**Enhancing Accessibility:**

**Venues and Visual Impairment**

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**Foreword**

**Craig Spalding, Chief Executive of Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans**

**Attending theatre shows, concerts, comedy nights, and festivals should be something that everyone can do, when they want, with confidence. However, for people with visual impairment, it isn’t always that simple. Accessibility in venues isn’t a tick-box exercise, it’s a commitment to inclusivity. It’s about attending to people’s needs on a case-by-case basis – asking individuals how they wish to be supported. Making venues accessible benefits everyone, ensuring every person who attends feels welcomed, valued, and respected.**

Our policy and campaigns work is guided by our policy group made up of people with lived experience of visual impairment who meet with us regularly to discuss the issues that matter to them. The issue of accessibility in venues arose from a discussion at this group where members spoke of their experiences when accessing venues. We decided to take action, going out across Scotland with policy group members to meet with venues to hear about the great things they’re already doing to support visitors with visual impairment, and highlight how visually impaired customers can be best supported. In Edinburgh, we met with Summerhall, the Festival Theatre, and the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC). In Glasgow, we met with the Scottish Event Campus and staff at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. We also spoke to His Majesty’s Theatre in Aberdeen.

This report highlights examples of best practice which venues are currently taking forward to improve accessibility for visitors with visual impairment. By demonstrating success stories, we hope to shine a light on the wonderful work already being done and inspire other venues to follow suit.

Our work is ongoing and will continue long after this report has been published. With 180,000 people across Scotland estimated to live with sight loss and this number set to grow, an accessible journey – from the point of booking tickets to attending a venue – is essential.

**Read on to find out more or flip to page 11 for our accessibility checklist and top ten tips.**

**Colette Walker, Co-Chair of Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland and Veterans’ policy group**

**Who doesn’t like to get dressed up, go for a drink and dinner, and then go and see your favourite band or a theatre show with your friends? This is no different to people who are visually impaired, but, unfortunately in 2024, we are faced with many barriers to participate in this style of activity.**

The members of Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans’ policy group have discussed at length the issues they have encountered, from trying to purchase tickets, to paying extra to ensure a sighted guide or carer can come with them, to how accessible the venue itself is. This includes whether staff are trained on disability awareness, for those with any degree of visual acuity. I am delighted that Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans have agreed to take this very essential campaign on.

Work has already started by writing to various venues and ticket providers. Members of the policy group have attended meetings with venues already, such as the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall and Scottish Event Campus. Staff have listened and engaged with what we have reported to them, discussed barriers – and more importantly, solutions – listened to our suggestions on improvement, and are continuing to engage with the group. This is very encouraging and hopefully more venues and companies will get involved.

Blind and partially sighted people just want to be as independent as possible, going out socialising, enjoying life, and doing the same as anyone else in society. Enabling better accessibility for us is also a positive for local businesses who will benefit from our custom – it’s a win-win scenario.

**Discover more by visiting our Accessible Venues webpage at sightscotland.org.uk/accessible-venues or scan the QR code below.**

**Website QR code here**

QUOTE: “I was able to follow the Edinburgh Tattoo from an elevated position in the arena. My view would have seen only the one edge of the performance from the ground. It is vital to acknowledge the difference.

“But finding and leaving my seat was terrifying, steep steps with intermittent handrails, all made of metal with no floor signage. The joy of being able to see the movement of the Tattoo and get live commentary via headset gave me the freedom to feel completely included.”

Rosalind Preston

**The accessible customer journey**

**Before the event and booking accessible seating**

**Booking accessible seating is the start of the customer journey for people with visual impairment.**

Visually impaired customers have raised that apps and websites are often not accessible and do not allow users to use zoom to enlarge their screens. Sometimes, customers are prompted to enter security codes, meaning accessible seating can be booked up by the time people get through the required steps.

Having dedicated phone lines and accessible website pages so that people can book accessible seating is key.

Accessible seating can mean different things for different people. For example, some people with visual impairment may prefer to sit nearer to the front of a venue with their companion, rather than in a designated accessible seating area. Having a flexible approach to accessible seating ensures venues can meet the needs of each individual customer.

CASE STUDY: His Majesty’s Theatre in Aberdeen have collaborated with Access Card which means that customers can bring a free essential companion to their shows after paying a small sign-up fee.

