



## **Supporting multisensory visitor experiences at natural heritage settings**

Audio description and access guidance  
for staff and volunteers



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## Introduction

The aim of this guide is to equip staff and volunteers at natural heritage sites, with the skills, knowledge and confidence to support multisensory visitor experiences. This inclusive approach aims to enable blind and partially sighted people to experience and enjoy nature settings, whilst enhancing the engagement of all visitors, whatever their level of sight.

Audio description is a means of conveying, by the use of vivid, succinct and precise language, the visual aspects of an experience. When visiting nature settings – such as woodlands, heathlands, wetlands, meadows, coastal and riverside trails – audio description can be invaluable in helping visitors to engage with different landscapes, the intricacies of specific flora and fauna, and the more transient encounters that often unfold within such settings.

This description may be provided and accessed in a number of different ways:

- *A recorded guide*, which would probably include descriptions of around 10 fixed key features of a site, with orientation between them, for a visitor to use on site. It would be accessed by a handset – either provided by the venue, or the visitor's own personal device.
- *Recorded descriptions of selected site highlights*. These would be accessed online, and can be useful for providing opportunities for pre-visit familiarisation and orientation, ensuring visitors know what to expect and what might both interest and challenge them during a visit at different times of the year.
- *Listening posts or beacons* with a recorded description of a specific feature or habitat of interest, drawing visitors' attention to site qualities that might otherwise be missed when walking around in-situ.
- *A live, audio described, guided visit* (one-to-one or in group settings).

The guided visit – or live tour – is one of the most popular ways for people to experience a nature setting as it allows people to engage with both predictable and more ephemeral qualities of a site. To share a visit with an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide provides a unique opportunity to ask questions, have a dialogue and offer your own perspectives. A guided tour may include possibilities to handle different plants, insects, or geological artefacts in some instances. They can also encourage greater autonomy amongst visitors with sight impairment

than a pre-recorded tour, in terms of influencing the content, pacing and route of the tour.

Verbal description may be interspersed with moments without speaking in which people can tune into the setting and experience the elements of that moment. The guidelines that follow will highlight the styles of practice that can make natural heritage sites more accessible and engaging for visitors with sight impairment. During any one visit, there will be varied – and in some cases quite challenging – features and encounters to describe, but with a little preparation you will be able to offer a warm welcome and confident descriptive tour to support an inclusive experience amongst your visitors.

These guidelines were developed collaboratively by VocalEyes, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, visually impaired coach and facilitator Andy Shipley, and the University of Exeter. This partnership developed during a two-year research project, Sensing Nature, led by Dr Sarah Bell.

The Sensing Nature study examined how people with varying forms and severities of sight impairment describe and experience a sense of wellbeing (or otherwise) with diverse types of nature during their lives (visit [sensing-nature.com](http://sensing-nature.com) for more details). Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the overall aim of the study was to improve the way we understand and enable more positive, inclusive multisensory nature experiences amongst people living with sight impairment, regardless of their life stage.

During the study, it became apparent that by building the audio description, visual awareness and creative engagement skills of people and organisations, more inclusive nature experiences could be facilitated. These would enable all visitors to enjoy a deeper, multi-faceted appreciation of habitats and natural settings. These guidelines aim to support the development of these skills.

The project team is keen to ensure that these written guidelines are as useful as possible, so if you would like to feedback on any of the content, please do get in touch with Sarah Bell ([Sarah.Bell@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:Sarah.Bell@exeter.ac.uk)) or Anna Fineman ([anna@vocaleyes.co.uk](mailto:anna@vocaleyes.co.uk)).

## An inclusive welcome

Visiting natural heritage sites can present challenges, queries and possibly anxieties for people with sight impairment. Such settings are often expansive and unpredictable; they are inherently changeable due to weather, levels of daylight, and seasonal cycles. It is therefore important to:

- **Communicate that blind and partially sighted visitors are welcome, and will be well-supported when visiting your site**

By providing detailed information within the access section of your website; ensuring staff have the skills and knowledge to support visitors with sight loss; and marketing your offer to local sight loss groups.

- **Highlight any resources and programming you have in place to offer blind and partially sighted visitors**
  - This may include: Large Print resources (texts, images, maps), recorded audio description, tactile opportunities or trained staff who deliver audio described tours or events. Where possible, it is worth making key resources available online as Word documents, as this will enable visitors to tailor the formatting to their own needs and preferences.

