

RNIB response to Ofcom Consultation" 2009 Review of Television Access Services"

1. Summary of the RNIB position on audio description

Increasing access to television for blind and partially sighted people through more audio description is a strategic priority for RNIB, which was set after overwhelming support from blind and partially sighted people.

That is why we are asking for an audio description quota of 20% of television programmes across all channels required to provide access services, with a year on year 2% increase in their obligation until they reach this quota. RNIB has been calling for audio description quota to be reviewed for over two years. During that time blind and partially sighted people have been waiting whilst Ofcom gathered the further evidence it needed on which to make proposals for audio description. With the research now done and the proposals made, we believe now is the right time to make the decision to change the quota to 20%.

Blind and partially sighted people rely on and want to use television as much as, and in some cases more than their sighted peers whilst at the same time facing problems when accessing television programmes. This is evidenced by several pieces of research. In 2006 Research the University of Birmingham¹ found that around 87 per cent of blind and partially sighted people regularly watch TV and videos or DVDs.

Ofcom's 2006 Television Access Services review found that some 2.7 million people had a visual impairment which required them to take some measure to be able to continue to enjoy watching TV, and the recent research shows that an overwhelming majority of 96% of audio description users say that the service improves the quality of their understanding and enjoyment of TV programmes².

¹ Doublas, G., Corcoran, C., Pavey, S. (August 2006) Network 1000: Opinions and circumstances of visually impaired people in Britain: report based on over 1000 interviews.

² Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 28.

Access to television, the information and entertainment it provides, is vital for the inclusion of disabled people and indeed all people in society.

RNIB therefore welcomes the Ofcom 2009 Review of Television Access Services consultation and the emphasis that Ofcom has put on reviewing audio description quotas for television to ensure that the access services code remains fit for purpose. We welcome the opportunity to submit comments to this consultation.

2. The method for determining access service provision.³

RNIB agrees that the existing method for determining access service provision broadly remains fit for purpose.

The rule on spending no more than 1% of relevant turnover on TV access services provides a guarantee for broadcasters that they will not be required to spend unaffordable amounts.

However, when the 1% is exceeded, this can cause a channel that had to provide the maximum amount of access services one year not to have any obligations the next year. In the interest of continuity for viewers, RNIB calls for a more pragmatic implementation of the 1% rule: once a channel has had obligations, it should continue to provide access services even if full provision would take it over the 1% rule. Our proposal is that, in instances where it is deemed that the continued provision of AD to meet the quota would cost a channel more than 1% of its relevant turnover, Ofcom should require the channel to continue to provide access services, but apply a staggered system of reduced obligations to ensure that the 1% threshold is not exceeded. Ofcom can set clear rules in this area, so decisions do not have to be made on a case-by-case basis. RNIB has put a proposal to this effect in Annex 1 of this document.

³ This is a response to the question "Ofcom invites comments on our conclusion that the existing method for determining access service provision remains fit for purpose." Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 20.

3. The options for future provision of audio description

Consultation question 1. Which of the three options do consultees favour, and why?

RNIB has consulted with its blind and partially sighted members and trustees and blind and partially sighted people more widely about the level of provision of audio description on TV. Evidence of a very recent consultative discussion with members can be found in Annex 2.

Following all of these discussions with end users, RNIB supports option 2, namely an increase in the audio description quota to 20% for all channels required to provide access services, with a requirement to reach the 20% in annual increments of 2%.

At RNIB, we are aware that some parts of the broadcasting sector are making a case about the affordability of this option and we acknowledge the general financial challenge facing the broadcasting industry. However, there are substantive arguments that, in the bigger scheme of things, make affordability a much smaller issue that some broadcasters would like us to believe:

1) Most broadcasters are already providing AD over and above their Ofcom quotas.

BSkyB have voluntarily increased their provision of audio description to 20% and by doing so have demonstrated their commitment to their blind and partially sighted customers. RNIB value this commitment from BSkyB.

The latest Ofcom analysis in the consultation document "2009 Review of Television Access Services" shows that Five is providing AD on almost 18% of programmes, S4C almost 13%, ITV1 and ITV2 both around 14%.

Even small channels such as Disney Channel are providing more than the current requirement with many reaching around 20% of programmes.