CASE STUDY: The Festival Theatre, part of the Capital Theatres Group in Edinburgh, have a designated phone line that attendees can use to book accessible seating.

QUOTE: “Visual impairment of any degree, should not in any way prevent us from going out, socialising, having a laugh, enjoying dancing and singing along with your favourite band, going to a theatre and having the same full experience as everyone else sitting around you.”

Colette Walker

Considering people who enquire about accessible seating and support on a case-by-case basis and adapting processes based on what someone needs will lead to a better experience for all.

Offering touch tours and site tours before the day of the event is a great way to get people with visual impairment involved and to make individuals feel confident.

CASE STUDY: His Majesty’s Theatre, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, and the Festival Theatre offer touch tours before shows. We hope that more venues follow suit.

QUOTE: “I’ve always loved concerts and theatres but since my eyesight has drastically decreased I don’t enjoy it as much.

“Getting to the venue can be very daunting due to the lighting as well as trying to read the signs of where to go in a sea full of people. I try to be as independent as I can but this is sometimes taken out of my control.

“Music is such a big thing in my life and I feel since my sight loss I’ve had this ripped away from me and don’t enjoy concerts anymore.”

Amanda Whitfield

QUOTE: “I feel that venues need to be accessible so that blind and partially sighted people can go to a venue to enjoy themselves without getting stressed.”

Amanda Foster

**The accessible customer journey**

**Travelling to and arriving at the venue**

**The meet and greet process when someone with visual impairment arrives at a venue is key. Ensuring someone feels supported on arrival means they’re more likely to feel comfortable at a venue.**

If a customer has said they’d like assistance or support ahead of time, it’s worth checking whether they might need a sighted guide from a bus stop, taxi or drop-off point to enter the venue.

CASE STUDY: Across all three Capital Theatre venues, they have dedicated trained ushers, named Audio Description Supervisors, who meet and greet customers in the foyer, ensure the audio description is working, take customers on touch tours and to seats, attend to food and drink orders, and ensure customers get home safely at the end of the night.

CASE STUDY: In Aberdeen, His Majesty’s Theatre have introduced Access Champions, front-of-house members of staff who are passionate about accessibility and who welcome and support customers at shows and on touch tours.

“It’s so important to the visually impaired and blind community to have accessible venues for independence, inclusion and to have the option of support if it’s offered. If we find a venue that is accessible, we are more likely to want to go back than a venue that is not accessible.”

Sam Gough

**Getting around the venue**

**Navigating a venue can present some challenges but there are lots of features that can improve the experience for visually impaired people.**

It’s important to note that every person with visual impairment has different accessibility requirements and levels of visual acuity. Communicating with individuals to ask what support they want is key.

Clear paths that visitors can follow, clear signage with colour contrast and large print, and staff being on hand to provide sighted guiding to those who may need it are crucial. Small changes in a venue can have a huge impact.

Training staff on sighted guiding is a practical way to make both customers with visual impairment and staff themselves feel comfortable and at ease. This includes both venue staff and any external security staff.

CASE STUDY: At the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, they introduced bright-coloured strips on the ends of steps in their auditorium to make navigation on stairs easier.

CASE STUDY: We are pleased to be working with Summerhall and Glasgow Royal Concert Hall to provide their staff members with sighted guide training over the coming months.

QUOTE: “I do enjoy going to venues such as the Queen’s Hall in Edinburgh and the Royal Concert Hall in Glasgow and the staff are very helpful and attentive. As someone who delivers visual impairment awareness training, I am endeavouring to work with the staff at the Edinburgh Fringe Office plus some high-profile venues to help them improve their awareness and accessibility to their theatres and halls.”

Ronnie Wilkes

CASE STUDY: We’ve spoken with venues about their offerings of audio description and welcome the importance that is placed on providing audio-described performances. Audio description allows visually impaired audience members to immerse themselves in performances, helping them to understand better what is happening in a production. Regularly having audiodescribed shows on offer is crucial to ensure visually impaired people have the choice to attend these accessible performances.

