

Audio Description in UK Theatre: Survey 2015-16

VocalEyes has been delivering audio description services for theatres since 1998. In 2014-15 we delivered 181 AD performances in around 75 performing arts venues in the UK. We are currently the largest provider of AD for theatres, alongside many other companies, freelance professionals, theatre staff and volunteers delivering AD.

We ran this survey in order to get a better understanding of the provision of Theatre AD in the UK, and to share the findings with the respondents and everyone involved and interested. Our aim was in part to provide a benchmark, for potential future research, and use as a starting point for discussion and action to make the performing arts more accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

The online survey was promoted through our email contacts, social media and with the support from sector organisations, such as Arts Council England, UK Theatre, Independent Theatre Council (ITC), Arts Professional, Scottish Theatre and others, for which we are very grateful.

The survey responses are summarised below, using the question numbers from the original survey. Beyond Q1, the responses summarised are those who answered Q1 with 'I represent a venue', as the respondents from performing arts/production companies did not return statistically significant figures, and the third segment were only given a small set of open-ended questions.

The majority of questions were closed, with multiple choice options. For some (Q18, Q79, Q80) open response was allowed, but for the purposes of this report, the responses have been analysed and presented as if closed.

The answers to some questions have not been included within this report, as they were aimed at the subset of VocalEyes clients, for feedback on various aspects of our service. We are happy to share these, on request, but we felt that they are of limited interest to the sector.

If you have any additional questions about the responses, please contact me. However, please note that no individual theatre's details would be shared, except through their own request or action.

Matthew Cock

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Abbreviations used in the report			
AD – Audio Description			
BPSP - Blind and/or partially sighted people			
VIP – Visually impaired person			
Q1	Which of the following best describes your interest in completing this survey?		
	I represent a venue	86%	119
	I represent a performing arts or production company	5%	7
	I don't represent a venue (personal views)	9%	12
			138
Q7	In which region are you based?		
	London	29%	27
	North	18%	17
	Midlands	11%	10
	South East	23%	21
	South West	5%	5
	Scotland	10%	9
	Wales	4%	4
	Northern Ireland	0	0
			93
Q8	How many seats does your venue have?		
		Range	20 - 3050
		Mean	696
		Median	500
			107
Q9	Are you the person who is mostly responsible for access in your organisation?		
	Yes	43%	40
	Responsibility is shared among a number of staff members	49%	45
	No, someone else mainly deals with access	8%	7

Q10	What access training have you attended?		
	None	32%	29
	General / pan-disability awareness training	62%	56
	Visual impairment awareness training	35%	32
	AD training	14%	13
	Others (including ASD, dementia, mental health awareness)	12%	11
			91
Q11	What types of accessible performances do you provide?		
	BSL interpretation	78%	60
	Captioning	78%	60
	Relaxed performances	64%	49
	Dementia-friendly performances	17%	13
			77
Q12	Do you ever provide AD for your performances?		
	Yes	73%	68
	No	27%	25
			93
Q13	How many AD performances have you provided over the last 12 months?		
		Average	9
			54
Q14	Of these, how many were booked by your venue and how many were booked by a visiting company?		
	Booked by our venue (53 responses)	Total	435
		Average	8
	Booked by the visiting company (30 responses)	Total	29
		Average	1
			53

Q15	Are you the person who is mostly responsible for booking AD performances at your venue?		
	Yes, I am	59%	33
	Responsibility is shared among a number of staff members	14%	8
	No, someone else mainly deals with audio-described performances	25%	14
	I don't know	2%	1
			56
Q16	Do you keep records of the number of BPSP who attend your AD performances?		
	Yes	70%	38
	No	22%	12
	Don't know	8%	4
		Av. = 11	54
Q17	Do you involve BPSP in the decision-making about your AD performances?		
	No	52%	28
	Yes	48%	26
			54
Q18	Please can you describe your concessionary ticket policy for BPSP attending your AD performances		
	Both VIP and companion got concession price (for 10 of these, this was 50% off)	38%	18
	VIP got a concession price (for 5 of these, this was 50%) but no mention of companion ticket price	29%	14
	VIP's companion got a free ticket, with the VIP getting a concession (11) or not mentioned (5)	33%	16
			48

Q19	Do you run any outreach activities which are particularly targeted at BPSP?		
	No	85%	47
	Yes	15%	8
			55
Q20	In general, how satisfied are you about the number of BPSP who attend your AD performances?		
	Very dissatisfied (1)	7%	4
	Fairly dissatisfied (2)	30%	16
	Neither dissatisfied or satisfied (3)	28%	15
	Fairly satisfied (4)	28%	15
	Very satisfied (5)	7%	4
	Weighted average	2.98	54
Q21	How do you market your AD performances?		
	Website	98%	54
	General mailing list	60%	33
	Programmes	60%	33
	Posters / leaflets inside the theatre	47%	26
	Facebook	49%	27
	Twitter	45%	25
	Specific mailing list for AD users	36%	20
	Local and national sight loss organisations	33%	18
	Access London Theatre brochure/email	25%	14
	Local press	18%	10
	Other arts organisations	13%	7
	Other social media	11%	6
	Online forums	7%	4
	Access Scottish Theatre brochure/email	4%	2
			55

