Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership (Large Print)

Inclusivity Guidance 2024

Contents

Summary

The following points are key findings from the *Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership* (VIHP) research on co-design and inclusive heritage engagement for people who have a visual impairment (VIPs). Much of the co-design research findings presented here are focused on accessible displays and exhibitions.

Importance of VIP inclusivity
Visual impairment forms one of the most common types of disability in the UK, with instances set to rise alongside a rapidly ageing population. Current awareness of accessibility for VIPs in heritage engagement is inadequate and a widespread revision of industry standard practices is required. Better levels of VIP accessibility are also more inclusive for people with a range of other disabilities, as well as benefiting non-disabled audience members.

Range and intersectionality of VIPs
The term visual impairment encompasses a range of conditions with varying levels of accessibility requirement. VIPs also come from a range of social and cultural backgrounds, meaning there is never one solution for the preferences and needs of VIPs.

Importance of co-design for VIP inclusivity

For heritage engagement to be inclusive of VIPs, people that have experience of living with a visual impairment should be consulted and brought into its design from the earliest stage. This includes the point at which funding is applied for. Co-design should be planned from the outset and delivered alongside at least one partner organisation with expertise in representing the VIP community. It should involve participants from varying backgrounds with a range of visual impairments, including people with sight impairment and people with severe sight impairment.

Inclusive exhibition spaces

To be inclusive to VIPs, exhibition spaces should provide assistive staff trained in visual impairment awareness. They should have their accessibility information easily available to VIPs prior to visiting and methods that facilitate easy navigation for VIPs, including good lighting, wide passageways, accessible colour schemes, easy to read information boards, signage and tactile navigation routes. There should be minimal physical barriers involved in accessing the exhibition space (e.g., doors, stairs, ropes etc.) and spaces should be quiet with low levels of acoustic reverberance. Exhibition venues should provide regular

quiet times for visiting and must facilitate the use of guide dogs, as well as assistive technology. Generally this should include the use of smartphones for accessibility needs, however in some instances smartphones are prohibited due to sensitive exhibition content, in which case discretion must be used. If smartphones are not permitted the exhibition should instead allow the use of (and ideally provide) magnifiers for VIPs, as well as audio described tours.

Audio: uses for inclusivity

Audio description, including guided/ self-guided audio description tours, should be used by heritage engagement outputs where appropriate. Audio description should be of a high quality and adhere to best practice recommendations. Other forms of audio engagement also make engagement more inclusive and should be used where possible, these include: illustrative dramatisations, sound effects, immersive audio (where it doesn't distract from other audio elements), podwalks and podcasts. Use of audio in exhibition spaces should be facilitated through the provision of headsets and versions downloadable to a smart phone or other personal device. VIPs should be able to bring their own headsets where possible, and those provided by a venue should be cleaned before use.

Presenting visual material

All written information in heritage engagement outputs should be available in braille, large print and audio format. Writing should be in plain English using an accessible font (e.g., Calibri or Arial) and kept to a minimum (150 words per information board) with text between 18-26pt. Colours used should be clearly contrasting and co-designed with VIPs. Backgrounds should be plain and visually cluttered images avoided.

Using tactile objects

The use of tactile objects make engagement outputs more inclusive to VIPs and especially individuals that have a severe sight impairment. Good hygiene practices must be used when offering tactile objects which can include: replica models (these should be as exact as possible), handling of objects from museum display (supervised), similar (usually less valuable) objects from other collections, scale models (to give a sense of objects too large to handle), and other interactive objects that don't rely on sight (e.g., objects that gamify exhibition content).

Evaluation methods

Making evaluation accessible is essential to ensure VIPs can feedback on any barriers to their participation. As with evaluation for non-disabled people, a range of methods should be used to reflect the intersectionality of VIPs, their preferences and learning styles. Surveys should be kept short and presented in accessible formats. Audio recording systems make it easier for VIPs to leave feedback (e.g., recording devices, phone/ WhatsApp numbers for voice notes or verbal feedback). Feedback sessions and focus groups are an inclusive method for participants to leave feedback but make it difficult to protect anonymity.

Introduction

"Nothing about us without us"

It is notable that over 2 million people in the UK currently live with a form of visual impairment, a figure that is set to rise dramatically in the future due to the UK's exponentially ageing population. VIP accessibility is also known to benefit the wider public and generally improves accessibility for all.

The Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership (VIHP) was funded by MOLA's Impact Accelerator Awards, to learn about the barriers to heritage engagement from people who have experience of living with a visual impairment (VIPs) in partnership with Eyes4Positivity. This builds on research from the UKRI AHRC funded *Unpath'd Waters* project (UNPATH), which identified that people who are visually impaired are underrepresented in heritage sector audience models (Perry et al. 2024). *Unpath'd Waters* also explored the methodology of co-design workshops with VIP audience members.

Whilst there are existing resources in the cultural sector that recommend accessibility practices for VIPs (see Resources Section below), the *Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership*

is unusual in that it has co-designed guidelines with VIP audience members through four consultation and co-design workshops. Furthermore, these guidelines have been created with the intention for the MOLA Public Impact Team to embed them into upcoming projects, particularly temporary exhibitions and pop-up displays. This is in response to the notion that meaningful inclusivity in cultural engagement starts at the earliest stage of project design and can inform ongoing practice. While the information explored in this document has an emphasis on exhibitions, many of the findings can be applied in other projects and engagement settings and represent a useful resource for any organisation interested in improving their practices.

This project has been delivered in collaboration with people who have a visual impairment, however, it is important to note that there is a large spectrum of sight loss, with differing presentations and accessibility considerations. Everybody's experience of living with a visual impairment is different and there is no one-size-fits-all approach to VIP inclusivity. Added to this is the intersectionality of VIPs, who may come from any social and cultural background and may have differing or even contrasting preferences in engagement and accessibility methods, as well as learning styles and interests. Generational differences can also vary

attitudes, behaviours and technology use. Many VIPs have multiple disabilities, requiring additional accessibility considerations. As such, this document should be seen as a collection of ideas and strategies to be drawn from, rather than a comprehensive model that can be applied holistically.

