

Accessibility Learnings by Fiona Rourke

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Introduction

This article is an offering from a long, pandemic-lead journey of producing 3 showcase events in an entirely digital landscape. As with many things 'pandemic', it was a very quick shift from planning tangible, in-person events to translating concepts of gathering & celebration into a screen ratio of 16:9.

Each event was a day-long celebration of collaborative work with multiple strands of live content across the schedules. We danced between the tenets of interaction & engagement, connection and accessibility, there were compromises to be made to find the best middle ground.

Here I discuss the journey of designing and evolving an accessibility offer within a digital delivery framework for these 3 separate events. The framework was initially developed for two South West Creative Technology Network (SWCTN) showcases and was subsequently transcribed for the Bristol+Bath Creative R+D event Creative Futures: place and presence .

When I began working with SWCTN we evolved our digital accessibility offer through our efforts to remove barriers to participation. The barriers we are focusing in in this document are in the context of disability and impairment. We were guided by the [Social Model of Disability by Shape Arts](#) and brought on a selection of accessibility service providers and lived experience consultants throughout the journey to help us pull together this offer.

We recognise that there were (and still are) barriers that we were either unable to address or possibly were/are not aware of. The areas I will touch upon in this document are partial-sightedness & blindness, deafness & hard of hearing and neurodivergence.

Our approach was developed from an arts and theatre background and was exploratory and gentle in nature. We aligned with and expanded upon (amongst others) offers from digital events run by [Unlimited](#) who are a leading arts & disability focused organisation.

While this document is intended to offer some insight into methodology from our experience it is not a substitute for engaging with both professional access service providers and lived-experience consultants. Both of these perspectives are key to creating a holistic, inclusive approach and I fully recommend including them from the outset. To quote a term well used in disability activism : ‘Nothing about us without us’.

The work and the document would not have been possible without the collective brilliance and influence of the organisations, teams and individuals I worked with and I have included an acknowledgement section at the end of this document. Where relevant within the document I will refer to specific names and linked out to their websites and profiles should you wish to connect with them for future projects. When I refer to ‘we’ throughout the document, I talk generally about the 3 teams I worked with throughout this journey.

Budget and planning for digital delivery

Here are some practices and thoughts that became apparent whilst developing the accessibility offer across the 3 events:

- Accessibility strategies should be planned in from the very beginning, particularly when starting to allocate budget, team and platforms. I would recommend having an accessibility consultant, lived-experience consultants or consultant service providers such as a BSL interpreter in your production team from early in the project.
- For projects that have a lot of contributors or a large team consider running an accessibility awareness session with one or more professionals to give everyone a basic level of good practice for producing resources and content. SWCTN had 2 bookable sessions that helped us all get in-tune with how to identify and action good practices.
- Use [accessible document guidance](#) and [plain English](#) to create resources from the beginning. Make these available early to attendees as documents they can download & check that the file format is accessible. Consider adding BSL, audio descriptions and captioning to video content and design content with these things in mind. Use the access guidance when generating any additional content for sessions such as slides. You can check that there is a reasonable contrast between text and background colours by [using this tool](#).

- For SWCTN, accessibility took up around a quarter of the total budget for the showcase. This accounts for the consultants, services, additional platform integrations, BSL & captioning translations in pre-made content and the creation of additional content for marketing. It doesn't cover the R&D time for the production manager role or for any other time taken by the core production team to generate resources or attend training.
- It is worth noting that this was at the beginning of the pandemic and during a rapid shift of services online so there was some additional work to do making the intended physical events into digital ones. Mapping out the costs of these services early will help to form an understanding of what can be achieved with the budget available.

Choosing a platform

When exploring potential platforms working through all accessibility considerations before committing is important. Organising short platform test with lived-experience users & service providers can give valuable feedback on their capacity to navigate and participate.

Additional 3rd party services may improve the user experience and quality of accessibility. For example, we chose to use separate streaming specific services that were broadcast to platforms using RTMP outputs. This gave us greater customisation and control of who and what was visible on screen. Notably it allowed us to give consistent BSL interpreter placement throughout the sessions. We also used some YouTube video player integrations to give us better playback and legacy content options.

Selecting the right platform to allow us to make the accessibility offers took a bit of time to play and problem-solve with to find the different integrations. Unfortunately, for many platforms accessibility features are slow to arrive. I built an offer using 3 separate platforms and 2 services to make it possible to get all the access features we wanted.

