

Leaping the Barriers:

a short guide to improve accessibility

for Visually Impaired People (VIPs) at outdoor events



Image: Vision for Growth group, partners for The Bicycle Ballet Co's Everyday Hero, at Liberty Festival 2013
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Preface

This basic outline seeks to share some of the findings and experiences of working with Visually Impaired People (VIPs) as participants in arts projects and as potential audience members at outdoor arts events. The aim is to improve accessibility to outdoor arts events for VIPs and have their voices, opinions and experiences in the mix.

The work evolved from the development of The Bicycle Ballet Company's Everyday Hero show, created with an integrated VI and sighted cast and tandems, for an audience including VIPs. In 2014 the company also undertook a small outreach, engagement and training project, with Bristol Cycling Festival, to encourage VIPs to visit two outdoor events in Bristol.

The general findings of both projects for working with this group are presented here for information. It is by no means comprehensive, but seeks to offer a few pointers, based on the experiences and feedback from the BB projects, to improve understanding and accessibility to events for VIPs over the longer term.

Intro

Visually impaired people (VIPs) experience isolation and are termed as hard to reach. "Nearly half of blind / partially sighted people feel 'moderately' or 'completely' cut off from people and things around them." "15 per cent of registered blind and partially sighted people say that they do not do any leisure activities outside their home." (Pey, Nzegwu & Dooley, 2006).

Anecdotal evidence from Bicycle Ballet's work suggests VIPs are looking for activities to get involved with, and events to attend.

A small survey by the company showed that barriers to attending any activity may often outweigh the desire to go, and that being confident of getting assistance and support will increase the likelihood of someone attending.

Types of Barriers

- Info before and at events – tailored communications are essential
- Transport – Getting to, then finding an event and getting back
- Assistance – VIPs might require support around an event and context before an event including eg synopses of info and touch events
- Equipment – signage, 'viewing' areas, access/comfort considerations for people and guide dogs, audio description

Overcoming the Barriers – a few ideas

Outreach

VIPs are generally not used to accessing outdoor events and festivals. To change this situation, outreach and communication is needed to build confidence and trust in the available support networks and potential for assistance, and additional communication and information at events.

The best way to achieve this is face to face, by meeting existing groups who get together for work or social activities. Alternatively email and online networks do seem to get information circulating, and word of mouth will be key.

Information – Marketing & Communications

VIPs tend to rely on word of mouth recommendations – from VI organisations (RNIB, Action for Blind People, Venturers Theatre, Pocklington Trust etc), local networks and friends – and are more likely to attend events if they can be confident of support and assistance, and understanding and making meaningful connections with the event or work presented.

- Marketing & communications need to demonstrate that not only will the activities be of interest, but that:
 - It will be worth the effort of getting to the event
 - Getting to and from the event will not be too difficult
 - Assistance to guide VIPs will be available at the event
 - VIPs can feel confident that the event will be accessible in terms of transport, support, information, context signage, audio facilities, seating etc.
- **A long lead in time** is required to enable VIPs to plan, at least 3 months ahead.
- A communications focus on **social media, emails and texts, and outreach** to meet individuals & groups and develop relationships. Followed up with links to further info on VI accessible platforms:
 - Accessible websites – here are two sites giving lots of ideas: <http://www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/websiteaccessibilitytips> and <http://www.hobo-web.co.uk/design-website-for-blind/>
 - Research the potential for large print formats of flyers
 - Create an audio programme
- There are a number of **talking newspapers**, newsletters etc; plan for at least a 3 month lead time.
- Information before events must be accessible and **give details of assistance available** at events, and/or a **contact number** to discuss requirements, the content or themes within the event or work presented and how it is conveyed.
- In general, make phone calls rather than send emails

Transport

- **Public transport** can be very accessible for VIPs, particularly in cities, but it can take a lot of energy & determination.
- Taxis are a more expensive, but very manageable, option.
- Consider offering **minibus pick ups** from peoples' homes to and back from events – community minibus schemes, with drivers, are often available. The BB team always offered minibuses to participants, but they were never taken up; occasionally people took **taxis**.

- Most popular, was arranging a **meeting point at a transport hub** to walk as a group to & back from an event.
 - Arrange a group meeting point. If booked in advance, train stations provide staff to meet VIPs from trains and guide them to exit points or your meeting place.
 - Ensure the key contact has everyone's phone numbers and has spoken to everyone in advance. Ensure the VIPs have a number, and know to phone, in case they decide at the last minute that they're not coming.
 - You also need to be aware of how many VIPs might need guiding assistance, to ensure there are enough people to assist, so they feel safe and supported.

Assistance & Guiding at Events

VIPs may attend events with friends or volunteers. However, finding suitable assistance may also be one of the barriers people face in attending events, so it might be helpful to arrange guides/stewards to assist VIPs around events.

Guiding, requires some **VI Awareness Training** to understand peoples' needs, the barriers they face and how to guide appropriately. In general, the VIP will take a guide's elbow from where they can be guided around obstacles and through crowds etc. Communication is key. The guide anticipates and communicates obstacles coming up.

It is strongly recommended that guides are **DBS checked** and that a Safeguarding Policy is in place, which includes emergency procedures and guidelines for reporting abuse.

It can be lots of fun wondering around an event with a big group of VIPs but, as in all group situations, it can take an age to agree to do anything, so smaller groups are recommended.

At Events

- **Highly visible signage** at events may enable VIPs to find their way around an event. Good colours are black lettering on yellow - yellow is generally the last colour on the spectrum to disappear from sight.
- **Seating areas & accessible, clean toilets** – including access for guide dogs – are clearly marked, and guides and staff at Information Points are fully aware of locations.
- Identify locations offering water for **guidedogs** and the nearest area for dogs to relieve themselves.
- Events can be very crowded, so it might be helpful to **identify quieter locations**, especially with seating, for guides and Information Points to offer. Access to viewing platforms, including for guide dogs, can also be helpful.
- **Audio Description** with mobile headphones are excellent, perhaps with a dedicated schedule for specific performances. Recorded **audio programmes** giving descriptions and timings may also be very useful.

Conclusion

Developing access for VIPs to outdoor arts requires a cultural shift for both event organisers and VIPs, which will take time and effort to achieve. Hopefully this short guide will be a useful part of the process.

Further information:

Excellent & FREE publication: “Access Toolkit: Making outdoor arts accessible to all”
Produced by ISAN, Independent Street Arts Network, 2009 & also available at this link:
<http://www.isanuk.org/product/isan-access-toolkit-making-outdoor-arts-accessible-for-all-2010/>

Comprehensive RNIB publication on inclusive design and accessibility: <http://bit.ly/1Had4tM>

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