Provide contact details for visitors to get in touch in advance of a visit to discuss their access requirements.

- **Provide detailed information about the site**

This could include:

- The nature, scale and layout of the site
- The quality of path networks, including information about distances, gradients, surface materials, presence of steps, ramps or other obstacles
- Accessibility of facilities such as visitor centres, cafes, toilets.

- **Provide information on getting to the site**

This can include nearby public transport links (if such transport is available) and the location of Blue Badge holder parking spaces, plus detailed directions from these to the most accessible entrances.

This is the type of information that a person with sight impairment may be seeking in advance, when considering whether to visit your site. By providing this information on your website, within your marketing materials, and by knowledgeable staff answering phone and email enquiries, a potential visitor will be more informed and hopefully reassured that they will be welcomed and supported – and as a result, more likely to visit.

For guidelines regarding the types of access information to provide online, see VocalEyes State of Museum Access 2018: [vocaleyes.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/State-of-Museum-Access-2018.pdf](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/State-of-Museum-Access-2018.pdf)

For guidance in creating descriptive directions for getting to your site, visit: [vocaleyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues](https://vocaleyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues)

For guidance in creating Clear and Large Print resources (including appropriate font size, styles, formatting, line spacing, colour tones and contrasts), visit: [ukaaf.org](https://ukaaf.org)

## General principles for communication

Communication is fundamental to enabling an engaging and enjoyable visit. It is important not to make assumptions about the types of experiences or the level of support that people will want or need on the basis of their sight impairment, but to ask. A wide range of eye conditions can influence people's vision, be it at birth or later in life. People will be affected in different ways depending on the nature of the condition, the circumstances of onset and all the other things going on in their lives. What people see and how they adapt is unique to them and may shift over time.

Even on a day-to-day basis, different circumstances such as reduced or increased lighting conditions can make a difference to what they are able to see. **Always take the time to ask what a visitor's support needs are, at that time.** Find out whether they would like assistance, but do not ask people how much they can see or what their condition is – they may volunteer this personal information to you, but your focus should be on what you can do to help.

Although someone's sight impairment may *influence* how and why they engage with nature, it need not *define* their nature experiences or preferences. Just as people who are fully sighted share diverse motivations for engaging with nature, so too, do people whose sight has changed or is changing in some way. Visiting may enable someone to fulfil, for example, a passion for birds or other forms of wildlife, an educational opportunity, peaceful nature immersion, or a quality day out with a partner, friends or family. Someone with sight impairment may hold any of these visit motivations (and others).

Here we offer some general principles for communication during a visit:

- When speaking to a blind or partially sighted visitor, it may help to imagine you are talking on the phone. You would not launch into a conversation without saying who you are, neither would you hang up without saying goodbye.
- You don't have to raise your voice when speaking to someone with sight impairment. Many people do it automatically, but loss of sight does not necessarily mean loss of hearing. Just make sure you face each other when speaking, and speak clearly. Be mindful, however, that you may need to temporarily speak more loudly with shifts in ambient sounds e.g. in the presence of a skein of honking geese or a strong gust of wind.

- Don't be afraid to use the words 'see', 'watch', 'look'; for example, "I want to show you something" or "I see what you mean". These are commonly used expressions, and avoiding them will make conversation unnatural and uncomfortable.
- However, rather than using *phrases* like "as you can see, the flock has landed on the lake", try alternatives such as: "there is a flock...", "what is striking about this view is...", "let's explore...", "unfolding around us is...", "flanking the side is...", "ahead of us is...". Don't stop to correct yourself if the phrasing doesn't work out as planned though – just continue with your description to maintain the flow.
- A blind or partially sighted visitor may not be able to see hand gestures or the facial expressions that we use to show a person that we are paying attention to what they say, and that we agree or disagree. Use occasional verbal response signals such as 'Uh-huh', 'Yes', 'OK'.
- When giving directions, avoid vague phrases like 'over there'. Be specific and give details such as "down to the end of path, then turn right on to the boardwalk". It can also be useful to note landmarks that indicate when people have missed their turning; "if you find yourself walking over a footbridge, you have gone too far".
- Some visitors may bring a guide dog. Guide dogs do not 'know the way' - nor can they read street signs. It is the visitor who is navigating. They give the dog commands to enable the dog to guide them safely to their destination. Never distract a working guide dog by stroking, feeding or calling it. Focus your attention on the person, not the dog. A guide dog owner may indicate a need for assistance by resting the harness-handle on the dog's back. If there are particularly sensitive areas of your site where dogs cannot go, do indicate this to the visitor at the outset (or in advance if booking onto an organised tour/event) and ask if they would be happy for a site volunteer to look after their dog, while you guide them to explore those areas. If not, you might need to adapt the route of the visit.
- Remember, not everyone will know or choose to let you know, that their sight is compromised in some way. Following these general principles for communication will be beneficial for *many* people, whether registered sight impaired or otherwise.