You can find out more about audio-described performances and how you can upskill your venue staff by visiting ADA Scotland at https://www.adascotland.com/

**The accessible customer journey**

**Leaving the venue and transport home**

**At the end of the event, it’s important to ensure customers with visual impairment are supported to navigate their way out of the venue and safely reach their chosen method of transport – whether this is a taxi, a bus stop, a friend giving a lift, or a train station.**

Providing this extra support becomes even more pertinent during winter months when it gets dark earlier, particularly for those with some visual acuity who are affected by the absence of light.

QUOTE: “So often registered blind visitors like myself who may wish to attend a venue on their own are excluded due to not having someone with them to assist and the lack of available staff at the venue to provide tailored support. It’s the little things like getting refreshments and merchandise at the interval or even just going for a comfort break that are out of reach, let alone trying to make contact with staff in the first place. Great service equals a guaranteed positive recommendation and could encourage others who’ve never before thought to visit to give it a try.”

Hussein Patwa

**Our policy recommendations**

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans are calling for the following policies to increase the accessibility of venues in Scotland:**

**A standardised booking system for accessible seats at venues in Scotland.**

A designated accessible phone line and/or website and/or app that allows people with disabilities to book seats at venues across Scotland.

**Mandatory accessibility standards and requirements that venues in Scotland must meet.**

This includes design features such as colour contrast, tactile markings and clear signage in large print.

**Making audio description and touch tours a standard practice for all performances.**

Ask touring companies to contribute towards the costs of running audio-described shows.

**Visual impairment awareness and sighted guide training for all staff members who work in venues in Scotland.**

Lived experience forums of people with visual impairment are key as part of this training.

**Accessible venues checklist**

Is the venue central for public transport?

Is there parking available if being transported, or a drop-off area nearby?

Are the stairs easily accessed and highlighted with handrails both outdoors and indoors?

Is there a ramp for people with walking difficulties,

wheelchair users or wheeled walker users?

Is the entrance to the building easily identifiable?

Once in the building, will visitors know where to go?

Is the signage clear?

Is there good lighting throughout the building?

Are you able to control the light levels such as through window blinds?

Are there trip hazards such as rugs, low furniture, or unexpected steps?

Are you able to provide information in alternative formats? Is audio description offered?

Are there members of staff who can be sighted guides?

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

Yes No

**Ten top tips for making your venue accessible**

1. **Communication is key.** Ask the visually impaired person if they

require help and support and if so, how best this can be provided.

2. **Always introduce yourself and when giving directions you should**

**ensure good verbal instruction is given.**

3. **Have information available in accessible formats including**

**large print, audio, easy read, and braille.**

4. **Ensure the environment has adequate lighting** that provides good,

even illumination – visually impaired people require around 4 to 5

times more light to that of fully sighted people.

5. **Use the 3B’s rule** – **B**ig, **B**old & **B**right. Dark solid colours against light

backgrounds help chairs and tables to stand out, and vice versa. Avoid

using patterns, prints, or stripes.

6. **Have equipment that can make the customer experience more**

**pleasant** – e.g. coloured glasses for drinks, colour contrasting non-slip

mats that can be put underneath a plate.

7. **Staff should have basic sighted guide skills** and ask if a sighted guide is

required, as well as how the visually impaired person prefers to be guided.

8. **Clear, bold signage that uses colour contrast**, such as white on a dark

blue background, can help visually impaired people with navigation.

9. **Ensure accessible toilets are available** and are easy to find with good

signage and lighting.

10**. Tactile indicators and strips of non-slip contrasting paint on the**

**edges of steps reduces the risk of tripping for visually impaired people.**

As does a change in the surface at the top and bottom of stairs.

**Thank you to our contributors**

**Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans would like to express our sincere thanks to everyone who contributed to this report. A huge thank you to the venue staff at Summerhall, Capital Theatres group including the Festival Theatre, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, the EICC, Scottish Event Campus, and His Majesty’s Theatre in Aberdeen.**

This was a campaign devised and led by Sight Scotland and Sight Scotland Veterans’ policy group. We would like to thank every member for sharing their personal experiences with us and for working with our Policy and Campaigns team to make this report a success.

If you would like to hear more about our work or have any questions, as a venue or an individual, please contact us at policy@sightscotland.org.uk and we will be in touch.

You can help us ensure that no one faces sight loss alone by donating via the QR code below.

**Donation QR code here**

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