Areas we found caused issues were:

- Anything that relied on visual spatial navigation, especially if in a gamified spaces such as Like Like, Topia or Mozilla Hubs.
- Any chat functions on any platform need scrutiny as they require the capacity to read and type text whilst also viewing other content on a screen which can be a problem for partially sighted/blind or deaf participants who rely on BSL. It can also be overwhelming for those who are neurodivergent.
- Any networking functions as these invariably did not have provisions to provide BSL, captioning or other accessibility functions and relied often on sight for navigation of the feature. We decided not to include networking as it was not accessible to all attendees.
- If you are working with website design you can refer to the [WCAG](#) to help navigate how to make your website accessible.
- Zoom has a lot of accessibility features including CCs built in, dial in (great for blind & VI participants) and removable chat functions that help. It may be worth levelling your platform against these functions to get an understanding of what the accessibility profile of the site is.

Preparing resources

The more resources that can be provided before, during and after the event the better. Here are some key thoughts on what can be produced throughout the project for the event.

- Accessible programme that is available in advance – release with invites if possible. Refer to guidance on how to make an accessible document.
- Make sure all resources such as presentation slides, videos and other materials produced are also accessible. Whatever services you provide in the event should be reflected in any digital resources you produce.
- Any other resources that can be made accessible before or after the event. Transcripts of both live content and chats. Re-watch options for viewing after the event. Copies of presentations and videos from sessions available before and after the event.

- Invites that are accessible and reach the people they are aiming to serve for example, use video invites with BSL & captioning to reach a wider audience. Also being proactive about finding those relative networks on social media etc. to circulate on.
- Ask presenters to speak slowly and clearly, ask them to wear headphones with a microphone to cut out environmental noise and make their audio clearer. Avoid visual references such as pointing.

British Sign Language (BSL) : interpretation and translation

During the planning and delivery of all 3 showcases we worked closely with a lead BSL interpreter Emily Quigley who helped us shape our BSL offer and provided training to the production team.

It is possible to use an agency to recruit and manage BSL interpreters but we decided to recruit individual interpreters using the [ASLI](#), [NRCPD](#) & [Interpreters of Colour Network](#) directories and use Emily as a coordinator. Emily was involved in most production meetings to make sure we were thinking about BSL throughout the production process.

A note on using the terms interpretation and translation: BSL *interpretation* generally references live real-time interpretation and *translation* is generally scripted and usually refers to post-production services for content such as videos.

Here are some things we learnt about offering a BSL service that helped us shape our approach:

- British sign language BSL is a language in its own right with its own syntax and structure and for some people it will be their first language. For some their only language.
- D/Deaf and d/Deaf represent differences in how people identify as deaf, you can read more about these distinctions [here](#). It is helpful to familiarise with some of those differences to help navigate how to resource an event well.
- Particular sayings and metaphors may not translate very easily into BSL, an interpreter can help you navigate what language to avoid. Refer back to plain English.
- Those who require BSL interpretation may not be able to read written English. This distinguishes why BSL interpretation should be made available alongside captioning.
- BSL interpreters need regular breaks. We programmed sessions that were between 30-45mins with a 15min break. We had a full day of programming and so had 2 interpreters to swap around for each strand of events. Some interpreters swapped within the sessions for any that were over 45mins. Our lead interpreter Emily helped us plan in the correct timings and breaks.

- When looking for platforms & streaming services it is important to consider that the BSL interpreter placement on screen should ideally stay in the same place and if possible, have an equitable size to the other participants.
- ‘In vision’ BSL translation refers to the embedding of a BSL translator in a video.
- There are different ways of interpreting a panel session. We had some interpreters covering whole sessions on their own, interpreting everything spoken in the session. We also had 2 interpreters working together in one session representing different speakers and doing conversational interpretation. It’s worth discussing these options with the BSL team.
- If you do have video/audio content that doesn’t have BSL embedded translations consider asking your interpreter to interpret it during the live event.
- Digital events with BSL translation should also have platform orientation instructions is BSL as well
- BSL interpreters will need to know of any specialist terms ahead of your event to help them interpret correctly. Any materials you can give in advance will help, scripts, schedules, videos, slides, websites or docs about the projects or subject matter.

- If you are providing BSL services make sure you have created some appropriate content to invite people who use BSL to the event.
- Consider representation, especially in light of the session content. A person of colour on your panel may wish to be represented by an interpreter of colour. There may be conversation around gender representation as well, particularly if is relevant to the discussions within the sessions.
- Placement of BSL – make sure they won't be obscured by captions.