Because most broadcasters are currently providing more AD than required by Ofcom, an increase in quotas would only have an impact on their budgets in a couple of years from now, when they have to increase their current provision levels. For most channels this means that they have about 3 years where their current provision would still suffice, and they would only have to start spending more on providing AD after that period, when it is generally envisaged that economic circumstances will be significantly improved from the current position.

The only notable exception is Channel 4, and this proves that blind and partially sighted people can not rely on the goodwill or voluntary increases by individual broadcasters, but that a general increase in the quota is necessary. It is necessary to increase the quota to ensure that blind and partially sighted viewers can expect a guaranteed higher percentage of programmes with AD across all channels required to provide access services, without any channel standing out as an exception.

2) The current Ofcom system has a built-in mechanism to ensure that broadcasters do not have to spend what is seen as an "unreasonable" amount of money on access services.

The current system provides a safeguard where it states "any channel which is able to meet the assessed cost of providing access services by spending no more than 1% of its relevant turnover is deemed to be able to afford the provision of access services". If anything, RNIB finds this rule quite generous on broadcasters, and we consider that it provides a more than adequate protection for those that are fearful of the impact of access service provision on their overall budgetary situation.

3) The cost of audio description has decreased.

As shown in the consultation document⁴, the average hourly cost of providing audio description has decreased by 25% over the past five years. This is a significant trend that we expect to see continuing.

⁴ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 18.

4) Awareness and usage of audio description has increased.

An increase in awareness levels was a pre-requisite for Ofcom to consider recommending a change in quotas for audio description to the Secretary of State and RNIB believes that this has now been demonstrated.

The research undertaken by Ofcom shows that the increase in awareness of audio description in the general population is statistically significant at 45% in comparison to the initial survey carried out where 37% of the general population was aware of audio description.⁵

Although the increase of awareness within the visually impaired sample is not seen as statistically significant due to the sample size, it does mirror the trend in the UK population sample.⁶

RNIB also wants to highlight that the increase in awareness of audio description amongst those people with mild and moderate visual impairment, who are less likely to be in touch with visual impairment organisations and therefore were maybe less likely to have heard about the service a couple of years ago, is very encouraging.

We also want to draw attention to the finding that of those visually impaired respondents around half (47%)⁷ have been using audio description for less than a year. This is encouraging, as it shows that many people have recently taken up usage of the service.

RNIB fully understand why the visually impaired participants recruited for the most recent Ofcom audio description research were not selected from our organisational membership or those in contact with us. However the use of this approach may have led levels of awareness of AD reported amongst blind and partially sighted people in the sample being lower than those of the overall blind and partially sighted population. Particularly as the research demonstrates that of those visually impaired respondents aware of audio description the most cited source of information is from visual impairment organisations. Therefore, we think that the awareness of audio description figure found by the 2009 research is, because of the

⁵ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 23.

⁶ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 24.

⁷ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 28.

methodology used, naturally going to be much lower than the awareness figure we would have found amongst RNIB members or supporters, for example.

RNIB appreciates the work undertaken by broadcasters and Ofcom, in 2008, in conjunction with ourselves to raise the awareness of audio description services on digital television. Broadcasters and platform providers have an ongoing responsibility to promote the service. We look forward to future work with them and Ofcom in raising awareness further as is referred to in the consultation document. The Ofcom research⁸ illustrates that there is still work to be done by platform providers, where it finds that 42% of those who were previously unaware of AD but who are interested in using it, already had Sky or Virgin but did not realise they could get AD on their Sky or Virgin equipment.

RNIB would therefore like to see more emphasis on the involvement of platform providers including Freeview and Freesat in promoting audio description as an essential part of their package in the future.

5) The time to review the audio description quota is right.

RNIB urges Ofcom to make a decision on the audio description quota now. The timing is right for three reasons:

Firstly, many blind and partially sighted people were disappointed that Ofcom could not recommend an increase in 2006, and they had to wait for three years for Ofcom to commission robust research on which to base its proposals for a review. RNIB trust that the research reflects Ofcom's best efforts to gather the necessary evidence. As with any evidence gathering for a harder to reach subgroup of the population, Ofcom has spend substantial time and money gathering this survey evidence. We also want to draw attention to the fact that Ofcom does not make recommendations lightly. As the research has led Ofcom to propose an option to increase the AD quota to 20% for all channels, this substantiates our claim that this is a robust proposition at this point in time.

⁸ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 29.