## Guiding a blind or partially sighted visitor

- Always introduce yourself to the visitor so that they know you are addressing them. Talk directly to them and not through a third party.
- Begin by asking the visitor if they would like assistance. If the answer is yes, ask if they would like you to guide them or give them directions. It is essential to ask; do not assume you know their individual requirements.
- If they would like you to guide them, ask them which side they would like you to stand and let them take your arm – do *not* grab theirs. They will usually take hold of your arm just above the elbow, and you should keep your arm relaxed and straight. Some people will prefer to put their hand on your shoulder, particularly if they are taller than you. Ask the method they prefer.
- You should be about half a pace ahead of the person you are guiding. Remember – a guide leads. *Always* go first. Walk at an even pace, comfortable for both of you and appropriate for the situation and place. There is no need to walk along at a snail's pace unless they explicitly indicate a need to do so.
- You may need to walk in single file when moving through crowds or narrow spaces. Tell your companion, "We're going to have to walk in single file for a moment". Make a definite move with your guiding arm backwards and over to the centre of your back. Your companion straightens out their arm and walks directly behind you.
- When approaching a single step, kerb or slope, pause when you reach it and tell the person "step up" or "step down" (or "slope up" or "slope down"). If the step is higher or lower than usual, give a warning. Always approach steps, stairs and kerbs straight on, never diagonally.
- When approaching stairs, if there is the option of a slope or lift, let the person know so that they can make a choice. It can be useful to give a rough idea of how many stairs there are (could be 10 or 70) before starting to climb them, but it is best not to give the *precise* number of steps – you may get it wrong, and your visitor may be counting out that number. Say "stairs up" or "stairs down". Approach in such a way that the person's free hand is near the handrail, if there is one, and describe whether it is above or below their hand. Confirm that they are ready to begin and then proceed up or down the stairs at a steady pace. Always say when the top or bottom of the stairs have been reached and pause for a moment. Do let visitors know if the stairs are uneven,

spiralling or curved, or if there is light coming up through open tread stairs, as this can be disorientating.

- Warn of any natural matter which may be present on a handrail, that visitors might find surprising to touch without warning – this may include, for example, wet leaves, soil, or animal droppings. Where handrails are made of wood, you may also need to be aware of splinters.
- When approaching a door or gate, let the person know if the hinge is on your side or theirs. Let them know if the door/gate opens inwards or outwards. The guide should open the door and go through it first.
- Approach chairs straight on, and tell the person whether the seat is facing them or away from them. Place your guiding hand on the back of the chair. Your partner can slide their hand down your arm to the chair and establish its position. They can then move into it feeling the side of it with their leg and checking the seat with their hand. Alternatively, place their hand on the back of the chair. Let them sit down unaided – never push anyone backwards into a chair.
- Similar principles apply for outdoor benches. Describe what type of bench it is – e.g. wooden picnic table, a decorative cast iron bench, a freestanding, backless seat – note whether the seat is particularly high or low down, and whether the bench has arms or a back. Do check the stability of the bench in the ground, and whether any part of it is broken.
- When you sit down with someone you have been guiding, for example at a bench or picnic table, do not move items around. If you move them, it may be difficult for the person to find them again.
- When guiding outdoors in more irregular nature settings, there are a range of features that the visitor you are guiding might need to be aware of. These may include, for example:
  - A change in terrain – for example from gravel to a decked boardwalk.
  - A change in light – for example emerging from a dense wood into an open clearing.
  - Obstacles approaching at head or hand height, such as low hanging tree branches, large spiders' webs, overgrown hedges, brambles, nettles, gorse, etc.

