaf and the hard-of-hearing
• Hearing loop
• Provisions for hearing dogs
• Assistive technologies e.g. smart glasses
Photo courtesy of Opera North
Number of events per year at which sign language interpreting and captioning are available at the venues
Number of events per year at which audio description and touch tours are available at the venues
• Integrated accessibility
• A new approach to arts accessibility which includes all, rather than providing special access to certain patrons with specific requirements
• Incorporation of access concepts from the design stage
• Access methods allowing individual choice

Photo by Masami Ito, The Japan Times
Key findings
A need to:

• bridge the gap between the limited availability of arts accessibility facilities and the rapidly expanding access options offered by innovative technology

• accelerate the implementation of accessibility legislation

• clarify the practical changes required in the day-to-day operations in the arts.
Key findings

The project findings highlighted three problem areas requiring action:
(1) attitudes to disability and accessibility
(2) financial considerations
(3) accessibility training.
Changing mentalities

• Perception of disabled as separate from able-bodied, viewing society as a collective whole with diverse visual and hearing abilities and disabilities

• Segregated access provisions, compartmentalisation of blind and sighted, deaf and hearing inclusive, integrated access for all

• Accessibility as an afterthought, supplementary accessibility as integral to the design
Action points

• Raising awareness
• Public engagement with arts access
• Education: school trips, workshops, talks, further integration of accessibility awareness into the curriculum
• Promotion of dialogue between arts access providers, venues, researchers, users, design team, charities and organisations advocating arts accessibility
• Continued support for arts access advocates
• Audience diversity
• Different types and degrees of visual and hearing abilities and disabilities e.g. hearing, profoundly deaf, hard-of-hearing, sighted, totally blind, partially-sighted etc.
• Arts can appeal to multiple senses
• Multisensory arts experience facilitated by access provisions e.g. touch tour
• Social activity of the arts
Financial issues

• Widening audience base brings economic benefits

• Imprudent to exclude rising numbers of people with sight and hearing loss in ageing population

• In the UK as a whole in 2001 ‘it was estimated that the spending power of disabled people (14% of the population) was over £45 billion’ (Arts Council for England)
• Considering the advantages of access facilities for sighted and hearing patrons
  - financial benefits
• Improved inclusive access facilities for all
  - ‘more customers, more ticket sales and higher profits’
• Pioneering technological access solutions e.g. Google Glass and mobile apps
  - attract larger audiences to the arts (Arts Council for England)
Audio introduction for all

• Audio notes to be listened prior to arts event
• Appeal for sighted patrons
• Pre-recorded, available to download for all events
• Audio introductions alone do not offer a complete solution
• Cost-effective option to be complemented by other access facilities
Training and assessment

• No certified training for arts accessibility at present
• Collaborative EU project ACT (Access to Culture and Training) involving QUB
  - establishing of training course
  - online and face-to-face teaching
Conclusion

• Advancement of innovative access facilities although limited and often segregated

• Much work needed in developing sustainable, cost-effective access facilities + training and assessment systems ensuring quality is maintained → successful implementation of legislation and NI Disability Strategy

• Raising awareness and moving towards a holistic approach benefitting all → promotion of social cohesion
• Shift in mentalities within the arts to consider society as a cohesive whole whilst also acknowledging its diversity
  impact on policy in other sectors
  advocating full integration of inclusive accessibility into the health, cultural and educational agenda
• Respect for the human right of accessibility to all aspects of life
  communal responsibility to weave inclusive access into the fabric of our society, to share our rich culture and heritage with all.
Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland.