

State of Theatre Access 2019



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FOREWORD

“The UK’s vision is to create a society that works for everyone and where all can participate fully. The UN Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities sets the guiding principles that are integral to this vision.

I am delighted that the accessibility of all public venues in the UK is constantly improving. Developments in technology allow for new innovative approaches, not only to venues but all parts of the theatre experience, such as the accessibility of online information and ticket purchasing.

It is important that we use our success in eliminating barriers and build on this current momentum. We estimate the total spending power of disabled people to be approximately £250bn every year, and the economic rationale for creating fully accessible venues is overwhelming. The State of Theatre Access 2019 report provides a wealth of examples of the progress that is being made and that will be made, and the sector should be very proud.

From Shakespearian tragedy to the Edinburgh Fringe, pantomime to post-modernism, the theatre is one of the richest parts of our national culture and is why many people visit this country from all parts of the world. It is for this reason that we must ensure that we do not restrict access to such a rich and important resource to disabled people.”

Justin Tomlinson MP

Minister of State for Disabled People, Health and Work

INTRODUCTION

We use the social model of disability, based on the principle that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment or difference. It puts the emphasis on what needs to be done to **identify and remove barriers**.

The two sections of this report are about identification (through awareness, acknowledging and sharing of information) and removal of barriers through offering access services and individualised performances for theatregoers in the UK.

In April and May 2019, we coordinated a team of volunteer researchers to audit the websites of 629 professional theatres across the UK. They recorded what disability access information each theatre provided (or didn't provide) and, where relevant, the number of upcoming productions and performances that were listed as having an access service (audio description, BSL, captioning) or individualised performance (dementia friendly or relaxed).

Section 1: Disability access information online seeks to raise awareness of the importance of having good access information on a theatre's website, with a checklist of essential information that all venues should have, and information about location, structure and formats.

Section 2: Access services provides a snapshot of the access services being provided in UK theatres to enable as many people as possible to experience and enjoy the performing arts. Figures show the number of productions and performances for each service, accompanied by quotes from theatre-goers who use and value them, and links to relevant organisations.

1. DISABILITY ACCESS INFORMATION ONLINE

Why it matters

Theatres that do not provide disability access information to support visitors are effectively excluding them from their venues, missing out on a significant customer base, and potentially failing to meet what is required of the venue under the Equality Act 2010.

This is backed up by the figures seen each year in the [Euan's Guide Access Survey](#) that surveys hundreds of disabled people, their families and friends on their experiences.

Of the 903 respondents to The Euan's Guide Access Survey 2018:

88% said that they were more likely to visit somewhere new if they can find access information about it beforehand.

94% said that they tried to find disabled access information about somewhere before visiting for the first time, 85% through checking the website.

53% said that they avoided going if a venue has not shared its disabled access information, because they assume that it is inaccessible.

euansguide.com/access-survey

Choosing where, when and how to visit a cinema, theatre, museum or other cultural venue can involve a lot of research and planning for disabled people, and many venues will be ruled out because of lack of information on access services, and barriers to even getting to the theatre and into the auditorium.

The imperative to act should be motivated by many aspects: economic (as the Minister reminds us in his foreword, the total spending power of disabled people in the UK is approximately £250bn), moral and legal (Equality Act 2010) and reputational. Around 1 in 5 people in the UK are disabled: the barriers they face and the choices they make as a result, will in turn influence families and friends.

Statistics by region

26% of the theatres audited (161 out of 629) had no disability access information on their website

	Theatres surveyed	Those with online access information	2017 figures	Upcoming productions listed
NE England	19	16 (84%)	↔ (16)	256
SE England	81	67 (83%)	↓ (83)	664
Scotland	38	31 (82%)	↑ (27)	333
London	135	108 (81%)	↑ (91)	640
N. Ireland	10	8 (80%)	↓ (9)	141
East Midlands	28	22 (79%)	↔ (22)	216
West Midlands	45	34 (76%)	↑ (31)	542
East	71	52 (73%)	↑ (47)	631
Yorkshire	35	24 (69%)	↓ (29)	423
Wales	36	24 (67%)	↓ (25)	282
NW England	59	37 (63%)	↓ (40)	381
SW England	73	45 (62%)	↓ (54)	579
TOTAL	630	469 (74%)	474 (72%)	5,088

TABLE 1: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that provide online access information, and the number of upcoming productions listed, by region, ranked with the best-performing nations/regions first.

Checklist for theatres

The key information that a theatre should provide on their website access information page.