Secondly, many channels have now reached the point where they are required to provide audio description on 10% of their programmes. Blind and partially sighted people have seen a year on year increase in audio description provision, and there is a very strong desire and expectation that this trend should continue. If a decision on increasing the AD quota to 20% is further postponed, then we reach an unwelcome stagnation in the audio description provision on TV.

Finally, the completion of digital switchover is only three years away. This will mean that by 2012, almost all of the UK will have access to digital TV and the many additional channels and wider programming that is available to them. Blind and partially sighted people should be part of this digital TV revolution by also having access to a substantially increased number of programmes provided with audio description spread over all popular channels with an audience share of more than 0.05%.

6) The need for audio description and its usage is likely to increase even more in the future.

RNIB predicts that there will be even more audio description users in the future than there are now.

Firstly by 2012 due to the digital switchover moving to more densely populated regions. The help scheme continues to play an important role in providing people with equipment that does deliver AD and in raising awareness of the service in its promotional leaflets.

Secondly the majority of blind and partially sighted people are over the age of 50 and one in five of all people over 65 experiences sight loss that affects their lives. Sight loss (along with hearing loss and certain other disabilities) is for many people related to ageing. As forecasting indicates that older people will be in the majority by the year 2025, inevitably the number of blind and partially sighted people, and the relevance of TV access services, will increase. RNIB commissioned research recently that showed that It is projected that by 2050 there will be approximately 3.99 million people with partial sight and blindness in the UK, which is an increase of around 122 per cent from 2008 estimates that there are 1,796,990 people in the UK

who had partial sight and blindness in 2008.⁹ This figure shows that more and more people will need audio description in the future, and we can assume that usage will increase as a result.

7) Increasing audio description quotas helps Ofcom fulfil its media literacy duty and its duty under the AVMS Directive.

The UK now has a responsibility to improve the level of audio description under the European Directive on media services: the “AVMS” Directive, under recital 64 and Article 3c. These state:

“(64) The right of persons with a disability and of the elderly to participate and be integrated in the social and cultural life of the Community is inextricably linked to the provision of accessible audiovisual media services. The means to achieve accessibility should include, but need not be limited to, sign language, subtitling, audio description and easily understandable menu navigation.”

“Article 3c

Member States shall encourage media service providers under their jurisdiction to ensure that their services are gradually made accessible to people with a visual or hearing disability.”

And in addition

Ofcom has a duty to promote media literacy. Ofcom itself provides the following definition¹⁰:

"A media literate person should be able to, for instance, use an electronic programme guide to find the programme they want to watch. They may agree or not with the views of the programme maker, or just enjoy the programme. They may also recognise that the programme maker is trying to influence them in some way. They may interact with the programme using interactive features or by telephone. And they may respond to the programme by writing to or emailing the broadcaster with their point of view. People may also be

⁹ <http://www.rnib.org.uk/aboutus/Research/reports/eyehealth/fsuk/Pages/fsuk.aspx>

¹⁰ http://www.ofcom.org.uk/advice/media_literacy/of_med_lit/whatis/

able to use communications technology to create their own video and audio content."

Ofcom's 2009 research clearly shows that 96% audio description users have the quality of their understanding and enjoyment of TV programmes dramatically increased through audio description.¹¹ RNIB therefore urges Ofcom to deliver on its duty to promote media literacy in particular for blind and partially sighted people as well as its duty to implement the AVMS Directive by increasing the audio description obligation on all channels that have a duty to provide access services from 10 to 20 per cent of programmes.

8) The benefits of increasing AD provision to individuals do by far outweigh any financial consideration.

We receive feedback from blind and partially sighted people about programmes that they would want to watch that are not offered with audio description. As RNIB, we a week's worth of programming and noticed that:

a) even in a period as short as one week, no channel would have difficulty identifying additional programmes that would be suitable for AD

and

b) increasing provision to 20% of programmes would no doubt lead to a wider choice for blind and partially sighted viewers, both in terms of time of the day when they can watch programmes and in terms of genres offered.

We believe that the benefits that audio description brings to those who use it is an overriding factor for Ofcom to consider in its decision on increasing the levels of audio description provided. The Ofcom research statistics show that 96% of users state that "audio description improves the quality of their understanding and enjoyment of TV programme".¹²

¹¹ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 28.

¹² Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 28.