- Obstacles underfoot, including uneven ground, tree roots or oversized rocks, puddles, wet leaves, muddy or marshy stretches, or stepping stones across relatively deep or fast-flowing rivers and streams.
  - Other obstacles, such as posts or bollards that people might walk into. Stiles can be challenging, particularly if broken, rotten or irregular. It is important to ensure that the person you are guiding has the physical support and description needed to understand the stile shape before putting any weight on it (e.g. diagonal or mirror stiles).
  - Barbed wire or electric fences can be problematic as they are not always easy to identify or avoid.
  - Steep or sudden drops – people can lose depth perception as their sight changes and so will not necessarily anticipate changes in gradient.
  - Presence of livestock, particularly for anyone walking with a dog, as these animals are not always immediately obvious (e.g. cows along field boundaries or under trees).
  - Presence of other people – particularly people moving at speed, be it walkers, cyclists, dogs on leads, mobility scooters, trampers, etc.
- It is also important to recognise that people's guiding needs may change with shifting weather and light conditions. For example, the sound of strong winds or rain, or the dampening effects of snow, can be disorientating through masking sound signals (e.g. echoes) that people may otherwise be using to anticipate approaching obstacles/landmarks. Glare (for example, reflections from wet ground after rain) and dappled lighting can be challenging for people with photophobia (experiences of pain or discomfort through bright light exposure), while others may need extra description within dim or low light conditions.
  - Always tell the person you are guiding if you are going to leave the vicinity, even briefly, and ensure they are in contact with something, such as a bench, fence post or wall. Also, do tell any blind or partially sighted person that you are with, even if not guiding, that you are moving away, so that they are not left talking to empty space.
  - If guiding someone to a car or minibus at the end of the visit, explain which way the vehicle is facing, and place your companion's hand on the door handle. They should then be able to manage alone.

## General tips for audio description

**Prioritise.** There's no set time a description should last, but listening requires a great deal of concentration and it is difficult to retain a lot of detail. Give prominence to what is important in the moment and the setting, rather than, for instance, describing every single feature in exhaustive detail. Consider the listener and the listener's interests, and **be selective**. Remember, your role is to mediate a sensory experience, not to describe everything!

**Use a vivid, varied and memorable vocabulary, and try to speak with confidence, flow and enthusiasm.** Hesitation, deviation and repetition will be noticed and will distract from the listener's ability to concentrate on the description. Find a comfortable pace of description, both for the listener and for yourself.

**Try not to refer to something before you've told us it exists** – for instance saying, "by the pond is...", before you've told us there is a pond.

**Indicate *where it is*** – try not to rely on non-verbal hand gestures, and avoid phrases such as "over here" or "over there". If delivering a group tour, ensure everyone is oriented in the same direction so you can use more specific phrases, such as "about 300m to your left, there is...", or "directly behind you is...". Use the *audience's* left and right to orientate. Sometimes it can be helpful to move *yourself* to where the feature of interest is, tap it or perhaps call back to the group from there, to provide an audible indication of its location.

**Be consistent with naming** – once you have referred to something as "the valley" or "the hill beyond," or "the nose and the tail", keep to those names throughout.

**Invoke the other senses.** Phrases that are 'tactile' are easier to remember: "glacier-scoured mountains", or "the insect's wings have a delicate, almost embroidered quality – colourful and richly detailed".

**Don't rely on information provided by visual interpretation on site.**

Saying "it's a marsh harrier" may not mean much on its own unless people have encountered this particular species before. Your audience will want to know what a marsh harrier is, why it's special, what it looks like, why it lives in that particular spot, how it moves, behaves and interacts with other species etc.

**Where possible, use mutually relevant points of reference.** When describing the visual qualities of a feature of interest or encounter, try to bring in broader multisensory description in order to create a shared point of reference. For example, you might liken the call of the water rail bird to a squealing piglet, or the scent of gorse flowers to that of coconut. Visitors may then be able to use this knowledge to recognise their presence elsewhere on the site or during future visits. Similarly, you can refer to the gradient of the earth underfoot or the wind direction to help people to orientate to their surroundings at different points during their visit.

**Don't be afraid to offer binoculars or monoculars.** Some people will have residual vision and this equipment can help to magnify the feature of interest. However, do ensure you allow sufficient time for people to orientate, particularly if new to using this type of equipment.

### **Think about the context**

With all description, consider:

- What makes it unique?
- Why is it found here?
- What are its historical, ecological and cultural associations?