	Access information	Notes
	Welcome message	Use direct and inclusive language throughout, addressed directly to the visitor
	Access contact details	Email and telephone number for people with additional access enquiries or requesting personal support
	Getting to the theatre	For arrival on foot, by public transport or car. Provide additional detail to the address, such as descriptive directions
	Accessible parking	Location, alternative if main one is full; cost and how to pay or book; distance to main entrance
	Venue images	Exterior and interior
	Concessions / proof	Should include details of what proof is required, if relevant
	Physical access	Areas of venue without step-free access; alternative routes, including lifts and ramps
	Accessible toilets	Location and information (include photographs); nearest Changing Places Toilet
	Alternative formats	Large Print / Braille copies of Programme
	Hearing induction loops	Instructions and coverage in auditorium

Location, structure and formats

Location and structure

Access information should be on a dedicated web page, which is easy to find, within one or two clicks from the home page – within the Visit section, via the main menu (not the footer menu).

The information should be structured within headed sub-sections, each with a manageable chunk of information. This is useful both for visual readers, and those who access websites using a screen-reader (text-to-speech software), as they can navigate easily between headings to find the information they seek.

Website accessibility

It is important to ensure the technical accessibility of the website itself. If your theatre receives funding via a Local Authority or Central Government (including via Arts Council England), it will have to adhere to the new standard [Public Sector Bodies \(Websites and Mobile Applications\) \(No. 2\) Accessibility Regulations 2018](#).

Video

Film, for example a short video embedded from YouTube, can be used to show venue access features, but the information conveyed should also be available in text. Films should be subtitled, ideally using open captions, where the subtitles are always visible. Not all website visitors know that closed captions (where subtitles are optional) are available or how to activate them.

YouTube's auto-generated captions are always inaccurate, so we strongly advise that you overwrite them, following the [Stagetext guidelines for subtitling film content online](#). See also the [VocalEyes guidelines for making film more accessible to blind and partially sighted people](#).

Audio

Audio that can be streamed or downloaded from the website is useful for blind and partially sighted people, particularly in the case of descriptive directions or an audio brochure about upcoming productions. Audio is also used to provide introductions for audio-described performances, covering description of the set, characters, costumes, props and the visual world of the play.

Visual Stories

Visual Stories are a way of providing accessible information to audiences for relaxed performance. They are designed to provide information about a venue or performance in an accessible way for anyone, but particularly for people who have a learning disability. Visual Stories contain images which show the reader the 'visual journey' to, and through, the venue so that they can prepare for their visit. These should be made available as downloadable PDF or Word document on the access page.

They also provide information on what theatre is, and explain commonly used terms, something often not explained to audience members generally. They are a low-cost, high-impact way of making theatre more accessible and can benefit a wide range of audience members. The model most widely used is that developed by Kirsty Hoyle at the Unicorn Theatre in 2010. It is predicated on Social Stories™ (trademarked and owned by Carol Gray) and uses the principles of EasyRead, a way of making information more accessible to people with learning disabilities. Visual Stories are designed to be general enough to suit most readers and are informative (e.g. 'An usher is someone who checks tickets and shows people to their seats'), rather than instructive (e.g. 'you can clap your hands if you enjoy the show')

Discovery of access services

A key aspect of website accessibility is ensuring that access services provided for performances are easy to find and book. The best user experience is when the theatre maintains an up-to-date list of relevant productions and details of the specific performances on the access page, grouped under headings for each type of access service: ideally with a link through to the relevant event page in the What's On section for ease of booking.

Larger theatres with multiple productions can also support access service users by providing tags or category searches for the access services within the What's On section, so that a user can quickly find the relevant performances. Many theatres already allow a user to search by genre, such as comedy or opera: the functionality should be extendable.

However, it is still important that the user is directed to the appropriate performance page. Some theatres require the user to click through multiple pages for successive performances until they find the one with either a graphic or text indicating that this is the access performance – a time-consuming and frustrating experience. Here, the interface is optimised for non-disabled users only, who can choose the performance on a date to suit them, rather than access service users, who typically must arrange their cultural life around the limited number of access performances offered. Some may be using text-to-speech or magnification software that means browsing takes even longer.

Organisations and links

Visit England / Visit Scotland Accessibility Guides

(accessibilityguides.org)

A useful toolkit to develop your theatre's access information page.

AccessAble (accessible.co.uk)

Originally called DisabledGo, AccessAble has surveyed over 125,000 'places to go' and the website has over 1 million users every year. Each access guide is created from a survey designed in consultation with steering groups of disabled people and collects objective and quantitative information, overlaid with factual descriptions and photos.

Euan's Guide (euansguide.com)

The website has thousands of disabled access reviews and listings submitted by disabled people. Reviews can be excellent endorsements and many people have visited new attractions and venues based on a review they have read on Euan's Guide. It can be very reassuring to read about another disabled person's experience beforehand, and it takes away the uncertainty when visiting somewhere new.

The Access Card (accesscard.org.uk)

Developed as a consistent and reliable way of both evidencing disability and reporting the specific needs of disabled people. It's an optional choice which disabled people sign up for and is accepted at venues and festivals across the UK.

Hynt (hynt.co.uk)

A national access scheme that works with theatres and arts centres in Wales to make sure there is a consistent offer available for visitors with an impairment or specific access requirement, and their companions or personal assistants.