While specific strategies can be suggested for improving accessibility in engagement, it is important to acknowledge that disability is created socially, by wider environments and attitudes that discriminate in favour of non-disabled people (as per the *social model of disability*) (Oliver, M. 2004). This philosophy should be embedded across the entire cultural sector before it can approach meaningful inclusivity for VIPs and other communities of disabled people. According to the experiences of VIHP participants, a more coordinated approach to standards and VIP accessibility best practice is currently needed across the cultural sector.

This stated, what follows are recommendations and insights into how such aims can be achieved from MOLA's unique position in the cultural sector, as a commercial archaeology company and Independent Research Organisation. The recommendations are organised into themes which arose

from the discussions within workshops and in consideration of how the workshops were planned.

Using co-design

For a project or exhibition to be inclusive to VIPs, individuals with VIP lived experience should be brought into its design at the earliest stage of project planning. Co-design and consultation with people with lived experience of disabilities should be normal procedure for the creation of accessible engagement outputs. The recommendations and learnings presented below have emerged from workshops conducted as part of both the *Unpath'd Waters Project* and the *Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership*.

Working with partner organisations
Organisations with expertise in representing the VIP community should be involved with VIP co-design projects from the outset. If funding is sought for co-design and engagement, they should be involved in the application process.

Co-design 'pre-design'
Ahead of any workshops with VIPs, a predesign consultation should be held between design teams and VIP partner organisations, to determine the best practice approaches for workshop design and the recruitment of the consulting

VIPs. Logistical considerations for the co-design workshops include:

- Consideration of the venue: VIPs need time to get acquainted with any new spaces.
- Transport, booking of transport for all VIPs in a large group is a logistical challenge that requires time and good communication with an accessible and reputable taxi company.
- Considerations into comfort (e.g. access to welfare and amenities, seating, and breaks), creating a safe space for VIPs to share their experiences.
- Dietary requirements and hygiene need to be considered, as some VIPs may have conditions that can be severely impacted by exposure to bacteria or they may have allergies.
- Remuneration in the form of shopping vouchers can be a preferable alternative to money for people receiving disability benefits, as these can be affected by receiving consultation fees.
- The design and collection of participation, recording and photographic consent must be considered (e.g. large font forms, audio capture of consent) as well as evaluation methods (some aspects of co-design evaluation method can be established in workshops themselves).

- It's also recommended that the number of participants in each workshop is limited (e.g. 6-8 people) to ensure individuals can meaningfully contribute.

Participants

Co-designing for VIP audiences presents a challenge. Every individual VIP experiences sight loss in a different way and there is a spectrum of varying accessibility requirements across VIPs. VIPs will have differing preferences and expectations based on their cultural, socio-economic and generational backgrounds. It's important there is a representative range of VIPs in the co-design team, including both sight-impaired and severely sight impaired participants.

Training

Any team members working with VIPs should undertake VIP awareness training. This enables staff to embed VIP friendly practices into the project, and to become aware of the range of visual impairments and how to accommodate them.

Co-design workshops

Co-codesign can take the form of workshops, in which the design ideas are explored, tested and documented. The

following considerations are recommended for delivering workshops:

- Ground rules

The collective establishment of ground rules at the beginning of sessions helps mitigate conflict and facilitate the running of workshops smoothly. For instance, in preventing individuals from dominating discussion or regularly meandering off topic. This can include the way discussion is conducted (e.g. by circulating around the group and regularly changing the starting point and direction). It's advised that ground rules are documented, circulated and agreed upon at the beginning of the co-design process. A team member should be allocated as the chair of proceedings and agendas should be agreed upon prior to delivery of each workshop.

- Design decisions

Although design decisions are explored throughout the sessions, concrete decisions shouldn't be made until all feedback has been gathered.

- Documenting co-design

Someone should be responsible for documenting the workshops by taking notes and it's recommended that they

are also recorded using a dictaphone or equivalent device. As well as keeping a record of design ideas this can be useful in instances requiring conflict resolution.

- Using examples

Providing examples of various design scenarios can provide good material for conducting discussion. The exact methodology here depends on the aims of each project and their intended outputs, however care should be taken to mitigate against inadvertently leading participants into specific design outcomes by being too prescriptive.

- Testing

Where possible testing should be used in co-design. This can include evaluation of similar project outputs provided as examples, or of the specific output being designed once it has reached 'testing' stage. Testing based design should be iterative, with each iteration encompassing feedback from previous workshops.

See Appendix for evaluation of our co-design workshops, which includes feedback from the VIPs.

Inclusive exhibition spaces

Assistive staff

Making sure there are enough front of house staff is important for positive visitor experiences, whether the visitors have a visual impairment or not. It is good practice to ensure there are enough staff trained in VIP awareness on hand, in case high levels of assistance are required. All staff need to be aware of existing support systems for VIPs within the venue and exhibition. Having staff to welcome VIPs on arrival, to give them accessibility information for their visit and to answer any questions is important for facilitating an inclusive experience.

VIP staff
Greater representation of VIPs embeds awareness of their lived experience and the issues faced by VIPs with staff and visitors alike.

Training
In addition to VIP awareness, designated sighted exhibition staff need to be fully trained in guiding, audio description and other techniques that can help with VIP accessibility.

Use of real people

Automated or AI systems of assistance are impersonal and can make visitors feel less valued.

Sufficient staffing

Floating staff should be present in each part of the exhibition space. Some severely sight impaired people may need full assistance throughout an exhibition. Limiting the number of visitors at certain times makes this easier.

