

Thinking of creating a recorded audio-descriptive guide for your museum?

Here are some considerations

Recorded audio-descriptive guides can be excellent resources for blind and partially sighted visitors to museums, galleries, and heritage sites. The best ones support independent exploration. Combining engaging descriptions and navigation directions, they are at once an intellectual support, and a practical tool. A recorded audio-descriptive guide can be accessed at a time to suit the visitor - with potentially no notice and no requirement for other support, visitors can take an autonomous journey, directed to match their preferred pace and interests.

There is a legal requirement for making reasonable adjustment to your provision so that disabled people can access your venue and collections; a recorded audio-descriptive guide can form part of your permanent access offer. However, audio description can be useful for many audiences, including visitors without sight loss, who enjoy the detailed focus on exhibits. Conversely, while audio-descriptive techniques will greatly enhance a regular audio guide, such a resource will not in itself be sufficient for blind and partially sighted people, who need comprehensive audio description and the option of descriptive directions.

Links to examples of audio-descriptive guides that VocalEyes has created are provided at the end of this guide.

Before embarking on the production of an audio-descriptive guide for your venue there are a few things to bear in mind, including:

1. Timeframe
2. Content
3. Navigation
4. Voices
5. Access to the content
6. Organisational approach to access
7. Marketing
8. Evaluation
9. Reviewing the resource
10. The onward visitor journey

This document provides an overview of what to consider in relation to these ten areas, and aims to answer frequently asked questions. If you have further queries, or would like to discuss how VocalEyes can help to increase the accessibility of your museum, please get in touch.

1) Timeframe

- **Work on a recorded audio-descriptive guide cannot begin until all displays have been installed**

This is because the spaces, objects, displays and navigation directions must be described from life. The listener will trust that the descriptions within the guide are accurate – to ensure vivid object descriptions and safe, reliable directions, the describer must see what they are describing, in situ. Lighting, positioning and other design and interpretation methods will affect how the object in question is experienced, on display, which is why object photos are not a suitable substitute for describing from the real thing.

- **Scripting cannot begin until the gallery or exhibition has opened to the public**

There are usually last-minute changes during installation – the angle of a display case; the removal of a bench; even an object substitution. Such changes have a great impact on an audio-descriptive script and can render it unsafe, as well as inaccurate. Waiting until public opening ensures the final build is in place and snagging issues resolved. This also gives the advantage for museum staff to observe visitor flow and activity – are there bottlenecks? Areas that become very noisy? Such information is invaluable in planning the route for an audio-descriptive guide.

- **Recorded audio-descriptive guides take a minimum of 8 weeks to produce**

It is important to factor this into your planning and set expectations both internally, and with your visitors. The process involves a team of professionals and various stages in order to produce the best quality resource for your visitors. In brief, the process includes:

- site visits
- research
- scripting
- editing
- on-site testing
- recording
- upload/ installation of audio files

A schedule is agreed at the start and you are given opportunities throughout to review and feedback on the script.

- **Recorded guides are best suited to permanent or long-term displays**

Consider the likelihood of display rotations or gallery redevelopment in the near future, which would make a recorded guide out of date. They are best suited to long-term displays to ensure enduring relevance and usage.

2) Content – what to include? What *not* to include?

- You need to strike a balance here - offering equality of experience does not necessarily mean replication of content for sighted visitors. Audio-descriptive tracks will be longer than standard audio guide tracks – it takes more words to give a description, plus there may be navigation directions. As a result, fewer stops than your audio guide may be required. Too long a guide will be fatiguing, both from a listening perspective, and the physical experience. If it is too long, a visitor may not reach the end.
- Provide choice over the listening experience where possible. For example, take a layered approach to content, providing optional tracks, which a visitor may choose to hear more on a topic.
- Ensure the user can skip forwards and backwards through tracks, to suit their time and interests.
- Consider your star objects and key displays that everyone comes to see – people with sight loss should not miss out.
- Do you have any tactile opportunities within the museum/ gallery? Consider highlighting these. It is not essential to mention them all – some blind and partially sighted people may not be interested in tactile resources – particularly if this would be at the expense of some other key content.
- Do you have any content in the form of interviews with curators or subject specialists, or music/ sound clips, which may be incorporated to enhance the content?

3) Navigation

- An important element of recorded audio-descriptive guides is the inclusion of directions, so that a listener can physically navigate between the content stops. Some visitors will not require these; however, for others they may be essential for undertaking independent visits to your museum. Ensure visitors can easily skip through directions, if they don't need them, or provide a version of the guide without them.
- The directions must be accurate! Visitor safety and the visitor experience depend on it, as does the reputation of your resource and museum.
- An alternative route to the usual visitor path may be appropriate, if it is more accessible; for example, to avoid a bottleneck, to include a seating option, or to utilise a lift or ramp.
- Navigation directions need to be sufficiently detailed, but as concise as possible.
- All VocalEyes audio-descriptive guides are tested on site by a blind or partially sighted audience advocate, ahead of recording. This ensures any issues within the directions are identified and corrected.

4) Voices

- Think about the impression you would like to give when choosing the voice for your guide
- Consider having two voices, perhaps one for the object tracks, and one for the navigation directions in between. This helps as an aural signifier that content is changing from one to the other, and is also much more interesting to listen to.
- You may like to consider including a voice from your staff team.

5) Access to content

It is important to think about how your visitors will access the audio-descriptive guide, from the outset. We recommend providing your guide both online and on site, to offer your visitors a choice and ensure as many people as possible are able to access the tour.