2. ACCESS SERVICES FOR PERFORMANCES

29% of UK theatres (182 of the 629 audited) list one or more types of access service for an upcoming production.

Many theatres provide more than one service, but overall:

127 (20%) provide **audio description** for performances

134 (21%) provide **British Sign Language** for performances

117 (19%) provide **captioning** for performances

26 (4%) provide **dementia-friendly** performances

126 (20%) provide **relaxed** performances

In this section, we provide a brief introduction to each of the main types of access service and individualised performance, as best practice in the UK currently. We share quotes from users on how important the services are to them, and provide links to further reading, service providers and national listings services.

We also share some of the key findings from our audit. The figures for individual theatres are aggregated within the English regions and Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, ranked using the ratio of population size divided by the number of access performances, i.e. the more access performances available per person, the higher the ranking.

Discussion of survey results

Overall, the audit appears to show that fewer theatres were providing the established access services of audio description (38 fewer theatres than recorded in State of Theatre Access 2017), BSL (29 fewer) and captioning (21 fewer), while there was evidence of an increase in relaxed performances, with 11 more theatres compared to 2017. Though we did not record dementia-friendly performances in 2017, it is certain that these have increased in volume.

The authors don't sense that there is a significant decline in the number of access performances in the UK, despite the reality of the economic and funding environment that will almost certainly have impacted many access budgets. However, there is a strong sense in both the commercial and subsidised sector that access services are as important as ever, and even on the increase, with emerging models of integrated BSL, captioning and audio description gaining interest as aesthetic elements of productions. Initiatives such as Ramps on the Moon and organisations such as Graeae continue to lead this charge and forge significant progress for disabled performers as well as audiences.

There are also several examples of recent and current theatre capital redevelopment projects (such as Octagon Theatre Bolton, Bristol Old Vic and Leeds Playhouse) in which the desire to increase accessibility has been stated as a major motivating factor. This suggests a growing commitment by the theatre sector to welcome a broader range of customers.

Methodology and criteria for inclusion

Both years, a team of volunteer researchers visited the websites of a total of around 900 theatres. Those run by a school, college or amateur society, those predominantly for community hire, or those which only show films, stand-up comedy or concerts/music acts were excluded from the detailed audit: those included had to have at least one upcoming professional theatrical production.

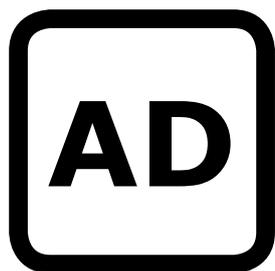
The number of theatres that passed those criteria decreased (659 theatres were included in the detailed audit in 2017, only 629 in 2019).

The audit was carried out during April and May 2019, by which point most theatres have their programmes online up to December or January 2020, though some listed productions further into 2020. The researchers recorded the total number of productions at each theatre, and the number of productions and performances thereof for which the theatre provided access services or individualised performances.

Limitations

These figures, equivalent to decreases of between 3% and 5% in three categories and an increase of around 10% in one category, may be unreliable due to the individual decision-making involved in the methodology. Researchers were making on-the-spot decisions that may or may not have been the same as that made by a different researcher in the previous year. Additionally, theatre websites change, and as noted in the first section of this report, it can be very difficult to find details of access performances, so some omissions may have been made.

Audio Description



What is audio description?

An audio description service makes a theatre performance more accessible for blind and partially sighted people. Ideally, the service comprises three elements:

1. An **audio introduction**, with a description of the set, characters and costumes, giving the audience information about the visual style and design of the production. Audio introductions are often delivered live by the describer just prior to the performance, over headsets. These are also made available a few days before the performance as mp3 files for download, or sent through the post on audio CD, together with access information detailing how to get to, and navigate around the venue. For some audio description users, this access information supports them to make an independent visit. For others it enables them to be an active, engaged participant in the theatre outing with the confidence of knowing what to expect when they get there.
2. A **touch tour**, which enables people to familiarise themselves with the layout and scale of the stage, meet some of the actors and begin to associate voices with characters to help them follow the action. They also have an opportunity to touch or handle the set, important props and costumes, all accompanied by description.
3. The **live description** of the visual elements of the performance as it takes place. Delivered through headsets, the describer speaks in the gaps between dialogue, song, music and sound effects, describing characters' actions and reactions, as well as set changes, shifts in location and lighting effects. This element can also be pre-recorded.

There are additional ways of delivering AD, for example, with cast members integrating the audio description within the performance, and other creative approaches.

What does audio description mean to you?

“I lost my sight some sixteen years ago, aged sixty, and found the transition challenging and inhibiting for all aspects of life. Finding out that my love of theatre ... could continue due to the provision of audio description was transformative and uplifting. I realised that activities I loved and valued as a sighted person could continue even though I had lost my sight. This is as significant and important to me as the provision of audio books enabling me to continue reading.