**Practise.** Read your description aloud a few times to check whether or not it flows, or if you need to rethink certain phrases or re-order the delivery in parts. Practise with a friendly colleague, friend or family member and ask them to flag anything that is not clear.

**Remember to encapsulate the 'WOW factor'. It's why people choose to visit your particular site, after all.**

## Describing nature's landscapes

The importance of a natural landscape is not lost amongst blind and partially sighted visitors, often featuring in valued visual memories and experiences. For some people with residual vision, a spectacular view in nature may be easier to engage with than the visual intricacies of a flower or insect.

An appropriate description of a landscape can also help with **orientation in situ**. When describing the landscape, it is important to:

**Start with an overview of the landscape** – set up the space (the 'long shot'), then place key features within that space (the 'mid shot'). Finally, you can 'people' the space with nearby wildlife, plants, fungi etc., and explain how those features are interacting within the space you have described.

Where appropriate, use multiple dimensions to capture the '360 panorama' of the setting. For example, within a woodland setting you might like to start with the tree canopy above you as the long shot, the immediate circle of trees around you as the mid shot, and then gradually move into the detail of the creatures in the soil beneath your feet, or vice-versa.

**Describe how one element relates to another**, for example "to the left of the central lake is a tall oak tree..." Order the information carefully so that there is a sense of sweeping left to right, top to bottom, or front to back.

**Talk about the atmosphere** created by the landscape – for example mystery, peace or anticipation. But remember to give the visual details that create that impression. Explain how, for example, wildlife or the weather animate or mask different elements of the landscape, and link that in to relevant auditory sensations where possible: "Here we are at the top of the sky tower overlooking a large mere. You might be able to sense that it is a very bright day with hardly a cloud in the sky. The midday sun is overhead, casting shimmering reflections over the surface of the water. We can feel a slight breeze blowing on our faces from a westerly direction. This is rippling the surface of the water and we can hear the rustle of the tall, brown reeds that surround the mere. In this clear light we can identify individual sheep on the rolling green hills in the distance beyond the water, that are sometimes obscured in other conditions. As we can hear, the water is busy with bird life. At the moment a long-legged white heron with a dagger-like yellow bill appears to be basking in the sunshine as it stands stock still on a raised island in the centre of the mere".

**Avoid phrases that sound uncertain**, as they tend to distance the viewer: “There appears to be...”, “it looks as though...”, “she might be reaching, for what could be apples”.

**Incorporate moments of stillness and peace.** Bear in mind that many settings, for example woodland glades or elevated viewpoints, are accompanied by important *non*-visual sensations e.g. the sense of pleasure or perspective encountered through alternative qualities of air, sound and microclimate. It is therefore important to offer the person you are guiding some quiet time alongside the audio description in case they would like to tune into and enjoy these non-visual aspects of the experience.

## Describing flora, fauna, fungi and their interactions

It can be daunting to consider including audio description as well as the ecological and scientific information that you already offer to visitors; but remember that if the person does not know what the plants, animals or geological features in front of them look like, the rest of the information may not help them. Although visitors might be aware of particular sounds and scents, they will not necessarily know the source of these sensations. So your description alone has to make these links; through your words you must complete the sensory jigsaw puzzle.

**Tell us what it is.** What is in front of us? Don't be afraid to state the obvious ("In front of us is an evergreen tree"). Give an overview first and then go into greater detail. We need a framework on which to hang the information.

**Tell us the size.** Rather than simply using centimetres and metres, see if you can compare it to something, for example: "the length of your arm", "the thickness of a finger", "small enough to sit in your palm".

For large, natural features, you could try: "a lake as big as four swimming pools"; "the tree is as tall as four people, standing on each other's shoulders".

For birds or animals, perhaps establish a commonly understood size, for example a robin or chicken, to which other species can be described as larger or smaller than.

**What shape is it?** Does it undulate like a snake? Does it have jagged or sharp edges? Is it sleek and extended, or round-bodied? Is it broad-shouldered?

**What colour is it?** Many people with sight impairment are born with at least some sight, and will likely have some memory of colour. People may still be able to see colours and shapes; some will retain central or peripheral vision. Even those who were born blind are likely to understand the significance of colour, so don't be afraid to include it in your description.