Accessibility information

Many VIPs will only visit an exhibition if they know it will be accessible to them beforehand. Clear accessibility information for visitors should be available online in accessible formats e.g., with good font size, colour contrast and screen reader compatibility. There should also be alternative methods for accessing information, including by phone.

Information on layout

Audience members should be given a sense of the exhibition space before visiting. This can be facilitated by allowing access to the space in advance of engagement with the exhibition or use of accessible maps. Accessible maps can

be physical (e.g. tactile), online, virtual tours and/or audio described.

Navigability

Poor navigability in exhibition spaces can cause stress and mental fatigue for VIPs, limiting their capacity to engage with content. Inclusive exhibition spaces should be designed minimally, with predictable spatial organisation and direct straight lines where possible.

Tactile routes

Using tactile floor and wall routes (at hand height) for navigation around the exhibition aids VIP navigation. Routes can benefit from different textures through, for example, carpet material. Floor routes can consist of slight ridges that allow the end of a cane to pass along them. The ridges should be in colour contrast to the rest of the floor. Wall routes should also be in conspicuous colour contrast in addition to being a different texture to their surrounds. Tactile floor routes should be positioned away from areas of heavy footfall (e.g., to the side of passageways), as these can wear them out. They should also avoid crossing passageways used by wheelchairs, which may be hindered by them.

Colour contrast

Good colour contrast and bold edges should be provided throughout the design scheme. Colours should be used that are uncommonly affected by colour blindness. The exact colours used should be determined through co-design with VIPs. Different areas in the exhibition can be demarcated using coloured tape, tactile rubber bumps or similar.

Lighting

Good levels of lighting should be used throughout exhibition spaces, in a way that minimises reflection and diffuses the light evenly.

Wide passageways

Passageways should be wide enough to allow all types of wheelchairs and ample room for visitors to pass each other with canes. Visitors may also have assistance dogs.

Arrows and signage

Signage should be large, well-lit and provided throughout. There should also be tactile versions on tactile navigation routes. Exit signs should be especially clear for safety reasons.

Wayfinding systems

The use of technology for providing wayfinding systems presents an opportunity for enhanced navigation. Existing systems include use of GPS or QR codes/ Navilens, though research into these was not within the scope of the VIHP workshops. It's recommended that wayfinding systems that are accessible online are also made downloadable for use on smart phones and other portable devices.

QR codes

QR codes can be used to access information throughout exhibitions, however they are contentious within the VIP community and won't benefit everyone. It's advised that co-design with VIPs determines whether they are appropriate for a given setting. Where they are used they need to be easy to find. They should have a tactile element (e.g., a tactile border and tactile letters 'QR' leading to them on the navigation route) to ensure they can be located. Setting out QR code locations in a predictable pattern within the space makes them easier to find. They should be large enough to minimise the need for accuracy in their use, but not so large that users need to stand at a distance to fit them into their phone screen. Alternative systems like Navilens further reduce the need for accuracy and can be identified at greater distances. Both rely on the use of phones/internet

access, and it is advised devices are made available for people who cannot use smartphones. QR codes that require passwords before links can be opened are less accessible for VIPs and shouldn't be used.

Geo-triggered audio

Audio engagement can be triggered by geolocation within the exhibition space, giving the opportunity for easier navigation.

Phone charging points

If visitors are required to access additional or supportive content on their own mobile devices, points for charging phones should be provided and should be made easy to find using clear and tactile signage. AC plug sockets should be used as public USB points can be tampered with by criminals to steal data.

Physical obstacles

Doors

Navigating through doors can be time consuming and mentally draining, the fewer doors the better. Doors can be left open or automatic doors can be used.

Stairs

Like doors, the fewer the stairs the better. Where access via stairs is necessary handrails are essential.

Lifts

Lifts are more accessible than stairs and also cater for VIPs that have mobility issues. Ideally lifts should have talking buttons and audible information about the number of floors etc. In addition, lifts should have an extra set of horizontal buttons at a good height for VIPs (additional as they are less accessible to wheelchair users) with braille and raised numbers on.

Barriers in exhibition

Many exhibitions have physical barriers to prevent objects being approached closely or touched, such as ropes. This disables VIPs in engaging with objects closely. Some VIPs can benefit from seeing things at short range or touching them.

Acoustics and noise

Quiet times

Spaces that are reverberant and noisy can be overwhelming and off-putting for VIPs (as well as for some people who are neurodivergent). Quiet times, limiting the amount of people that can enter an exhibition at once, should be scheduled to reduce footfall. This also helps the problem of VIPs feeling obliged to move through exhibition spaces faster than they need to, due to high numbers of visitors. Quiet times should be a minimum of two hours and should be scheduled regularly to allow VIPs more attendance options. They should also be scheduled at varying times of day and on varying days of the week - for example, not just in the evening when it is dark outside as many VIPs find it harder to travel in poor light. Ideally, coordination between cultural institutions should ensure that quiet times do not overlap frequently, so that VIPs are not caused to miss out on other cultural experiences due to limited options. Quiet times also benefit people with a range of other disabilities.

Exhibition space acoustics

Exhibition spaces that are acoustically deadened by treatment, for example carpeting, cause less sonic activity/confusion and are therefore more inclusive.

Noise

Exhibition spaces should be kept generally quiet and free of irrelevant noise sources. It's also a good idea to provide a quiet break-out space for individuals that may feel overwhelmed by being in an exhibition space.

Policy

Guide dogs

It is a legal obligation under the Equality Act 2010 to accept guide and assistance dogs into venues. Although assistance dog owners are required to provide water for their dogs it's good practice to make some available.