Theatre is a live activity, a mix of dialogue, actions, music and sound effects, all happening in a set and design, which also plays a major part in communicating the message or story unfolding on stage. Fitting accurate and meaningful audio description around these multiple aspects takes preparation, time, skill in writing and speaking. And a true understanding of what is needed for a blind or visually impaired audience member to get the maximum from the show. The quality of the audio description is paramount.”

Robin D.

“When I go to the theatre it is so nice to have an audio headset. Otherwise I will not be able to follow what is going on in the performance. I am able to enjoy the show without having to ask sighted people all the time what is going on and disturbing others around me. I feel very equal and happy. I’m also able to have discussions afterwards as I followed it so well.

I find it very frustrating when people don’t have audio description.... It’s really annoying especially in this day and age, there is no reason for it. I just feel very isolated.”

Ashrafia C.

“The power of audio description is as much to do with the people you encounter and their attitude as the performance itself. This goes so far beyond an equal right of access or even the power of theatre as an art form.

The power of audio description is how you're treated.... On that day at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse I was treated like a human for the first time in two years outside of my immediate circle; a full person, someone with value and worth....

Because a stranger, someone who doesn't know you, who is meeting you for the first time, who is a respected and talented person in their profession, sees you as a person, treats you as a person and by the end of the encounter has got you seeing yourself as a person again. This is more than transformative – the only word I'd found in the last two years in my inarticulate attempts to understand – this is redemptive. This is redemption. And I have come to depend on it.”

Joanna W (Excerpt from [Seeing yourself for the first time: the power of people in audio-described theatre](#))



2019 audit findings

127 theatres listed at least one audio described performance, that's **20%** of the theatres included in the survey.

Those theatres listed a total of 897 audio-described performances of 527 upcoming productions.

The regions that offered the most audio-described performances per head of population were: **West Midlands**, the **East of England**, and **London**. (Table 4 below)

In all regions except for **East Midlands**, we found fewer theatres (38 in total) listing an audio-described performance than in the audit undertaken for State of Theatre Access 2017.

Users of audio description were offered on average **1.7** audio-described performances for each audio-described production.

If a theatre provides audio-description, on average it does so for **43%** of its productions.

Regions that provide above the average are: **London** (58%), **South East England** (50%) and **North East England** (46%)

Table 4: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that list audio-described performances, and the number of relevant productions and performances, by region, ranked by the ratio of performances to population size.

	Nation/ Region	AD Theatres	Compared to 2017	AD productions	AD performances
1	W Midlands	10 (22%)	↓ (12)	67	209
2	East	8 (11%)	↓ (10)	31	128
3	London	36 (27%)	↓ (41)	83	137
4	E Midlands	6 (21%)	↑ (5)	46	66
5	Wales	6 (17%)	↓ (8)	32	42
6	NW England	3 (16%)	↓ (5)	28	28
7	SE England	19 (23%)	↓ (25)	69	95
8	Yorkshire	12 (34%)	↓ (13)	46	51
9	SW England	5 (7%)	↓ (13)	36	51
10	NW England	10 (17%)	↓ (14)	50	51
11	Scotland	11 (29%)	↓ (14)	37	37
12	N. Ireland	1 (10%)	↓ (5)	2	2
	TOTAL	127 (20%)	165 (25%)	527	897

Organisations and links

VocalEyes (VocalEyes.co.uk | [@VocalEyesAD](https://twitter.com/VocalEyesAD)) is the leading audio description company in the UK working in the arts. Their audio describers and trainers work with theatres and museums to improve access to their performances, events, exhibitions and venues for blind and partially sighted people. VocalEyes also promotes all audio-described performances and events in the UK through their website, social media and What's on guides in a range of formats. Contact them at enquiries@VocalEyes.co.uk or on 020 7375 1043.

Audio Description Association (AudioDescription.co.uk | [@AudioDescribe](https://twitter.com/AudioDescribe)) is a membership organisation for audio describers.

Audio Description Association Scotland (ADScotland.com | [@ScotlandAD](https://twitter.com/ScotlandAD)) Membership organisation for audio describers and listing service for AD events in Scotland

Extant (extant.org.uk | [@ExtantLtd](https://twitter.com/ExtantLtd)) are the UK's leading company of visually impaired artists & theatre practitioners.

[Integrated Access report 2018](#) is a very useful research inquiry into the use of audio description and integrated access in the UK.



British Sign Language



What are BSL interpreted performances?

British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of over 87,000 Deaf people in the UK for whom English may be a second or third language.

At a signed performance, trained sign language interpreters, usually standing to one side of the stage or in a box, interpret the script and language used by the performers at the same time it is being performed.

Specific seats are allocated in the theatre (mostly within the first eight rows) so that the theatregoer can follow the signers' interpretation clearly, enabling everyone to access the spoken word.