This is confirmed by the numerous positive comments on audio description that RNIB has received over the years. To quote just a few of them:

"I never thought that a difficult controversial film such Last Tango in Paris would be described, and it was a quantum leap in being included rather than excluded, making up for all the missing out ... "

"As a registered blind person, I am pleased that more and more films and television programmes are being audio described. Without audio description, I sometimes have little understanding of what is happening on screen. I do not have much of a problem with 'Talking Heads' programmes but changes in lighting levels and locations are very difficult."

"It 's funny I was not a great fan of audio description but it is like eyesight you don't miss it unless you live without it, so I am now a convert."

"I wanted to say thank you for such wonderful audio description, it was as though I could see every bullet spitting from the machine guns, the ships approaching the beach, every tear and facial expression. That's not to mention the vivid panorama of war created in my mind a great film, with perfect audio description."

In addition 84% of audio description users say in the recent Ofcom survey that they would use it more if it was available on more programmes.¹³ Therefore increasing audio description provision gives greater equality with the general UK adult population in accessing the information and entertainment services that television provides.

Of the three options Ofcom's consultation on access services offers, RNIB urges Ofcom to recommend option 2, a 20% increase of audio description across all channels that are required to provide TV access services. This option would best ensure equality of access for blind and partially sighted people. There is a need for channels with a

¹³ Ofcom (2009) - 2009 Review of Television Access Services, page 28.

smaller audience share amongst this group to also have a quota at a 20% level, similar to the bigger channels to ensure that a cross section of genres and channels provide audio description, widening choice for blind and partially sighted viewers.

In addition, we therefore welcome Ofcom's decision to not recommend changes to the quotas of audio description based on the time of day or viewing figures. This ensures that audio description is available for varied genres of programming and at off-peak as well as peak viewing times.

9) Only increasing audio description requirements for PSBs would not generate sufficient progress.

Blind and partially sighted people have a wide and varied range of interests when it comes to watching TV programmes, just like sighted people.

Option 3 excludes non-PSBs from an increase in the AD quota. This option makes the implicit assumption that PSB channels are more relevant for blind and partially sighted people than for other viewers. There is no evidence that this is the case, and the audio description obligations as they operate now work from the assumption that any channel that has an audience share of more than 0.05%, which is a good indication of popularity amongst the general population, is also of interest to the disabled population. RNIB supports option 2 instead of option 3, and believes that it would go against the spirit of the Communications Act to impose lower obligations on non-PSBs than on PSBs when it comes to the provision of TV access services

Consultation question 2: Further suggestions for future access service provision

1) Audio Description of programmes delivered over the internet

We would like to see the statutory requirement to provide audio description extended to delivery of broadcasting over the internet, given that this technology will in all probability gradually become a more prevalent means of viewing TV over the coming years, and that people with sight problems need audio description whichever platform they use to watch programmes. RNIB welcomes the recent

availability of audio description on the BBCi-player but we regret that other broadcasters' online services have not followed suite. We therefore urge parliament to give Ofcom the powers to regulate the online content of broadcasters to ensure that blind and partially sighted viewers can watch their on-line content with audio description.

2) Audio Description Listings and Electronic Programme Guides

Ofcom should require broadcasters to provide a free and accurate audio description listings service, across all channels, for blind and partially sighted people.

Blind and partially sighted people are not able to fully access electronic programme guides on digital television. These guides give an affordable and easy way to find out which programmes are on now and next and which carry audio description.

Sometimes programmes also appear on electronic programme guides as having an audio description flag and in fact do not carry the service, therefore wrongly triggering the audio tone signifying audio description availability on some receiving devices. The reliability of this system needs to be further improved by correct flagging of AD in the information broadcasters supply to programme guides.

The only fully reliable method of establishing which programmes have audio description at the moment is by accessing the website www.tvhelp.org.uk which is run by a volunteer, updated with information provided by the broadcasters and is therefore more accurate than the EPG. RNIB knows that many blind and partially sighted people do not currently have access to the internet and therefore they have no access to this website. We want to discuss with Ofcom how fully accurate information can be provided to more people, and what funding mechanism could be set up to support it, e.g. a free telephone line.