Photography

Institutions commonly forbid photography in their exhibitions. However, VIPs may use their phone camera's zoom function to magnify things, and exceptions should therefore be made to facilitate this where possible. Staff should be aware of these exceptions. Use of phones by VIPs in some cultural settings such as theatres has caused controversy due to the disruption it causes others, as such VIPs can be asked to put their phones on silent and encouraged to use them conscientiously. In instances

where exhibition or performance content is too sensitive to allow the use of smartphones, alternatives such as magnifiers and audio tours should be provided.

Audio: uses for inclusivity

Audio description

In-person audio description tours
Audio description tours are an effective way of engaging VIPs in exhibition content. Doing them in-person is preferable for some people but relies on a good, well-trained, audio describer, which is key to the effectiveness of the engagement. Whilst in-person tours have the benefit of allowing questions and interaction with visitors, they reduce the level of independence by which VIPs can explore exhibitions and are best combined with less prescriptive approaches. Tours should be held regularly.

Self-guided audio description tours
These can be delivered by providing headsets or through online access, via personal device/ smartphone. When offering self-guided tours online, exhibition spaces should have good WiFi availability, phone charging points and a downloadable version. Information should be easily navigable using layers of information. They should describe room spaces and include navigation instructions. Equipment needs to be clearly signposted using tactile means and must be sanitised after each use.

Layers of information

Self-guided audio tours should give listeners the option to easily skip through information they are not interested in or delve deeper into things that they would like to know more about. For example, each talking point can have multiple layers starting with a brief overview. Here listeners are able to choose if they would like more information before selecting the type of information. For example, an item could be introduced as a '1st Century Roman Samian Ware bowl', then pressing 2 could lead to an 'audio description of the bowl', pressing 3 could 'learn more about Samian Ware and Roman pottery', pressing 4 could 'learn more about the site and excavation where the bowl was found' etc.

Engaging audio description

Audio description needs to be engaging for everyone. This can be achieved by using imaginative language, metaphors and imagery alongside more factual information. Ideally different interests and learning styles should be catered for simultaneously and by using different layers of information.

Structure of audio description

Summaries should be provided at the beginning and end of the description and the file/structure should be broken into short segments, to allow independent navigation through the content. A skip forwards and backwards function is essential.

Narrator

Different narrator's voices used in audio-description suit different people, but can be off-putting if they are not right for the listener. It's best to have more than one option, with both more neutral and more expressive styles as well as different accents. Using varied voices for different types of information can be helpful. For example, having a professional (e.g. curator) voice for specific objects can be an engaging way of providing a specialist perspective.

Speech

Audio-description should be spoken crisply and clearly with good articulation and separation between words. The pace is important, and a good speed should be maintained that gives plenty of time for processing but doesn't drag. There should be plenty of pauses to give space for mental catch-up. Listeners should be able to skip backwards and forwards through the audio easily. Tone should be appropriate to the

content and fairly neutral, to avoid distracting from the information.

Language

Plain English should be used wherever possible without jargonistic terminology, but not in a way that oversimplifies learning. Where technical terms are necessary, they should be defined and explained. Abbreviations should be avoided or expanded on when necessary and the present tense used where possible.

Relatable

When talking about distance and size it is better not to rely on measurements but instead give relatable comparisons, so listeners can picture them easily. For example, it is better to say 'approximately the size of a football pitch' than 'two acres'. Colours can also be explained by comparison, e.g. 'lemon yellow' or 'mustard yellow'.

Detail and information

When describing pictures and diagrams sufficient detail should be offered, nothing should be taken for granted. Labels and visually presented text should be read out word for word, so exactly that the same information is received by both sighted and non-sighted audiences.

Illustrative or interpretive audio

Dramatisation

Bringing objects and historical content to life through scripted audio dramatisations is an engaging way of presenting stories and information. In this case they should include an element of audio description or self-description within the script and benefit from the use of good acting and sound effects.

Sound effects

Sound effects can be used within audio outputs, including guides, but should be used sensitively and shouldn't take the listener by surprise. Warning should precede content that could be emotionally triggering.

Oral histories

Oral histories can be used in heritage engagement, to bring stories to life through personal experiences.

Immersive Audio

Soundscapes and immersive sounds

Atmospheric soundscapes can help to create atmosphere in exhibition spaces but can also be distracting and interfere with the ability for VIPs to focus on content, so shouldn't be overused and should be intermittent. If immersive sounds relate to themes such as war or other potentially disturbing content, trigger warnings should be used prior to their presentation. Context should also be provided to increase the relevance of the sounds. Some VIPs will bring support animals, which may also be distracted by certain sounds. Some VIPs prefer immersive sounds to be presented on headphones so that they have more control over how much they interact with them. However, some VIPs report using headphones can make immersive audio experiences overwhelming and it's recommended that open-cup headphones are used to help mitigate this. Spoken words should be used cautiously in soundscapes, as they may make it harder to concentrate on exhibition information.

Other audio engagement methods

Podwalks

These are guided walks presented in an audio format that can be engaged with online or by downloading them onto a personal device. As with audio description they should use Plain English and be non-jargonistic with clear explanation of any technical terms. Too many dates and numbers can be off-putting. Relatable measurements should also be used (e.g. 20min walk as opposed to 1 mile). Voice should be relevant to the content and suitable for the audience, ideally with more than one option available. As with audio description speech should be paced so that it doesn't feel rushed with plenty of pauses for mental catch-up and summaries at the beginning and end of sections are useful. Sensory descriptions of past historical environments (noises, smells etc.) make walking points engaging and relatable.

Podcasts

Podcasts are a good way for cultural organisations to engage VIP audiences with content. Although similar guidelines apply to podwalks in terms of language, voice and speech they were not explored as part of the VIHP

workshops and would benefit from further co-design research with VIP audiences.

Presenting visual material

Inclusive methods

Braille

Where labels and booklets are used in exhibitions braille versions should be available.