Good BSL interpretation depends on how much involvement the interpreter has with the production team and a good relationship with the stage manager is essential, especially when it comes to last-minute script changes. Ideally, a video recording of the production rehearsal is provided to the interpreter for preparation. It is good practice for the BSL interpreter to attend rehearsals and read the scripts to adjust their signing to suit the dialect of the region they are working in.

It is important that the BSL interpreter is positioned in a suitable area so that audiences can see the signs and the on-stage action. This positioning should be part of the pre-production planning process.

BSL-interpreted performances can be compromised if the dialogue is fast paced and having many actors on stage at the same time can be challenging to interpret and words can become lost in the signing. Some production companies use two BSL interpreters to overcome this challenge, although it depends on the stage directions of actors who could be moving and changing roles quickly.



What do BSL interpreted performances mean to you?

“Interpreted theatre offers the possibility of not just capturing the dialogue but encompassing the emotion of the piece. We have previously seen this done extremely well at festivals and one of the reasons why we have attended Latitude festival for three consecutive years. One performance that stands out, was a production on clinical depression in young men. The performance and the interpretation were so in sync with each other it produced this amazing experience that allowed for me to be fully immersed in the emotion and to cry at the same time as the rest of the hearing audience.”

Adolfs K

“I’ve seen this show for the third time, and it’s still fantastic! To see the stage and the interpreter...giving me equal access to the show. Wow!”

Lina C.

“Seeing interpreted shows is great, the access to the whole thing, the music, the atmosphere, the whole thing, I would go to any interpreted show!”

Martin G.

“I can go out with friends have a drink and a chat, sit and watch the show, and with the interpreter there, I can just switch off and enjoy the show.”

Anon.



2019 Audit findings

134 theatres listed at least one BSL interpreted performance, that's **21%** of the theatres included in the survey.

Those theatres listed 447 BSL interpreted performances of 379 productions

The regions that offered the most BSL- interpreted performances per head of population were **Wales, South West England** and **Yorkshire**. (see Table 5 below).

We found 29 fewer theatres that listed BSL interpreted performances than in the audit undertaken for State of Theatre Access 2017.

Of those productions that were BSL- interpreted, there were on average **1.18** BSL interpreted performances for each production.

If a theatre provides BSL, on average it does so for 28% of its productions.

Regions that provide above the average are London (46%), **Scotland** (35%), **East Midlands** (34%), **South East England** (31%) and **North West England** (29%).



Table 5: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that list BSL interpreted performances, and the number of relevant productions and performances, ranked by the ratio of performances to population size.

	Nation/ Region	BSL Theatres	2017	BSL productions	BSL performances
1	Wales	10 (28%)	↓ (8)	35	44
2	SW England	9 (12%)	↓ (12)	40	52
3	Yorkshire	14 (40%)	↑ (12)	45	47
4	Scotland	11 (29%)	↓ (15)	37	45
5	W Midlands	12 (27%)	↓ (15)	42	46
6	E Midlands	6 (21%)	↔ (6)	25	33
7	SE England	23 (28%)	↓ (26)	51	62
8	NE England	4 (21%)	↔ (4)	14	15
9	London	25 (19%)	↓ (33)	35	42
10	NW England	9 (15%)	↓ (14)	33	33
11	East	11 (15%)	↓ (15)	22	28
12	N. Ireland	0 (0%)	↓ (4)	0	0
	TOTAL	134 (21%)	163 (25%)	379	447



Organisations and links

Signed Culture (signedculture.org.uk | [@SignedCulture](https://twitter.com/SignedCulture))

(previously known as SPIT - Signed Performance in Theatre) is a membership organisation that advocates for and supports access provision to the arts and culture for Deaf BSL users. Their website, social media and e-newsletter promotes BSL-interpreted events. They also support organisations to find Interpreters and Deaf Presenters, offer advice, guidance and bespoke training in deaf awareness and site-specific BSL.

Graeae Theatre (graeae.org | [@Graeae](https://twitter.com/Graeae)) include BSL, creative captioning and audio description woven into all their productions in a mixture of both live and in ear, depending on the nature of the production.

Deafinitely Theatre (deafinitelytheatre.co.uk | [@DeafinitelyT](https://twitter.com/DeafinitelyT)) combine the use of BSL with spoken English, enabling both languages to be accessed at the same time.

Captioning



What are captioned performances?

Theatre captions are similar to television subtitles and give people who are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing access to live performance. The actors' words appear on an LED caption unit (or units) placed above or either side of the stage or via other display devices such as tablets or glasses, at the same time as they are spoken or sung.

Unlike opera surtitles for hearing audiences, captions include additional information such as character names, sound effects and offstage noises. A trained captioner prepares the captions in advance, checking them several times at the theatre and with reference to a video beforehand to make sure that they match the actors' delivery.