Online via own devices

- Many blind and partially sighted people are smartphone-users, and the number rises each year. This may be the most comfortable means for many people to consume audio, given that they are familiar with their own device and how to operate it, and it is set to their personal user specifications.
- You would need to post the audio files on your website, so consider where they would sit and how you would signpost visitors to be able to find them with ease. Accessible platforms such as Audioboom and SoundCloud can be used to embed the tracks within your website.
- For visitors to be able to download the files, or stream the content on site, you will need sufficient WiFi provision.

- Consider also creating a recorded audio-descriptive introduction to your venue, which can detail how to travel to the museum, how to access the building, opening hours and support and resources available across the museum. This can be posted alongside the full audio-descriptive guide on your website.

On-site handsets

- When offering the loan of handsets on site, ensure the device is accessible; otherwise no matter how accessible the audio content, it will never be heard. For example, simple keypads with raised buttons and other tactile indicators can be useful. If the device has a touch screen, accessibility features must be activated. VocalEyes can advise further.
- Ensure the handsets are charged and well-maintained. Have procedures in place to guarantee this, so at any time a visitor will reliably be able to enjoy an audio-described tour.
- Implement a policy of training all staff in where to locate the handsets, how to use them, and how to effectively communicate the instructions to a visitor with sight loss. Otherwise, staff can create a barrier.
- Consider that even with necessary support, visitors will need time to familiarise themselves with the handset, which would not be the case if using their own device.
- If you have a standard audio guide, it is possible to provide your audio-descriptive guide on the same device, provided it meets accessibility requirements.

6) Organisational approach

- Make an organisational commitment to access - all staff need to know about the existence of the resource, and to proactively offer it; then be able to locate and know how to operate it. If only certain team-members have this knowledge, and they are not available when required, this creates a poor welcome and visitor experience.
- Consider visual awareness training for your team. This will give them the skills, knowledge and confidence to welcome and support visitors with sight loss, in the use of a recorded descriptive guide, and beyond.
- Beyond front-of-house, teams need to know that removing a gallery bench, or changing a case display will impact on the content or directions included within the guide.
- How does your recorded audio-descriptive guide link up with your other provision? Do you offer live audio-described tours or events? Do you have handling objects or other tactile opportunities to offer? What about Large Print or braille versions of text? Ensure your resources are complimentary and present the full package of possibilities to your visitors.

7) Marketing

- Once you have a recorded audio-descriptive guide, make sure you tell people about it! Many guides remain underused, simply because visitors do not know they are available.
- How will you tell the audience that you have this resource? Start thinking about this from the beginning. Possibilities include:
 - Your website
 - Social media channels
 - (Large) Print leaflets/ brochures
 - Signage on site, particularly at the entrance and welcome desk
 - Trained staff – responding to phone and email enquiries, and on site
 - Direct communications to your mailing lists
 - Radio coverage
 - Local talking newspaper (tnf.org.uk)
 - Contacting local groups for people with sight loss (use the RNIB Sightline Directory: sightlinedirectory.org.uk)
 - VocalEyes marketing channels
- Consider how you will launch the resource? How will you promote it ongoing?

8) Evaluation

- Think about how you will measure the success of the guide: uptake numbers? Consultation with visitors? Visitor exit surveys? An accessible online feedback form?
- Provide a range of means by which visitors can feedback, to accommodate communication preferences, and capture all potential data.

9) Reviewing the resource

- At what intervals and by what means will you review the resource? Build in time and budget for reviewing and updating the guide, to ensure it remains accessible and relevant.

10) The onward visitor journey

- A recorded audio-descriptive guide can be a catalyst for ongoing interaction between a visitor and your venue, therefore think about what a visitor might be able to do next:
 - Can you signpost visitors to further galleries, online resources or event opportunities if they were particularly interested by something within your guide?
 - Is there a means for them to discuss their experience with staff?
 - Are there opportunities for the visitor to communicate with other visitors; perhaps through museum membership, or online?
 - Can the visitor contribute to the museum, for example by joining your access panel? Are there job or volunteer opportunities?

Summary

A recorded audio-descriptive guide may be suitable if you are looking to:

- Increase access to permanent or long-term displays
- Invest in a long-term resource
- Provide support which visitors can access independently, at any time, without a need to book or contact the museum in advance

However, it will function well in conjunction with other provision, some of which you may already have in place, such as trained staff, Large Print and braille guides, and tactile or handling opportunities.

Please get in touch to discuss your aims and requirements, and we can help determine the best ways to support your visitors.

Examples of recorded audio-descriptive guides created by VocalEyes

Full guides including navigation

- Natural History Museum, Hintze Hall
nhm.ac.uk/visit/access-at-south-kensington.html
- Handel & Hendrix in London
vocaleyes.co.uk/audio-clip/handel-hendrix-in-london-audio-described-guide/

Object/ artwork tracks only

- Ferens Art Gallery
vocaleyes.co.uk/audio-clip/ferens-art-gallery/
- Shakespeare's Birthplace Trust:
soundcloud.com/shakespearebt/sets/object-tales-audio

Introductions

- Art Fund Museum of the Year 2018 finalists:
vocaleyes.co.uk/audio-clip/art-fund-museum-of-the-year-2018/

This resource was developed by VocalEyes with the help of our User Panel of blind and partially sighted arts lovers. With thanks also to staff at The Geffrye Museum of the Home and the Wellcome Collection for their feedback.

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