Magnification glasses/ headsets

Magnification headsets give people with some impairments the ability to look at things in more detail and should be made available for visitors. They should have control knobs to allow VIPs the ability to decrease and increase the level of magnification.

Information boards

All information should be available in large print, audio and braille. Audio can be engaged with using headphones (e.g. triggered automatically/ by a button) or as part of an audio guide. An accessible font should be used (e.g., Calibri or Arial) with a size between 18-26pt (anything bigger than 26pt should be emailed or put into audio) and boards should be positioned at a height and angle that is easy to read for both standing people and those in using a wheelchair. Text

should be used minimally (150 words per board max) and should be presented on a plain background with good colour contrast. They need to be well lit without glare. Images on boards should be large with good colour contrast (in colours that aren't commonly associated with colour blindness) and ought to be visually clear without clutter.

Objects/ artefacts with writing

When artefacts have a written component (e.g., a handwritten letter or diary entry on display as an artefact) they should be presented with an audio version and transcript in large print and braille.

Using tactile objects

Inclusive methods

Hygiene
Where tactile methods are used sanitiser should be provided for visitors and objects for handling should be sterilised after each use. This is particularly important as many VIPs are vulnerable, and some visual impairments are negatively affected by poor hygiene.

Object handling
Some museums allow objects to be handled at specific times and usually under supervision by a specialist. This is excellent for VIPs who can't get a visual sense of the object. Some items, such as musical instruments, can even be 'tried out' giving a deeper understanding of their purpose and function.

Replica models
Ideally any object that can be seen but not touched should have a replica model for tactile engagement. These should be as similar as possible to the object they represent. Where there are differences in, for example, size, weight, material or texture, these differences ought to be clearly stated to

give a better sense of the real item. Some VIPs need to look at things very closely to see them clearly, and replicas should also therefore resemble the original items as accurately as possible. Best practice is also to make them from similar materials, so that when they are "tapped" they give a realistic impression of the item's fabric.

Similar objects

For artefacts that can't be touched an alternative example of a similar item that is available for handling can be provided to give a better sense of the original. For example, it may not be advised to allow the handling of a complete Roman pot, but a broken pot sherd of the same pottery type will demonstrate its texture and fabric.

Scale models

Sometimes buildings and other large structures or landscapes can be conveyed by scale models. This is an effective way of communicating architecture and should be accompanied by contextual information as well as a sense of the original size.

Tactile images

Artworks, photographs, maps and other two-dimensional images can be made tactile by giving them texture and creating ridges in the surface. This allows audiences to feel their way around the image and visualise it themselves, though it should be noted that this is a skill some VIPs are better at than others.

Other interactive objects

Using interactive objects that are accessible to VIPs and illustrate or gamify ideas can be fun and make engagement more inclusive.

Evaluation methods

General guidelines

Just as there are different visual impairments, so too do VIPs have different learning styles. It is therefore important to provide a rounded evaluation methodology to enable VIPs to provide useful feedback on their experience.

- Always provide alternative methods of evaluation to cater for different accessibility needs and preferences.

- VIPs may face more barriers to providing evaluation than sighted people, reducing their likelihood of participating. Incentives (e.g., prize draws or loyalty points towards shopping vouchers) may help to motivate some people.

Surveys

Surveys can be especially challenging for VIPs, when using them try to make them as engaging and accessible as possible.

Include different question formats, as not all VIPs will respond well to the same method for expressing feedback. For example, some VIPs will be more comfortable with emotional language or long-text answers, whilst others will find it more effective to rate things numerically.

- Keep them short (e.g., five questions) and easy to complete with simple language.
- Online surveys should be created using a platform that allows customisation with accessible font and colour options, for example, SurveyMonkey - which has been designed to meet specific (US) standards of accessibility.
- Ensure the language is clear. Establish what you want to know and format the question accordingly e.g., by using number scales or multiple-choice answers. Include a free text or comments box so they can elaborate if they choose.
- Prompt for feedback at the time of engagement but always provide the opportunity to complete surveys at home instead. A link to the survey can be provided on devices used to support the exhibition.
- Make sure it is possible to do the survey anonymously and abide by GDPR protocols on data collection.

Audio recording systems

An easy way for VIPs to leave feedback is to record it verbally using a recording device. The method here will be determined by evaluation strategy, and will require an accessible prompt to be provided, explaining the feedback being sought, but could include:
- holding down a well signposted button to record a response
- interacting with somebody using a recording device
- Use of a private booth (to protect anonymity)

Contact numbers

An alternative to voice recording at an exhibition could be to provide a contact number, allowing VIPs the ability to leave feedback by text, or as a voice note. This method needs to be provided in a way that protects the visitor's anonymity and doesn't inadvertently collect their phone number details.

Feedback sessions

Round table discussions or focus groups with visitors who are willing to give up their time (or can be motivated by

incentives) is a useful way of evaluating engagement, particularly prior to an engagement opening to the wider public. This can be run in a consultation style discussion and incorporate voting systems.

A drawback to consider here is the lack of anonymity in leading face-to-face feedback, as well as the tendency for groups to agree with each other rather than express controversial opinions or deliver negative feedback directly.