Colouring is used in nature for many vital reasons relating to the survival of species and the balance of an ecosystem – for example attracting mates, fighting predators, pollination, camouflage, to name a few – so do draw attention to this. In addition, try to be specific about the colour to evoke the incredible colour palette of the natural world; rather than just 'red' try "a powerful, shiny, scarlet" or "muted, rusty red" or "a deep wine". Yellow could be "an earthy ochre" or "a hazy lemon".



**What are its textural qualities?** Is it soft, smooth and feathered? Velveteen? Or hairy and coarse? Is it spiky or scaled? Does it look robust or more delicate? Does it seem translucent, or does it have a sheen? Do particular plants have unique tactile qualities in terms of their flowers, leaf patterns, stem dimensions, or the arrangement of buds on the stem?

**Is there a scent?** At certain times of the year, scent will play a critical role within a habitat, for example to attract creatures or repel predators. Be aware of odours you encounter, and try to identify the sources and intentions of them. You could even invite visitors to see if they can follow a scent-trail to its source – providing the conditions make it safe to do so.

**What sounds does it make?** Can you pinpoint different sounds in the setting and link them to different sources? Can you recreate sounds with your voice, using a recording, or perhaps by tapping stones or a tree trunk to mimic the sounds to listen out for? Are there sound trails to follow that might enrich the way people can tune in to the site?

**How does it move?** For example, how do different plants and trees move in the wind? How and why do different animals weave through the nooks and crannies of a particular habitat in the ways they do? Are they furtive and secretive, tentative, overt, playful or flamboyant? What do they seem to be interacting with in the setting? Are there particular quirks of movement that might be distinctive or captivating, for example “sky dancing”, “skulking”, “needling the ground”? How do different species interact with each other and why might this be? Are any species particularly effective at camouflage or mimicry?

**Capturing more fleeting encounters.** Nature is often on the move, and it is important to be responsive to this whilst guiding; be open to the moment. For example you might be at a lake describing the landscape, when a chase ensues between a resident heron and a couple of incoming egrets. Don't be afraid to pause your description to explain what is unfolding. You can fill in further details following the action.

It can be helpful to think of ‘three As’ in these moments:

- *Action* – What is the animal doing **now**? For example, “two incoming egrets, swooping across the lake at rapid pace in pursuit of a resident heron, circling, circling, diving down...”
- *Appearance* – What does it look like? You might not have time to give a full description in the moment, but even interspersing small details can be helpful,

for example “a flash of black, bright yellow beak, dives down, upended in the water...” You can embellish these with more description afterwards once the moment has passed.

- *Activity* – What does the creature usually do? Why is it here? Having captured someone’s interest in the animals involved within the fleeting moment, you can then provide more detailed information explaining how it usually moves or behaves, why it’s here, and any interesting stories you may have about its habits and interactions with other species or habitats etc.

**Include the story or narrative.** Some visitors may be keen to engage with the stories of individual animals and plants. For these visitors, it can be useful to complement factual descriptions of what might be encountered on site and why, with engaging stories that use humour and enthusiasm to emphasise unique characters and quirks. For example, for tagged birds, intergenerational stories of different bird families and their travels could be incorporated to spark people’s imagination and understanding of your particular site as part of a broader network of diverse habitats that these birds dip in and out of through the course of their lives.

**Where possible, incorporate tactile experiences.** Some people with sight impairment may appreciate the opportunity to handle features of interest to get a better understanding of weight, texture and shape, for example of different plants, fungi, insects or geological artefacts. When exploring your site, try to identify tactile experiences that could provide this added interest, whilst recognising that this may not always be possible with more sensitive specimens or those with irritant properties. Ensure any tactile opportunities are meaningful to the story of the site.

Always ask a person if they would like to touch or handle something – they may not. If they do, continue to let them know what you are offering them, rather than placing something in their hand without warning. Be aware of possible irritants within species, plus allergies any visitors may have, for example to feathers or pollen.

If you decide to use tactile replicas (for example bird feathers, wooden or thermoform species models, foam cut outs etc.), there is still a need to describe them, to guide the touch experience. Again, give an overall description: “This is a model kingfisher. The small, colourful bird is about sixteen centimetres long. It has iridescent, speckled, electric blue plumage on its back and head. It has a marmalade-orange coloured breast, flame-red legs and a long dark bill. Just below the bill is a patch of white feathers. It is mounted on a wooden post, on the

table in front of you, facing you. If you move your hand forward you'll find the top of its head".