Q22	How confident do you feel about different aspects of your AD provision?		
(Rated from not at all confident (1) through neutral (3) to very confident (5))			
	%age / 5	Weighted average	
I understand what information should be included within the AD script and how it should be delivered	74%	3.69	
I know that my audio describers are well-trained and that they keep their professional skills up-to-date	88%	4.41	
I understand the technical set-up for our AD provision and I know that our equipment is in good order	79%	3.96	
I know that our box office assistants understand the needs of AD users so that they can seat them in the right area of our auditorium	83%	4.17	
I know that our front-of-house staff are confident about welcoming blind and partially sighted people to our venue	86%	4.33	
		54	
Q23	Which of the following best describes the AD service in your theatre?		
We use freelance professional audio describers	36%	21	
It is delivered by VocalEyes	26%	15	
It is delivered by a service provider which is not VocalEyes	14%	8	
Mixture, including VocalEyes, other companies and/or freelancers	10%	6	
We use volunteer audio describers	9%	5	
Our own theatre staff provide AD as part of their job	2%	1	
AD is done by describers who travel as part of the visiting company	2%	1	
		58	

Q45	What are the reasons why you don't currently provide AD?		
	We don't have the right equipment to provide it	70%	16
	We can't afford to provide the service	57%	13
	There is no demand from audiences	39%	9
	Our programme makes it difficult to provide the service	17%	4
	The producing companies that visit our venue don't want us to provide it	4%	1
	Our senior management team does not want to provide it	0%	0
			23
Q46	Has your organisation provided an AD service in the past?		
	No, we have never provided it	92%	21
	Yes, we have provided it in the past but no longer provide it	4%	1
	I don't know	4%	1
			23
Q47	What, if any, additional support do you offer for BPSP who are visiting your venue or coming to your performances?		
	We have front-of-house staff who are confident in assisting blind and partially sighted patrons to move around our venue	88%	14
	We provide information about welcoming guide dogs to the venue	38%	6
	We offer specific information on our website about how to get to the venue and how to navigate around it	31%	5
	We are able to offer touch tours upon request	25%	4
			16

Q48	Do you have ambitions to offer an AD service for BPSP?		
	Yes, we would like to be able to provide the service in the future if we could	39%	9
	I'm not sure, but I would like to know more about AD and the different ways in which we might be able to build in into our programme	35%	8
	No, we don't think AD is right for our organisation	17%	4
	I don't know	9%	2
			23
Q49	If you would like to be able to offer an AD service in the future, what sort of things might you be interested in to help you to achieve this?		
	Advice on the equipment you would need	94%	17
	Help in training your staff or friends of the theatre to provide your AD service	61%	11
	Contact details of freelance audio describers who are local to your venue or to the venues that you visit	56%	10
	Help in establishing a local group of BPSP who could advise you about the accessibility of your venue and/or your performances	50%	9
	Case studies of other venues or companies which have recently introduced or increased their provision of an AD service	44%	8
	Assistance in negotiations with visiting companies about the provision of an AD service.	28%	5
	Funding advice/support (through 'Other')	17%	3
			18

Q54	How many describers do you use for each AD performance?		
	We use one describer to prepare and deliver the AD	58%	21
	We use two describers to prepare and deliver the AD	44%	16
	We use one describer to prepare and deliver the AD, but they have access to a second describer who gives them feedback on their script	8%	3
			36
Q55	Which of the following do you provide for your blind and partially sighted patrons?		
a	Introductory notes which describe the show's visual elements and are sent out (as text or audio file/CD) in advance of the performance		
	We do not provide this	37%	13
	Upon Request	29%	10
	For all our AD Performances	31%	11
	For all our performances	3%	1
			35
b	Access information for the venue which is specifically written to help VIPs navigate around the space		
	We do not provide this	41%	14
	Upon Request	35%	12
	For all our AD Performances	6%	2
	For all our performances	18%	6
			34
c	On-stage touch tours which enable patrons to familiarise themselves with the playing space, set, props, costumes and performers		
	We do not provide this	0%	0
	Upon Request	14%	5
	For all our AD Performances	72%	26
	For all our performances	14%	5
			36

d	Programme or cast list in Braille or large-print		
	We do not provide this	26%	9
	Upon Request	60%	21
	For all our AD Performances	9%	3
	For all our performances	6%	2
			35
e	Live introductory notes which are delivered in the auditorium via the AD headsets before the show begins		
	We do not provide this	14%	5
	Upon Request	3%	1
	For all our AD Performances	67%	24
	For all our performances	17%	6
			36
Q56	Do you or your colleagues regularly listen in to the AD that is being delivered?		
	Yes	59%	21
	No	22%	8
	Don't know	19%	7
			36
Q57	Have your describers received formal AD training?		
	Yes	83%	30
	No	6%	2
	I don't know	11%	4
			36