Testimonials

It's been a really worthwhile experience...it's great to have an opportunity for our voices
to be heard and I really feel they have been [heard] and understood... whereas in all too
many situations we're heard and ignored - **VIHP participant**

The sessions were very well planned and arranged to suit each one of us. A wonderful
experience with archaeologists whom are prepared to do all they can to improve
accessibilities to visually impaired and severely cited impaired people - **VIHP**
participant

I give it [the project] 11 out of 10! Because I'm really really happy. I like how it has been
structured...you've been really really nice, you've been super friendly to my guide dog...I
think it's been really really brilliant. I've been looking forward to coming to the sessions
so I guess I've missed them. I'm very happy thank you...and I'm not generous with

*feedback, I'm not just pleasing people. - **VIHP participant***

I've felt you've done really well [at creating a safe space] I've felt like I can express
*myself... I've felt that we've listened to each other - **VIHP participant***

Pleased; brilliant; happy; exciting; engaging; stimulating; productive; thought provoking;
challenging (in a fun way); friendly; nurturing; learning curve; positive; inclusive;
*inspiring; very welcoming; considerate; thoughtful; productive; interesting. - **various VIHP participants***

Resources

DBSV (2024) [Guidelines to ensure accessibility to museums and exhibitions for the blind and partially sighted](#)

Plain English Campaign (2024) [Plain English Campaign Homepage](#)

RNIB (2024a) [Exhibitions for All (rnib.org.uk)](#)

RNIB (2024b) [Resource Guides from RNIB](#)

Transport for London (2024) [Assisted transport services - Transport for London (tfl.gov.uk)](#)

UK Government (2010) [Equalities Act](#)

VocalEyes (2022) [Heritage Access Report.](#)

Relevant charitable groups

Blind Aid: [https://blindaid.org.uk/.](https://blindaid.org.uk/)

Blind Veterans UK: https://www.blindveterans.org.uk/

EXTANT: https://extant.org.uk/.

Eyes4Positivity: https://eyes4positivity.org/.

Glaucoma UK: [https://glaucoma.uk/.](https://glaucoma.uk/)

Guide Dogs: [https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/.](https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/)

Macular Society: [https://www.macularsociety.org/.](https://www.macularsociety.org/)

Retina UK: [https://retinauk.org.uk/.](https://retinauk.org.uk/)

Royal National Institute of Blind People: https://www.rnib.org.uk/.

SENSE: https://www.sense.org.uk/.

Thomas Pocklington Trust: https://www.pocklington-trust.org.uk/.

Visionary: https://www.visionary.org.uk/.

Vocal Eyes: https://vocaleyes.co.uk/.

Acknowledgements

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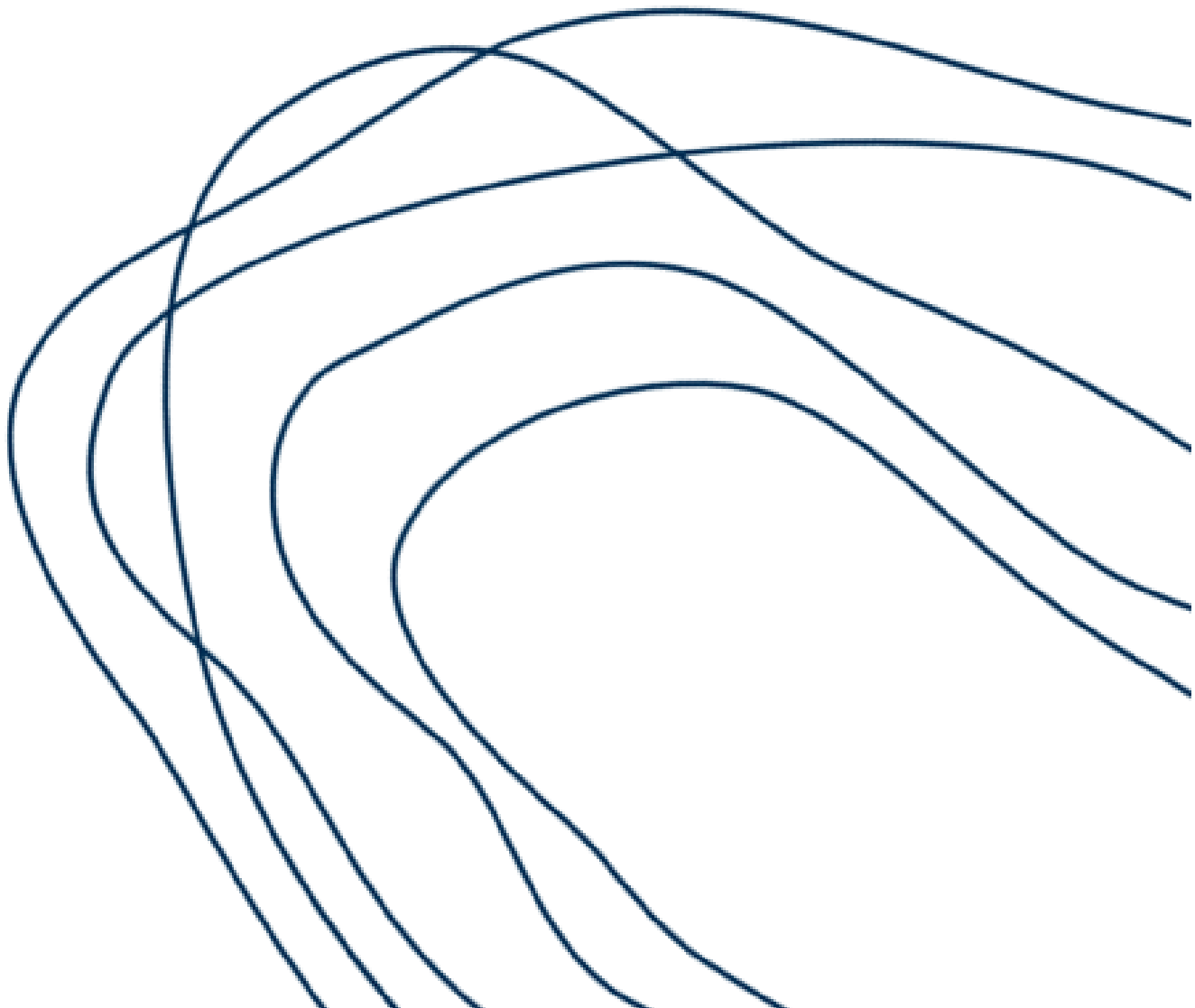https://doi.org/10.1080/17567505.2024.2341361

Appendix: VIHP Evaluation Report

VIHP EVALUATION REPORT (Large Print)

We are pleased to provide an evaluation report on the activities undertaken as part of the Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership IAA Award 2024.