Don't be tempted to grab the person's hand or drag it to the feature in question. Just let them know where it is in relation to them, and allow time for them to explore it themselves, before you then fill in some details: "If you run your hand down the front of its head you'll locate its beak. Females are differentiated by a flash of red across the lower part of the bill. Now you can find its feathered, fiery, orange breast, and move down the rather short, stumpy legs..." Take your time, allowing the visitor to make the most of the tactile experience.

## **Describing architectural and artistic features on site**

Many nature settings also include features of cultural or historical interest, for example, ruins, sculptures, artwork and carvings. Some visitors may be keen to explore these as part of the experience.

**When describing these features, it is important to give an overview** – what is the feature? (“In front of us is a bronze sculpture/ a 16th century fort/ a wall-carving”...).

**What size is it?** A sculpture the size of a car / a wall some 10 metres high.

**What is it made from?** Is it stone, cast iron, wooden, brick etc?

**What is its condition?** It can be useful to describe any damage, deterioration or weathering of the feature – this is part of the visual experience, and can also give a sense of temporal perspective.

**What is the physical context of the feature?** Is it on a plinth or roped off? Or integrated into the habitat? What is it surrounded by?

**Age, provenance, how the piece was built/made and who by** are all details that you might want to consider sharing. But remember that if the visitor doesn’t know what’s in front of them first, this information will be almost irrelevant.

Where appropriate, don’t shy away from **explaining particular techniques used by the artist/sculptor/architect**, but if you’re going to include a term such as ‘sand cast’, make it clear what this means and how it affects the appearance of the sculpture; “a method of casting typically used for casting iron, in which the mould is constructed from compacted sand. The mould can only be used once and needs to be reformed for each casting”.

**Tell us how you know what you know.** What are the visual clues that tell you something? Rather than simply saying, “it’s a modern bronze sculpture from the 1960s”, tell us what it is about the artwork that allows you to draw that conclusion; “this abstract, organic form is typical of works produced by modern sculptors in the 1960s. The bronze is mottled green from weathering, and the edges are shiny and smooth where people have touched it. This suggests the artwork has been in situ for some decades”. Give the visual evidence and then the listener can make up their own mind.

**Order your information logically.** There's no strict rule for ordering the information, and each feature within a setting will suggest a different order, so you will need to take time to study it before you attempt to describe it. However, it is unhelpful to jump from the head to the feet of a sculpture and back again, for example.

## **Preparing a live tour**

Blind and partially sighted people might choose to visit a site independently, perhaps getting in contact in advance to establish when a volunteer guide might be available for a one-to-one tour. Alternatively, they might wish to join existing group tours and events being organised on site. By employing the types of audio description skills outlined in these guidelines, such activities will likely be more engaging for all, not just those participating with sight impairment.

### **An inclusive welcome**

When designing a tour, it is important to think about how you are going to welcome your group to offer a meaningful way in to what you'll be exploring together, and to ensure everyone feels comfortable, safe and oriented in the setting. In all tours (with people with sight impairment or otherwise), make sure you have everyone's attention before beginning to speak, and that everyone is oriented to face you. Get into the habit of introducing yourself verbally, and asking any other staff or volunteers present to introduce themselves. Say how many people are in the group. Say your name as you begin to speak so that people can get used to your voice, and say theirs before directing a remark to them. Tell people where you are, and ensure they can hear what you are saying. "We're standing just outside the visitor centre. To your right is an accessible toilet, and behind you is the start of the reserve path network..."

Give an overview of your site at the outset, mapping out key points of interest and how they relate to each other, and to your location at that point. Indicate the journey you'll be taking through the site, where you'll be stopping and the types of terrain you'll be encountering. Before moving on to the first point of interest, ask if anyone would like assistance. If you're describing, ensure that another volunteer or staff member is available to act as a sighted guide. Lead from the front. Where possible with larger groups, it also helps to have a volunteer available as a back marker to ensure no one gets left behind.

### **What are the year-round and in-season highlights?**

When planning your route and approach, it is useful to think carefully about the real highlights of your site that people will be keen to experience at any time of year. In addition, consider the multisensory opportunities available during specific seasons. For example, are there particular plants that grow, or become notably tactile or pungent at certain times of year? Are there specific periods when an animal species is more likely to visit or be particularly vocal? Are there micro-habitats that offer sensory cocoons or more enlivening interactions with the elements?