3. Accessibility of other broadcast content: Teletext and red button services

Ofcom has to ensure, so far as is reasonable and practicable, that people with visual impairments can use the public teletext service

under the Communications Act 2003. RNIB would like to see Ofcom ensuring that all current and future teletext developments, including interactive red button services, are accessible to blind and partially sighted people. This may mean that the obligation that Ofcom have under the Communications Act 2003 being strengthened in any future changes to the Act.

Consultation question: The need to re-examine the current exemption of non UK facing licensees from providing access service provision.

RNIB agrees with Ofcom's decision to re-examine the current exemption of non-UK facing licensees from providing access service provision.

In this context, Ofcom's role in helping the UK government to achieve Article 3c of the requirements of the EU's AVMS Directive is relevant.

Recital 64 of the directive sets out the importance of the accessibility of audiovisual media services:

“the right of persons with a disability and of the elderly to participate and be integrated in the social and cultural life of the Community is inextricably linked to the provision of accessible audiovisual media services.”

Article 3c itself states:

"Member States shall encourage media service providers under their jurisdiction to ensure that their services are gradually made accessible to people with a visual or hearing disability."

RNIB urges Ofcom to take this obligation into account in its review of the current exemption of non-UK facing licensees from providing access service provision.

RNIB, in keeping with its commitment to diversity, has undertaken a research study to assess the need for audio described Bollywood films in the UK and India.

The research assessed the opinions of over 300 blind and partially people of Asian descent with regards to audio description in Bollywood films. It revealed that;

- Only 8 per cent of the respondents stated that they had no difficulty in following a film/television programme.¹⁴
- Despite accessibility issues, 19 per cent of the 260 respondents in the quantitative study stated that they watched a Bollywood film on television everyday.¹⁵
- Over half of the respondents in both studies stated that they were more likely to watch Bollywood films if AD was provided (56 per cent in the quantitative study and 92 per cent in the qualitative study).¹⁶
- There was a lack of awareness about AD amongst blind and partially sighted Asians in the UK.¹⁷

The past few years have seen an explosive growth in the number of television channels aimed at people from the Asian sub-continent across the UK. Much of that growth has been made possible by the digital revolution in television services. The public service consultation by Ofcom has shown that ‘ethnic minority’ audiences turn to satellite digital channels and the Internet followed by the public service channels.¹⁸

One per cent of the Ofcom licensed cable and satellite channels regularly broadcast Bollywood films in the UK, out of which four channels namely Zee cinema, Sahara One, Star Gold and B4U movies are 24- hour Bollywood film TV- channels.

¹⁴ RNIB (2009) – Bollywood for all: demand for audio described Bollywood films, page 58.

¹⁵ RNIB (2009) – Bollywood for all: demand for audio described Bollywood films, page 38.

¹⁶ RNIB (2009) – Bollywood for all: demand for audio described Bollywood films, page 51

¹⁷ RNIB (2009) – Bollywood for all: demand for audio described Bollywood films, page 59

¹⁸ Ofcom (2008) Ofcom’s Second Public Service Broadcasting Review, page 5

Can be accessed at: http://www.ofcom.org.uk/consult/condocs/psb2_1/consultation.pdf

The popularity of these films is also evidenced in other undertakings such as:

- Bolly & Beyond; a recently launched VoD service by BT Vision. The service will target South Asian communities in the UK with a mix of Bollywood movies, music and television shows and,
- The latest film treaty between the Indian and UK Government that facilitates the joint-production films to qualify for the same tax breaks as their purely British counterparts. Films with a budget of less than £20 million will get 20 per cent tax relief, falling to 16 per cent for bigger projects. Producers will also get access to two funds run by the UK Film Council, worth £13 million.

In view of this scenario and the fact that, as established by a recent study out of Defeat Diabetes Foundation, South Asians are significantly more likely to suffer from sight loss because of diabetic retinopathy than Caucasian Europeans¹⁹; it becomes significant to re-visit accessibility issues as faced by blind and partially sighted TV viewers of Asian descent when watching Bollywood films.

The introduction of audio description to Bollywood films on TV channels licensed in the UK is not only likely to bridge a major gap in accessibility of Bollywood films for the first generation of British Asians living in the UK but would also introduce the concept of description to its Indian counterparts, which today is home to world's largest number of blind and partially sighted people.

¹⁹ Defeat Diabetes Foundation: Kumer, Sudhesh. Parkes-Harrison, Kelly. Diabetes Care news release. March 2009.