Introduction

This evaluation report presents the results of the activities undertaken as part of the Visual Impairment Heritage Partnership (VIHP) project, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through one of MOLA's Impact Accelerator Account (IAA) Partnership Grants.

Our VIHP partner, Eyes4Positivity, represents people who have a visual impairment (VIPs) and assists in researching accessibility within the cultural sector. With a large network of members of varying backgrounds and accessibility needs, they provide training and educational guidance in working with VIPs.

The research of the UKRI AHRC funded *Unpath'd Waters* project (UNPATH) endeavoured to reach visually impaired people who are currently underrepresented in heritage sector audience models (Perry et al. 2024; see also VocalEyes 2022). The VIHP built on the UNPATH research into co-design methodologies and expanded on this, working with s*everely visually impaired* (formally referred to as 'blind') participants, to develop accessible methods for MOLA's engagement outputs through collaboration with VIPs.

 The VIHP project had three key aims:

1. To explore and document barriers and opportunities for VIPs in MOLA's current engagement methods and outputs.

2. To encourage greater dialogue with VIP audiences via Eyes4Positivity, laying the foundations for further

collaborative work to the benefit of MOLA, Eyes4Positivity and VIP audiences.

3. Through collaboration with VIPs and Eyes4Positivity, to provide and promote needed guidance on VIP inclusivity strategies.

No exact output (other than a publicly available guidance document on VIP-inclusive strategies) was anticipated but the VIHP team rather sought to learn further ways to embed VIP friendly practices into their upcoming and future engagement projects.

The below table lists the activities undertaken.

Activity / Output	Venue	Date
Sight loss awareness training	MOLA London office	24th April 2024
Workshop 1	Shoreditch Town Hall	28th May 2024
Workshop 2	Shoreditch Town Hall	11th June 2024
Workshop 3	MOLA London office	16th July 2024
Workshop 4	MOLA London office	30th July 2024
Guidance document	N/A	

Project Activities

Sight loss awareness training

Although this project has been delivered in collaboration with people who have a visual impairment, there is a large spectrum of sight loss, with differing presentations and accessibility considerations. As such the team undertook VIP accessibility training prior to the co-design workshops. This supported staff in learning ways to embed VIP friendly practices into this, and future projects.

MOLA staff experiencing different sight impairments as part of the training with Eyes4Positivity

Feedback quotes from MOLA staff show the impact after Sight Loss Awareness training:

> "I feel that I have a greater understanding of the daily challenges faced by those with different types of impairments and how this can impact choices (of what a VIP decides to do with their lives!)"

> "I now feel deeper understanding and therefore more confidence to speak up and support VIPs."

> "It's essential that people who have no experience of sight loss are educated in the everyday realities for people with sight loss, in order to create a more inclusive society."

> "I think it is invaluable to have someone with site loss leading the training, it gave me a unique insight into the challenges people with sight loss face and what can be done to overcome these challenges. Overall, it felt incredibly positive."

Predesign consultation

The VIHP team took on the logistical learnings from UNPATH and incorporated VIP research findings in relation to heritage engagement.

Ahead of the workshops with VIPs, a predesign consultation with Eyes4positivity was held to determine the best practice approaches for the workshop design and the recruitment of the consulting VIPs.

It was important there was a representative range of participating VIPs, including both sight-impaired and severely sight impaired participants. Additionally, the number of participants for the workshops was limited to ensure individuals could meaningfully contribute.

Logistical considerations for the co-design workshops included:

- assessing the venues to ensure suitability regarding:
  - how to accommodate different needs, VIPs need time to get acquainted with any new spaces.
  - comfort (e.g. access to welfare and amenities, seating, and breaks), creating a safe space for VIPs to share their experiences.
- booking of transport for all VIPs, a logistical challenge that required time and good communication with an accessible and reputable taxi company.
- refreshments: dietary requirements and hygiene were also considered
- remuneration for consultants, considered with VIPs needs in mind. Renumeration as a shopping voucher was provided following each workshop to the participants.

It was also agreed that the VIHP team would chair the sessions and agendas would be approved and circulated to the VIPs prior to delivery of each workshop. Additionally, the VIHP team would be responsible for documenting the workshops by taking notes, and sessions were recorded using

a Dictaphone, of which the VIPs were notified and consented to.

Co-design workshops

The methodology consisted of four workshops, which were initially structured according to different themes, before further development in consultation with Eyes4Positivity.

Workshop 1:

This workshop started with an introduction to the project, an icebreaker activity, and setting of ground rules to support the co-design relationship. The collective establishment of ground rules at the beginning of the session helped facilitate the smooth running of the workshops. They covered the way discussions were conducted (by circulating around the group and regularly changing the starting point and direction), and behavioural expectations. These were circulated after the workshop and agreed upon collectively. They were also reviewed and reiterated at the beginning of subsequent workshops to ensure they remained relevant and that everyone understood and accepted them.

The VIPs were asked about their perceptions and experiences of engaging with heritage. Discussions around exhibitions and museums were held, partly as this was the most common aspect of heritage engagement the VIPs had undertaken. VIPs were asked to identify barriers they had experienced and their initial thoughts on how these might be

overcome. Positive adaptations and accessible evaluation methods were also discussed.

The following workshops were then planned in consideration of themes the VIPs discussed in workshop 1.

Participants in discussions at Workshop 1

Workshop 2:
In this workshop the UNPATH research was introduced and conversations delved deeper into how to improve accessibility for VIPs. The idea that 'audio is ideal' was discussed and the group revisited inclusive evaluation methods.