Captioning

For all 3 showcases we used a captioning service rather than hiring individual freelancers. This allowed for easier management and a consistent service. It also gave us a bit more flexibility to move between streaming and conference platforms. We chose [AI media](#), a company that had experience of working with the different digital platforms that we were trialing. [Stagetext](#) also offer a similar service, though originally more rooted in live theatre events.

For the first showcase we had stand-alone captions that were provided in a separate web browser player. This was because we were using the platform's internal streaming studio that at the time and it had no options for caption ingestion in the video stream.

For the second & third showcases we used the streaming studio service called [Streamyard](#) and additional YouTube integrations so that we were able to have captions included in the video alongside BSL.

By the second and third events we had closed captions that were available through the player in the platform.

- Captioning is helpful for a lot of different people including those with hearing impairments, some who are neurodivergent and those for whom English may be a second language.
- There are 2 types of live captions: open captions and closed captions. Open captions are 'burnt in' to the video meaning they cannot be turned off or changed by the viewer. Closed captions are a separated text input that are added to a player such as YouTube that can be turned on or off or customized by the viewer.

Closed captions are desirable if the platform has a CC (closed caption) option on the player as it gives more flexibility and choice to the viewers. Open captions are great for when there is no CC option and you want captions included within the stream.

- Captioning works on blocks of time, usually hourly so when programming keeps this in mind. If you run over by a few minutes, you will be charged for an additional block of time. When running sessions, consider building some contingency time for the session running over time. So, if it's an hour slot, make it 45-50mins.
- If there is content playing within the sessions that also needs captioning, make this clear to the captioners otherwise they may just caption live content.
- Make sure which ever captioning style you choose that you don't obscure important parts of the video such as BSL interpreters or other
- Find a captioning service that can work with the platforms you are using, particularly if you are running feeds through multiple platforms.

Visual Impairment (VI) & Audio Description (AD)

I want to talk a bit about our journey of navigating participation for blind and visually impaired (VI) participants. Unlike with BSL we did not have a consultant that joined throughout the production meetings, so the approach was a little different...

Our offer for blind and VI attendees began with some training by [Roz Chalmers](#) an audio describer who works with [VocalEyes](#) on how to prepare resources and approaches. In order to assess the accessibility for visually impaired attendees on the platform we hired lived-experience consultant and artist [Sally Booth](#) to do some tests using her screen reader.

We decided to ask all speakers and hosts to provide short introductory audio descriptions of themselves at the beginning of each session, only if they were comfortable to do so. This was modelled from the workshops with Roz and the [AD work of Unlimited](#) in order to offer anyone with sight impairment the some of the same visual information as everyone else.

It was important to make sure this was a gentle offer and that it was in no way mandatory. By us asking people to describe themselves visually, there were some interesting conversations raised around representation particularly in terms of indicators of race and heritage and how people chose to represent themselves with regards to their own experiences and judgement.

It felt valuable to offer these descriptions when discussing inclusion and for various other topics throughout the events. We had some particularly positive feedback from more than one attendee who appreciated the inclusive nature of the audio descriptions and hoped it would spread to other events.

We made it a homogenous offer across the event in an attempt to make it consistent, but it did raise a question as to whether it was necessary in all sessions, as some topics were less relevant to the visual make-up of the panel. When speaking with another consultant [Dave Williams](#) he highlighted that sometimes, if it is not valuable to the context of the session, the additional visual information can be a bit overwhelming or just not very useful.

I would suggest that there is still plenty of navigation to do in terms of audio descriptions, some of which can only be done through gentle experimentation and connecting with lived-experience users for feedback.

Here are some other things we learnt about planning for blind and VI participants:

- Screen readers can be magnifiers or offer text to speech navigation of content, it is really worth connecting with lived-experience users of this technology to understand how navigation works for them.
- People with visual impairment may struggle with multiple activities happening on screen at once, chat functions are not always accessible. This can be a little exclusive and we asked our hosts to include salient points from the chat in their narrative to make it feel inclusive. On some platforms such as Zoom you can remove the chat all together.
- Alt-text for images (which can be read by text to speech screen readers) on websites is valuable if the image is relevant to the context of the content but website 'furniture' such as plain banners etc. can be left. Too much alt-text on website artefacts can be confusing
- Visual artefacts should not be relied on to convey any information that is not included in the audio narration.

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- Siobhan Green
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- Anna Haig
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Translator

- Fifi Garfield

Other Consultants

- Sally Booth – lived experience VI consultant
- David Williams – lived experience blind consultant
- Roz Chalmers - Audio description and accessibility consultant

Visit www.bristolbathcreative.org
for more information.