Are there areas that get particularly crowded at certain times of year, or where silence is encouraged? If so, find a spot nearby where you can pause and freely describe what will be encountered beforehand, to ensure everyone in your group can hear, and no-one/nothing at the location in question is unnecessarily disturbed.

Choose scheduled stopping points, around 5 – 10 depending on the scale and nature of your site and the duration of time allocated for the tour. At each stopping point, think about describing the landscape (the orientation layer) and perhaps the atmosphere, before choosing an area of focus – be it the story of a particular plant or animal, a guided tactile opportunity, a point of historical significance, or a moment of multisensory immersion. Remain open to fleeting encounters throughout.

### **Be prepared...but not *too* prepared!**

You will need to prepare by examining these features of your site in advance; imagining the questions *you* would ask a knowledgeable guide if they were describing something you could not see; and preparing some memorable phrases that will help bring those features, experiences and encounters to life. You're aiming for a relaxed, informal approach, so don't feel the need to hide behind a clipboard! Reading from a prepared script is often distancing to a listener and lacks the spontaneity and enthusiasm that is so engaging in a live visit.

### **Use your senses**

When you examine your site or the specific encounters that may arise as you walk around it, think about the order in which you'll give the descriptive information. Practise using more multisensory language. Reflect on when and where it might be useful to incorporate moments of stillness or silence for visitors to tune in to the site with their wider senses. Take notes. Be creative. You really need to take your time to experience your site with all the senses, probably more closely than you have ever done before.

### **Remember navigation**

It is important to include clear navigational information between points of interest in your tour. This description should always be given *before* moving on with a group; "we are now going to walk to the nearest hide. We will follow a narrow, earthy path through a wooded glade for about five minutes. This will open out into a wider board-walk, before we head over a small footbridge..." That way, people can feel confident as to where they are going, and how they are going to

get there. Try to avoid sharing new information while on the move between stopping points, as the group may not be able to hear you, and may be focussed on navigating – but if a fleeting moment unfolds, pause the group, turn to face them and start your impromptu description there.

### **Allow time**

Indicate the intended duration of the tour, in advance if feasible, and certainly up front on the day. This is particularly important for people who might be reliant on lifts, public transport or pre-booked taxis. Ensure you have built in sufficient time. Depending on the group size, numbers and guiding preferences, it may take a little longer for groups with sight impaired members to move between stopping points and to fully explore the features of interest. It is better to have fewer stopping points and more comfortable transitions between them than for people to feel rushed or unsupported.

Build in time for questions too. Visitors may ask about features or events you've described; that doesn't necessarily mean you've failed to make it clear, it may well mean you've succeeded in making it interesting. The great pleasure of live description is the opportunity to interact socially, to find out about people's interests and tailor your tone and level of description accordingly.

### **Practise, seek feedback**

Practise your descriptions aloud – you will soon glean whether or not you can deliver them in a concise and clear way. Perhaps try describing images of different species, scenes or features of interest first, or short video extracts of more transient moments, before describing in situ.

A dry run of any tour is invaluable, particularly for preparing the navigation description around the site. Ask a colleague to join you and listen, and feedback. If you have time, you could think about piloting your tour by organising visits with people with varying forms of sight impairment under different seasonal conditions. By experiencing the setting together, you may gain useful insights into what different people are tuning into and why, and where additional audio description might be needed.



## Further resources

- **How to create descriptive directions to your venue – VocalEyes**  
[vocaleyeyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues](https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/services/resources/descriptive-directions-and-information-for-blind-or-partially-sighted-visitors-to-arts-venues)
- **Guidelines for online access information – VocalEyes, State of Museum Access**  
[vocaleyeyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018](https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/state-of-museum-access-2018)
- **5 ways to improve the visitor experience**  
5 ways to help plan projects involving people with sight loss – Sensing Culture  
[sensingculture.org.uk](https://sensingculture.org.uk)
- **Promoting your audio described events - VocalEyes**  
[vocaleyeyes.co.uk/services/promote-your-audio-described-event](https://vocaleyeyes.co.uk/services/promote-your-audio-described-event)
- **UK Association for Accessible Formats**  
[ukaaf.org](https://ukaaf.org)
- **RNIB Sightline Directory – for finding groups for people with sight loss local to you**  
[sightlinedirectory.org.uk](https://sightlinedirectory.org.uk)

## Contacts

For further support in welcoming visitors with sight impairment across your site, please contact:

### **VocalEyes**

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