Q61	What do you provide to make sure that your audio describers are prepared for their show?		
	The opportunity for the audio describer to see the show from the audience	100%	36
	An accurate script	97%	35
	Enough time to prepare	89%	32
	A DVD or recording of the show	81%	21
	Access to the production team	75%	27
	The opportunity to do a technically-supported 'dry run'	75%	27
	Information about the BPSP who are attending the show	47%	21
	A contract for their services	44%	16
	Other (please specify)		36
Q85	Please tell us how useful the following things would be to you		
	Rating from Not at all useful (0) to Very useful (4)		
		Weighted average	Answered
	Marketing activities for BPSP who are interested in theatre	3.45	47
	Theatre-specific visual impairment awareness training for your staff	3.00	47
	Training for theatre staff on managing AD performances	2.98	47
	A review of the customer care you are able to provide to BPSP	2.96	47
	Guidelines on outreach activities for BPSP which you can run locally	2.72	47
	A review of your technical set-up for AD	2.63	47
	Guidance on working practices for audio describers	2.62	46

Q88	If you could change three things about your AD service, what would they be?	
Answered: 35. Priority 1 scored x3, Priority 2 scored x2, Priority 3 scored x1.		
		/178
Bigger audience	20%	36
New / better equipment	20%	35
More frequent / regular AD performances / more choice	11%	20
Better / more marketing	10%	18
Better infrared/sound quality/coverage in auditorium	10%	18
Training	6%	11
Lower cost of service	3%	6
Consistent / available describers	3%	6
Consult with users / potential users	3%	6
younger audience	2%	4
Links to local groups	2%	3
More in-house support	2%	4
Process for getting information to describers	2%	3
provide service in another part of venue	2%	3
Take AD service in house	2%	3
large print/braille	1%	1
Better describer location	1%	1

Technical Section			
Q70	Where in your theatre do your describers deliver the description from?		
	A place where they are in line-of-sight of the stage	58%	29
	A place where they watch the performance on a video monitor	30%	15
	Other (both/combo)	12%	6
			50
Q71	How do your describer/s hear the show?		
	Via headphones	55%	27
	Via a speaker at the description point	20%	10
	Live ambient sound	16%	8
	Other (please specify)	8%	4
			49
Q72	What type of microphone does your audio describer use?		
	A boom microphone attached to headphones	53%	24
	A stick microphone	40%	18
	Other	7%	3
			45
Q73	Can the audio describer hear their own voice in their headphones when their microphone is live?		
	Yes	46%	22
	No	13%	6
	Don't know	42%	20
			48

Q74	How is the audio describer's microphone controlled?		
	Push Fader	38%	13
	Button	15%	7
	Rotary pot	6%	3
	The audio describer can't control their microphone	4%	2
	I don't know	36%	17
			47
Q75	How is the AD broadcast in the auditorium?		
	Infra-Red	83%	38
	Radio (RF)	13%	6
	WiFi	0%	0
	I don't know	4%	2
			46
Q76	Is the AD channel...?		
	Clean – so it's not mixed with the show relay	68%	32
	Mixed with the show relay	17%	8
	I don't know	15%	7
			47
Q77	If you offer a clean AD channel, can customers choose to hear both AD and show relay through the receivers?		
	Yes	29	64%
	No	4%	2
	Not applicable because we don't have a clean AD channel	16%	7
	I don't know	16%	7
			45

Q78	What equipment do the patrons use to listen to the AD?		
	Stethosets	74%	34
	Over-ear Headphones	20%	9
	Belt-pack receivers with headphones	2%	1
	iPhones/iPod Touch/iPads	0%	0
	I don't know	2%	1
	Other (please describe)	2%	1
			46
Q79	Who is responsible for maintaining the patron-end equipment?		
	Tech team / department / staff	48%	21
	FOH manager / team	18%	8
	Access officer / team	9%	4
	Theatre/Theatre staff	9%	4
	VocalEyes	5%	2
	Mentioned shared responsibility	9%	4
			44
Q80	Who is responsible for ensuring that any patron-end equipment is charged and ready for use?		
	FOH manager / team	34%	16
	Box Office	15%	7
	Tech team / department / staff	15%	7
	Theatre/Theatre staff	5%	5
	Access Officer / Visitors Services team	9%	4
	Duty Managers	6%	3
	VocalEyes	2%	1
	Mentioned shared responsibility	17%	8
			47

Q81	What is the coverage like in your auditorium?		
	Very poor	0%	0
	Poor	0%	0
	Good	60%	28
	Very Good	36%	17
	I don't know	4%	2
			47
Q82	How often do you check the coverage in your auditorium?		
	We check it before every performance	54%	25
	We check it every 2 to 3 months	17%	8
	We check it once or twice a year	15%	7
	We rarely check our coverage	2%	1
	I don't know	10%	5
			46
Q83	What assistance does your technical team provide for the delivery of the AD?		
	They set up the equipment before each description	71%	34
	They run sound checks with the audio describers	71%	34
	They maintain our equipment in between descriptions	69%	33
	I don't know	2%	1
	Other (please specify)	13%	6
			48