The captioner also works closely with the production team, usually the Deputy Stage Managers or Stage Managers, to ensure that any changes to the script are incorporated. During a performance, the captioner cues the lines live as the action unfolds on stage. Should an actor miss a line, the captioner will try to skip over it so that it doesn't appear on the caption unit.

The captioner ensures that the text is verbatim, accessible, and perfectly cued, so that d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing people in the audience have an equal experience of the performance.

Timing of the captions is crucial so as not to pre-empt the actors, especially if the text involves a key punchline or joke. It's also important that the text does not lag behind the actors, because this prevents those who are hard of hearing from following the action.

What does captioning mean to you?

“Ends, owas untyen enee oweees.” This probably doesn’t make much sense to most of you! I have a perceptible hearing loss and this is what I hear when an actor says “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears.” It’s difficult to explain the isolation experienced by those of us who are deaf or hard of hearing. Going to the theatre was something I had given up – a huge blow to someone like me who has always loved the theatre. I stumbled across a Stagertext captioned performance some years ago and it was a complete revelation. I can now attend theatre performances knowing that I will be able to follow the dialogue easily and enjoy the show without constantly having to ask my husband to ‘translate’ for me.”

Sue B.

“Captions have opened a whole new world for me, because one of the worst things about becoming deaf was missing out on music, and it’s as if my life has come back to me now I know I can visit my beloved theatre. I was devastated and deeply depressed because I had lost my first love: music, films, and stage, so you can imagine my joy when I saw that Sinatra, The Musical was being captioned. I went with my best friend from school days. It was fantastic! So many old memories came flooding back and I must admit I cried like a baby. My friend cried too because she knew how wonderful it was for me to be able to follow everything and sing along to the music.”

Suzanne W.

“While I know some sign language, it’s not enough to follow an entire British Sign Language (BSL) interpreted performance and my deafness is too severe for the loop system... I was starting to get frustrated until I saw a Stagetext captioned production. It was revolutionary having such instant access to the action and dialogue, especially as it’s no mean feat to lipread or memorise Shakespeare!”

Lucy C.

2019 audit findings

117 theatres listed at least one captioned performance, that's 19% of those included in the survey.

Those theatres listed 720 captioned performances of 416 upcoming productions.

The regions that offered the most captioned performances per head of population were **West Midlands, London** and **Yorkshire**. (See table 6 below)

We found 22 fewer theatres that listed a captioned performance, than in the audit undertaken for State of Theatre Access 2017.

Of those productions that were captioned, there were on average **1.73** captioned performances per production.

If a theatre provides captioning, on average it does so for **40%** of its performances. Regions that provide above the average are: **London** (60%), **South East England** (46%), **East Midlands** (41%) and **Yorkshire** (41%)

Table 6: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that list captioned performances, and the number of relevant productions and performances, ranked by the ratio of performances to population size.

	Nation/ Region	CAP Theatres	Compared to 2017	CAP productions	CAP performances
1	W Midlands	11 (24%)	↔ (11)	45	185
2	London	39 (29%)	↓ (40)	94	188
3	Yorkshire	9 (26%)	↓ (10)	46	77
4	Scotland	12 (32%)	↔ (12)	30	50
5	E Midlands	5 (18%)	↑ (4)	35	36
6	Wales	5 (14%)	↔ (5)	22	24
7	SW England	6 (8%)	↓ (13)	33	38
8	NE England	2 (11%)	↓ (5)	16	16
9	SE England	12 (15%)	↓ (17)	44	50
10	East	7 (10%)	↓ (10)	25	29
11	NW England	8 (14%)	↔ (8)	23	24
12	N. Ireland	1 (10%)	↓ (4)	3	3
	TOTAL	117 (19%)	139 (21%)	416	720



Organisations and links

Stagetext (stagetext.org | [@StageText](https://twitter.com/StageText)) provides captioning and live subtitling services to theatres, museums and other arts venues to make their activities accessible to people who are d/Deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. Established in 2000, Stagetext are committed to improving access to arts and culture for all deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people.

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Dementia-friendly performances



What are dementia-friendly performances?

Dementia-friendly performances are enhanced theatre experiences for people living with dementia and their supporters. They aim to create an engaging, supportive, calm, predictable and unhurried experience, designed with the specific needs of people affected by dementia in mind, recognising the wide range of cognitive, physical and emotional challenges associated with the condition. Pioneered by Leeds Playhouse in 2014, they are usually adaptations of mainstream shows, although there has been a recent increase in bespoke shows made specifically for this audience.

Front of house considerations might include offering detailed pre-show information packs to take the stress out of preparing the logistics of the visit, more time allowed pre/post show and during intervals to accommodate people who may need longer to move around, additional dedicated dementia-aware staff / volunteers to support customers, assistance at transport drop off/pick up points, additional seating on busy routes, flexible seating options in the auditorium, additional clear signage, convenient storage for mobility aids, a dedicated quiet space and refreshments served at people's seats during the interval.