Annex 1: solution for smaller channels

The following logic could be applied for smaller channels who would otherwise under full requirements fall at the 1% hurdle.

If a channel has been under obligations in the previous year to provide TV access services, but its new increased obligations mean that it would be spending more than 1% of its relevant turnover on access services, a solution similar to this one would remedy the situation:

- Apply a reduced subtitling requirement of 66% and check if that brings the channel under the 1% hurdle. If yes, than ask the channel to provide its required AD quota.
- If the above does not solve the issue, apply a reduced subtitling requirement of 33% and check if that brings the channel under the 1% hurdle. If yes, than ask the channel to provide its required AD quota.
- If the above does not solve the issue, apply a reduced subtitling requirement of 33% and a reduced AD requirement of 10% AD.
- If that does not solve the issue, absolve the channel from the requirement to provide access services. This last measure would be similar to the system that is in operation at the moment.

Annex 2: Ofcom access services review consultation - teleconference with RNIB members 14 October 2009

In summary

These quotes are taken from the transcript of a telephone meeting between six RNIB members. The discussion was moderated by a trained facilitator. All of the participants were female and aged 50+ (with two in their eighties). The members were responding to questions or comments by other members or the facilitator and as with most conversation transcripts, this transcript contains uncompleted sentences and grammatical errors made during the conversation.

Everyone agreed on Option 2. All thought AD was a very valuable service. The group discussed some issues other than AD which have been noted at the end.

Members

As this is a public document we have not included the names of the six members who took part and instead use two letters to identify each speaker.

CO
AN
RO
TH
JA
BI

Quotes

1. Would you like more TV programmes to be audio described?

RO Yes, I think definitely there should be more audio description

AN Oh, definitely. I think that's a fair development, because it's going to be a milestone over the next few years. That's only a fifth, and I think that's a reasonable target

BI I would personally think they should have 20% on everything and then it would be standardised, and every provider would have to meet the same commitment. If this is going to be the only opportunity for change for many years, then we need as much as we're able to.

CO Of course. So we have a choice just like other people then, haven't we?

BI It would make you feel... it's a social inclusion issue I think, really. You can talk about television programmes and you feel you can interact with it or understand it better and discuss the programmes more realistically with people you do meet, if you both have a common interest.

TH Yes, I think it would be useful. You never know, especially I like history.

JA Yes, so do I. Yes, at least [20 per cent].

2. Tell us what difference AD makes and why you would like more?

TH Before that I didn't realise how much I didn't understand. I wouldn't want to be without it.

JA Well, I find it is very good. It makes quite a lot of difference. It makes plays particularly more understandable, because they seem to be getting more obscure, perhaps it's me.

JA Well, it makes it more understandable. It's much quicker, whereas some of them without AD you think, well, what the hell is happening? You certainly get what is happening better and I do miss it when it's not. There are old programmes that don't have it.

BI I'd like to say that I think audio description has revolutionised television for me. I never used to like television much, because I felt I

couldn't be involved in it. There were big silences and actually you were left wondering, and you'd no idea about what was happening. Sometimes to help a sighted person understand what audio description is, it would be good for them to be blindfolded for five minutes and the television switched on.

BI If you take into account that the majority of blind people, at least two thirds are elderly then they're not going to go out to the pictures necessarily. It's important to have something in their home that will give them independence and will bring entertainment to them, as it were

CO I can't see the television at all so of course to me it's important otherwise I don't think I'd really bother with the television, to be honest.

CO I like a lot of the location and holiday programmes and it's particularly nice because they describe the scenery and everything.

CO I only had my Freeview box last Christmas and it was nice to watch Phantom of the Opera and things because they described all the things people were wearing and all sorts of things like that, and I particularly liked it. And that has made such a difference in the last year, 10 months now, because I never bothered with television before that, to be honest.

CO I find audio description really does help me an awful lot. I've just enjoyed "Australia" [dvd] and that's really lovely, and when you get a play on the television that describes the person's crossing the road or picking up a book or whatever, it really does help me an awful lot.

CO It's like opening up a new door to me with the audio description.

CO For instance, if you hear water or something like that, you think, well, what's happening? Are they in the water or is it a waterfall or what is it?

CO You get the wrong end of the stick completely, which I've done on occasion.