Workshop 3:

For the first part of the session the VIPs were divided into two groups and after being provided with a fictional brief, they were asked to design a VIP accessible exhibition. Designs covered accessibility requirements and inclusivity strategies, as well as desired content.

In the afternoon a selection of MOLA engagement outputs, including the *"Dig box"* activity, the *A428* Pop-up exhibition, soundscapes from CITiZAN's outreach project "Echoes" (Arts Council), and the podwalk produced for *Brentford Waterside* were reviewed to assess inclusivity. This process was an excellent tool for engaging the VIPs beyond the theoretical.

VIP participants assessing MOLAs "Dig box" activity

Workshop 4:

The final workshop undertook a review of some of the currently available assistive technologies and tactile resources used within museum exhibitions, and the importance of layers of information.

Following this the VIPs were asked to undertake a 'tabula rasa' exhibition design: VIPs were given a short brief to work in groups to design their own fictional exhibition or museum. This was a successful activity for codesign and for gathering insight, although facilitation was required to ensure that everyone could have their say.

Finally, a discussion on the format of the guideline document and evaluation of the workshops was completed.

VIHP Inclusivity Guidance

Whilst there are existing resources in the cultural sector that recommend accessibility practices for VIPs, the VIHP is unique in that it has co-designed guidelines to inclusivity with VIP audience members through consultation and the co-design workshops.

The guidance represents a useful resource for any organisation interested in improving their practices. While the information explored in the document has an emphasis on exhibitions, many of the findings can be applied in other projects and engagement settings.

The document should be seen as a collection of ideas and strategies to be drawn from, rather than a comprehensive

model that can be applied holistically, as VIPs may come from any social and cultural background, may have differing or even contrasting preferences in engagement and accessibility methods, as well as learning styles and interests. In addition, generational differences can vary attitudes, behaviours and technology use. Many VIPs also have multiple disabilities, requiring additional accessibility considerations.

The guidance document will be available from both MOLA's and Eyes4Positivity's websites.

Evaluation and reflections

Meeting the project aims

We addressed the project aims in the following ways:

1. During this project MOLA and Eyes4Positivity delivered four workshops that explored and documented the barriers faced by the VIPs with current museum practices. We also reviewed a variety of current MOLA engagement outputs and identified opportunities for greater VIP inclusivity.
2. Throughout this project, MOLA has enhanced its existing working relationship with Eyes4Positivity and developed new connections with VIP audiences, laying the groundwork for future collaborative work in both our research and commercial projects.

3. The experiences and insights shared by the VIPs in the workshops informed the development of the inclusive guidance document, which is available on both MOLA's and Eyes4Positivity's websites.

VIP feedback

During the workshops we discussed with the VIPs more accessible ways of capturing feedback. We used the final session of the fourth workshop to gather feedback from the participants on the workshops, following the guidelines of the earlier discussions.

The participants were overwhelmingly positive about the workshops, both with the emotional words they used to describe them, and the more traditional scores out of 10 (with 1 being very poor and 10 being excellent) we even achieved a score of '11', providing a welcoming environment and opportunities for the participants to be heard.

Word cloud produced from the emotional words participants used to evaluate the workshops

Suggestions for improvement were mostly along the theme of requiring more time, both to discuss the topics of the sessions, but also to allow time for participants to network and learn from each other.

We asked the participants if there was just one thing that they would implement to make exhibitions and / or MOLA activities more accessible what would that be, and in addition for the requirement for good audio description, positive role models and awareness training for staff, immersive multisensory engagement was identified as being key and should be further explored. Tactile representations are crucial as they enhance understanding of the concepts being explained.

Following the VIP guidance to support them in providing anonymous feedback on the sessions, we sent them a link to an online form in TEAMS. One participant completed that survey, the results of which aligned with the feedback we gathered in person.

Lessons learned

Preparation and administration
There were several learnings around the administration and logistical organising of the workshops, which need to balance the level of support needed by the VIPs and the time needed

to accommodate that. Clear definitions of what is reasonable need to be identified and clearly communicated to participants. While it is the aim that we can support everybody in the way that they need, it is also important to set limits of what can be achieved with the time and resources that are available.

Key administration points:

- Provide clear and concise information and instructions in advance. Include contact details should there be further questions or clarifications needed.

- Being mindful about taking photographs of VIPs (who may not be able to see the images). Providing options in consent forms as to how and where they can be used is a must, and ongoing consent with regards to the use of images is highly recommended.

- The remunerations (in our case in shopping vouchers) must be considered with VIPs needs in mind. Do they require digital or physical vouchers? Be sure to check and make time to work through this administrative task.

Running the workshops

One key ground rule that must be considered is that everyone respects the different levels of visual impairment experienced by the individual participants, and that each

individual is open about their level of sight loss. This minimises the risk of assumptions being made.

Managing the room and facilitation techniques are very useful skills to draw upon, for the following reasons:

VIPs, having been asked to be open about their experiences visiting museums and exhibitions, needed space to declare mental exhaustion, frustrations and risks. Skillful facilitation provided space to vent, and by asking VIPs to offer what they consider solutions enabled the VIHP team to avoid negative stagnation.

Balancing a thorough exploration of themes against the structure of the workshop agenda was constantly discussed by the team. Keeping on point and enabling everyone in the room to 'have their say' required active chairing.

Evaluation methodology
While we did discuss accessible evaluation methodology and implement some of the suggestions from the VIP participants, more research and trials are needed in this area. The request for the ability to provide feedback anonymously is especially challenging if VIPs are also not able to access online surveys.

Final thoughts

The VIP participant contributions were, and continue to be, invaluable. VIPs have lived experience and are best placed to identify barriers and accessibility requirements. It is vital that we continue to work with these audience members to enhance our own activities and resources, and we look forward to working with them in our forthcoming and future projects.

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