Show adaptations might include increasing some sound levels to enhance clarity and reducing others to relieve potential distress; changes to lighting cues - blackouts or very bright moving lights may be disorienting; enhanced clarity of stage action during busy scenes and moments to encourage audience participation in familiar songs or interaction with actors at post-show meet and greets. House lights should only be marginally brighter than usual to allow

for safe movement mid-show: dimmed lights are a useful and familiar cue that a show is in progress.

Enjoyment of the show can be enhanced further by offering creative, themed pre-show sessions e.g. group singing sessions using songs from the show.

Best practice in designing dementia-friendly performances starts with consulting people living with dementia to assess the adaptations required to create an appropriate and comfortable front of house and show experience.

Dementia-friendly performances can enable individuals and families affected by dementia to continue to attend the theatre, confident that they will be welcomed respectfully as their needs change. Recent trends see people with dementia being incorporated into the audience groups being welcomed to Relaxed performances. This is not recommended, as the need for predictability and calm can be at odds with the relaxed attitude to responses in Relaxed performances, and is likely to make the experience less accessible for everyone.

What do dementia-friendly performances mean to you?

“Staff are more attentive than usual, and they don’t rush anyone. It gives people who wouldn’t normally go a chance to be part of it. You get the feeling of excitement of being there, and you get transported by the show, so you don’t think about your worries for a while.”

Bob F.

“I really enjoyed talking to the actors. I think it can open their eyes. It might make people see people with dementia differently. It might make them think we can still do things, and we might still be in the audience.”

Rosa P.

“I have problems with visual-spatial perception so new places can be frightening for me as I can't work out where the floor levels are. Stairs are a nightmare and I need extra time to get to my seat. When the sound builds up in a show I feel like my head is rattling, it feels unbearable, like I need to leave. So I would struggle to go to an ordinary performance.”

Chris A.

“A visit to the theatre can bring so much joy and enable you to stay connected with the community around you. To share laughter and applause in the audience and watch wonderful performances can bring so much happiness. Simple adjustments to lighting, sound and accessibility can bring the opportunity to remain connected to so many. I can no longer follow storylines and many would feel it was pointless for me to attend a performance. However, my overwhelming emotion was one of happiness. I hadn't followed the plot, but it didn't matter. I enjoyed sharing a wonderful time with the rest of the audience. I enjoyed the laughter, singing of familiar songs but most of all I enjoyed being part of the experience.”

Wendy M.

2019 audit findings

26 theatres listed at least one dementia-friendly performance, or other initiative such as a dementia-friendly tea dance or a memory café, that's **4%** of the theatres included in the survey.

Those theatres listed 32 dementia-friendly performances of 25 productions.

Of those productions that had dementia-friendly performances, there were on average **1.28** dementia-friendly performances per production.

Table 7: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that list dementia-friendly performances, and the number of relevant productions and performances, ranked by the ratio of performances to population size.

	Nation/Region	Theatres providing DF	DF productions	DF performances
1	East	3 (4%)	3	8
2	Scotland	2 (5%)	5	5
3	Yorkshire	5 (14%)	5	5
4	E Midlands	3 (11%)	2	3
5	SE England	5 (6%)	6	6
6	W Midlands	2 (4%)	3	3
7	NW England	1 (2%)	1	1
8	London	4 (3%)	1	1
9	NE England	0 (0%)	0	0
10	N. Ireland	0 (0%)	0	0
11	SW England	0 (0%)	0	0
12	Wales	0 (0%)	0	0
	TOTAL	26 (4%)	25	32

This is the first year data on DF performances has been collected, so there are no comparative figures from State of Theatre Access 2017.

Organisations and links

Nicky Taylor (nickytaylor.uk | [@nickytaylor](https://twitter.com/nickytaylor)) originator of and consultant on dementia-friendly performances

Leeds Playhouse (leedsplayhouse.org.uk | [@LeedsPlayhouse](https://twitter.com/LeedsPlayhouse))

Theatre & Dementia leedsplayhouse.org.uk/creative-engagement/older-people/theatre-dementia/

West Yorkshire Playhouse Guide to dementia-friendly performances (now Leeds Playhouse) baringfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Dementia-Friendly-Performances-Guide.pdf

Alzheimer's Society (alzheimers.org.uk | [@AlzheimersSoc](https://twitter.com/AlzheimersSoc))

Dementia Friendly Arts Venues Guide (alzheimers.org.uk/get-involved/dementia-friendly-communities/organisations/dementia-friendly-arts-venues)

Relaxed performances



What are relaxed performances?

Relaxed performances offer a warm welcome to people who find it difficult to follow the usual conventions of theatre behaviour. This can include people with learning disabilities, movement disorders, autistic people, people with Tourette's syndrome and other neurological conditions.

Many other people may choose to attend a relaxed performance, either as an access requirement or because they like the inclusive environment.