AN But it makes a huge difference. It's just things that you wouldn't necessarily know if the audio description wasn't there, especially if you're following an ongoing drama or anything like that. It's so easy to miss things if you've got very little vision and you can't see what is showing on the television screen.

AN I was watching an opera type programme last Christmas. A lot of it was in different languages and I was completely lost and couldn't follow it so I was quite disappointed.

CO On Coast to Coast last night they were in Dorset amongst the truffles and things, and I thought, I wish I had that in audio description.

AN Yes, it is. I personally would like a lot more of the Sky Channels to have a lot more audio description,

AN Yes and also it's very frustrating if you're used to something being audio described, say, for example, Coronation Street, and for whatever reason that particular week they've forgotten to push the button. Oh dear.

3. What types of programmes or channels (soaps, documentaries, drama) should have more audio description?

RO I'd like things such as nature programmes with audio description and when you're talking about scenery, you definitely need audio description for that.

RO Yes, I enjoy Emmerdale and Coronation Street, but I'd like more films and drama put onto audio description.

TH Yes, I'd like more detective stories, I like those.

JA Yes, I think something like Morse would benefit from audio description.

JA I would like more audio description on quite a lot of programmes. Nature programmes. Quite often they're very sparse and they have a

long scene of some birds and they don't mention what birds and one doesn't always know. They could do a lot more.

TH Like Titchmarsh, they have the different people on that, if you knew exactly what was happening, that would be nice. He chats and they're doing things and do all sorts of things, it'd be interesting if some of that was described.

BI It would be good to see an increased range of audio description across the whole spectrum, rather than a particular type of programme. If we just got a representative range that would be best to cater for all tastes.

BI There are certain types of programmes that need more audio description, where there's more visual information, like nature programmes or travel programmes. Where people go to different parts like some of the Michael Palin things; now they're brilliant with AD. It's quite interesting to hear about these countries and cultures.

AN Sometimes there are some sporting things that I think, ooh, you could [benefit from AD] even though you get commentary sometimes things are not exactly clear, but I suppose on a live event that could be slightly tricky, possibly.

AN I do watch a fair few dramas and I always think that there's room for more drama to be audio described.

BI I would like that [Murder she wrote] audio described. I like Agatha Christie stuff

AN Yes, it is. I personally would like a lot more of the Sky Channels to have a lot more audio description, but off the top of my head I couldn't name one in particular. It's just a general feeling for me.

JA No, I think one picks and chooses so much that you need it generally on all channels.

AN I would probably watch more [programmes if they were audio described]. Yes, I probably would, definitely.

4. Do you make decisions about your TV viewing depending on what has AD?

CO Tomorrow when my son comes in with the shopping he'll go through the book [TV listings] and tell me what's got audio description on. And I think, ooh yes, I'll watch that.

CO If there was more AD I'd pick and choose a bit more

AN Yes, 90% of the things that I watch have been audio described and I purposely do look for something that is audio described. However, if there is something on and it hasn't got audio description I think, ooh, I'll give that a go, I will try and bear with it, but there are just some things that the pleasure has gone if it hasn't got the audio description, which is a shame.

TH I used to take a Braille TV guide and I packed up using that, because there was so much to go through for the little bit I was watching, there didn't seem much point. Now, I just hope for the best.

Other issues discussed by group.

- Digital TVs need to be more accessible and need to have talking menus and EPGs
- Background music or other noise on programmes sometimes drowned out AD
- Problems with finding out which programmes have AD
- That AD should be publicised more by broadcasters and RNIB
- Staff in TV shops/Sky and Virgin installers/Broadcaster help lines should know about AD, help people select products with AD and help people set up equipment with AD.

Annex 3: About RNIB

We are the leading organisation representing the needs and interests of people in the UK with a sight problem. We work directly and indirectly with blind and partially sighted people.

We are a membership organisation with over 10,000 members who are blind, partially sighted or the friends and family of people with sight loss. 80 per cent of our Trustees and Assembly Members are blind or partially sighted. We encourage members to be involved in our work and regularly consult with them on government policy and their ideas for change.

We also work with representative organisations, visual impairment professionals and we provide expert advice and options to national and local government, the broadcasting and telecoms sector, and a range of public and private organisations.

Contact for further information:

Leen Petré

Principal Manager, Media and Culture Department.

RNIB

105 Judd Street

London London WC1H 9NE

Leen.Petre@rnib.org.uk