

Peter Hewitt, CEO Arts Council England
Speech at the launch of the See a Voice Project
16th January 2007

Thank you David. As Chief Executive of Arts Council England, I am delighted to be here at the launch of the See a Voice project - thank you very much to Lord Harrison and the See a Voice team for hosting this event.

As many of you will know, Arts Council England is committed to getting more art to more people in more places. Our ambition is to 'put the arts at the heart of national life and people at the heart of the arts' and, like DCMS, we want to see more active participation in the arts by a broader range of adults and young people across the country. That is why we are so pleased to be investing public money in See a Voice and I would like to add my congratulations to those of David to STAGETEXT and VocalEyes on their success to date.

Increasing access to the arts for deaf and disabled people has been a priority for the Arts Council for some time. Since 1994, our investment in new and renovated arts buildings has removed many physical barriers to a host of arts buildings in England. In the last year we awarded just under £5 million of National Lottery funding through our open access Grants for the Arts programme to a range of disability-focused projects which involved disabled people as participants, audiences and professional artists. And increased investment in the arts by this government has enabled us to significantly increase revenue funding for organisations like STAGETEXT and VocalEyes over the last few years.

Responding to the demand for improved access by disabled people, this investment has given the organisations the stability to go on and successfully develop captioning and audio description services.

However, we know that the costs of providing accessible services still remains a challenge for many arts organisations. We also know that disabled people remain less likely to attend or participate in arts events than non-disabled people. But with increasing numbers of disabled people and an ageing population, we need to take further steps to address this which is why our PSA target is so crucial to us.

It's also why we launched our **disability equality scheme** last month. Our vision is to promote greater recognition of the role of disabled people in creating and engaging with the arts, ensuring that all disabled people have the best possible access to all arts practice taking place across England.

We will be working with all of our clients, with all of our staff and through all of our resources to support the delivery of this scheme. And See a Voice is great example of how we can and will put this into practice. By working right across the country, See a Voice is a genuinely national project working with 15 hubs to bring together a wide range of arts expertise including key partner organisations like STAGETEXT and VocalEyes, theatre technicians, marketing staff and audience development agencies, as well as each of our regional offices.

Of course, one of the most exciting aspects of this project is the opportunity to increase attendance by deaf and visually impaired people in the arts, which David has talked about. But lets not actually forget about the quality of work that this project will enable more people to see - from leading London theatres to rural venues in the far South West of England to performances during Liverpool 2008, the European City of Culture. The arts have the power to transform lives and communities and our world class theatre sector is thriving. This project goes straight to the heart of this by improving access to the arts for disabled people and enabling more people to enjoy the very best theatre programmes right across the country.

Of course, the Government's Spending Review process is very much with us at present and until decided there remains a degree of uncertainty about levels of future funding for the arts, but events and projects like this - where we can work strategically with DCMS and with our client organisations to meet shared objectives - can only help to make the case for sustained investment.

We look forward to supporting the development of See a Voice and wish once again to congratulate STAGETEXT and VocalEyes on their success.