Relaxed performances take a laid-back approach to noises or movement coming from the audience. They give everyone permission to relax and respond naturally. Many people feel that relaxed performances offer a more dynamic theatrical experience, which benefits everyone.

The responsibility for making a show 'relaxed' is shared by the audience, the venue and the performers, building in an agreement that unexpected outcomes are possible. Key elements are:

1. A clear explanation for all audience members about what a relaxed performance is when they book.
2. Pre-show information that clearly describes the show so that anyone can make an informed choice about whether it's something they want to see.
3. Staff who take an inclusive approach from start to finish.
4. An introduction at the start of the show – ideally by one of the actors – to remind the audience that it's a relaxed performance and giving anyone who needs to move or be noisy the freedom to do so. Audience members should also be able to move around, leave and return to their seat at any point.
5. Consideration given to the production's sound and lighting levels, taking into account sensory sensitivities: for example,

- strobes or sudden loud noises might be removed.
6. A clear plan for how any complaints from audience members will be managed.
 7. A quiet space outside the auditorium where people can go during the show if they need to.

What do relaxed performances mean to you?

“I arrived and I remembered feeling immense excitement. The building [The Old Vic] was so beautiful and exquisite; I felt like I had left the world behind me and that I was somewhere much more magical than anything I could ever imagine. I was given the visual story by my teacher and I flicked briefly through it (a visual story is an explanation of everything that will happen and where everything is; the staff and exits are also mentioned). I felt much more reassured when I had seen this because I was immediately prepped for everything and knew where everything was. I distinctly remember seeing a part of the visual story which said I could leave the play at any time to watch it on a monitor which instantly calmed my nerves beforehand.”

“The National Theatre made the trip a lot easier for me with the aid of the visual story, which pointed out all the areas of the building, the characters, the set and the plot. Calming my nerves was really important otherwise I would not have enjoyed the performance as much, but I had almost no anxiety when going into the theatre.”

Bella M (via Tincture of Museum).

“...it was so uplifting to sit in a theatre surrounded by people having the time of their life, people for whom coming to see a show might be a once in a blue moon treat. Yes, there was some disruption throughout the performance, people moving and talking and running around, but you cannot deny that the atmosphere throughout the show was one of mutual enjoyment and respect for other audience members. I saw very few people feeling the need to tut or look around to stare judgmentally when a disturbance occurred, and instead witnessed multiple others going out of their way to smile or say a kind word to somebody else.”

Pippa (lifeofpippa.co.uk).

2019 audit findings

126 theatres listed at least one relaxed performance, that's **20%** of the theatres included in the survey.

Those theatres listed 290 relaxed performances of 197 productions

The regions that offered the most relaxed performances per head of population were **London, South East England** and **West Midlands**.

We found 11 more theatres listing a relaxed performance, than in the audit undertaken for State of Theatre Access 2017.

Of those productions that had relaxed performances, there were on average **1.47** relaxed performances for each production.

If a theatre provides relaxed performances, on average it does so for 13% of its productions. Regions that provide above the average are: **London** (31%), **East Midlands** (17%), **Scotland** (15%) and **South East** (15%)

Table 8: Number of theatres per UK nation and region that list Relaxed performances, and the number of relevant productions and performances, ranked by the ratio of performances to population size.

	Nation/ Region	Theatres providing RP	Compared with 2017	Productions with RP	Relaxed performances
1	London	20 (15%)	↓ (26)	45	123
2	SE England	24 (30%)	↑ (20)	38	42
3	W Midlands	16 (36%)	↑ (9)	21	21
4	Yorkshire	11 (31%)	↑ (9)	15	18
5	East	16 (23%)	↑ (13)	17	19
6	E Midlands	7 (25%)	↑ (5)	11	13
7	SW England	10 (14%)	↓ (12)	14	15
8	Wales	6 (17%)	↑ (3)	7	8
9	Scotland	6 (11%)	↑ (2)	11	13
10	NW England	7 (12%)	↓ (9)	14	14
11	NE England	3 (16%)	↓ (6)	4	4
12	N. Ireland	0 (0%)	↓ (1)	0	0
	TOTAL	126 (20%)	115 (17%)	197	290

Organisations and links

Touretteshero (touretteshero.com | [@touretteshero](https://twitter.com/touretteshero)). Artist, writer and theatre maker Jess Thom co-founded Touretteshero in 2010 with her colleague Matthew Pountney as a response to being diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome in her early twenties. Their goal is to change the world 'one tic at a time.'

[Relaxed Performances - The FAQs](#)

[A relaxed ending](#)

Tincture of Museum (tinctureofmuseum.wordpress.com | [@TinctureOfMuse](https://twitter.com/TinctureOfMuse)). Award-winning museum volunteer Claire Madge covers all things museum in her blog, consultancy and talks, though with a strong focus on making museums and theatres more accessible for autistic children.

[Autism in Theatre](#)

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Recent publications in this series

State of Museum Access 2018

(vocaleyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018)



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