

Blind to the Facts 2023

Executive Summary

A project commissioned by Baluji Music Foundation and funded by Vision Foundation.

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1 Introduction

Commissioned by the Baluji Music Foundation (BMF) and funded by Vision Foundation, this report explores the experiences and barriers associated with working in the UK music industry for blind and visually impaired (BVI) professionals. The project was led by Dr Claire Castle, who works for research charity BRAVO VICTOR, and Dr David Baker from the Institute of Education's Department of Culture, Communication and Media was a co-investigator. Ethical approval was granted for the project by University College London's Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee (Reg: Z6364106/2022/11/104).

The report provides insight into the experiences and views of BVI people working in, or hoping to work in, the industry, and those of employers, providers and other stakeholders with or without experiences of working with BVI professionals. The report draws on data gathered from two studies. Firstly, a survey of 109 respondents, of whom 44 had V.I., and secondly, a series of semi-structured interviews run with 11 interviewees. Five interviewees were BVI musicians (including three members of Inner Vision Orchestra, an ensemble of BVI musicians formed through the Baluji Music Foundation) and six were sighted industry representatives who held various other stakeholder/provider roles. The report updates findings from John Ludlow's Blind to the Facts report, produced in 1995 for the Baluji Music Foundation, which surveyed 50 BVI musicians about their musical careers and barriers they had experienced.

Overall, findings indicate some progress towards inclusion of BVI professionals in the music industry since the 1995 Blind to the Facts report. However, many of the same barriers, and some new challenges, were also evident. Findings are summarised below and compared to findings from the original report. It should be noted that difficulties experienced by BVI professionals are likely to be greatest amongst those with the highest level of V.I., i.e., those who are blind as opposed to those who are partially sighted. Partially sighted respondents were not well represented in the sample, so comparison of these groups was not possible. More data is needed to explore how the severity of sight loss and age of onset affects professional opportunities.

If you want to contact the Baluji Music Foundation about this project or any of their work, please phone 0207 226 2094 or email baluji@baluji.com.

2 Key findings and comparisons with the Blind to the Facts 1995 survey

2.1 Transport and travel

In 2023 transport and travel continued to create difficulties for BVI. Respondents reported mixed levels of satisfaction with their ability to travel to work locations and

nearly a third were “Dissatisfied” with travel costs. Participants highlighted the challenges of securing transport as a non-driver, costs of public transport and taxis, and the impact of this on their ability to take work opportunities. The practical challenges of finding venues and entrances were also highlighted, along with the importance of being able to access sighted support in the workplace to assist with navigation and provide other practical support. Lack of transport was also the most commonly cited issue in 1995.

2.2 Sheet music and Braille music

In the current study, access to written music remains a barrier for some. Few respondents read Braille music, although this may not be problematic for those who work in genres and styles which do not rely on sheet music. However, a small number observed that lack of access to Braille music training during childhood may hinder later musical engagement and employment in the industry, particularly those working in classical styles. In the survey, over a third of respondents were “Very dissatisfied” with the availability of musical scores in an accessible format. Regardless of the type of score accessed (e.g., Braille, large print, via technology), the time-consuming nature of committing scores to memory was apparent, with implications for participation in ensembles.

Access to written music was also a major problem in 1995, and restricted the music that BVI musicians could play. Large print music was uncommon, and copyright always created difficulties for enlarging and reprinting music. Braille Music was essential to classical musicians and those who wanted to graduate from music college.

2.3 Information

Access to information is a barrier for many BVI musicians. Despite the increase in online information sources, there is a lack of information about venues and, particularly, how exactly to travel to, and enter, buildings. In the current study, even when BVI had successfully navigated to a venue, some still struggled to find the correct entrance. This information may be essential for BVI professionals to feel confident attending new workplaces, and ensuring they can remain independent when travelling to, and around, work environments. Consequently sighted support was felt to be particularly important for navigation to, and around, workplaces, especially in locations.

In 1995 access to information was also limited, including details of venues, agents, record companies, studios, fellow musicians, festivals. Existing sources were not available in accessible formats. This made it difficult for BVI musicians to identify performance opportunities.

2.4 Technology

In 2023, technology allows easier access to scores, and new ways of listening to, and learning, music. However, some BVI professionals are struggling to access and utilise this technology. Accessibility settings were found to create difficulties when using some Apps, and continual updates to software left some without access to their technology. A third of BVI survey respondents were “Satisfied” with how easy it is to use music technologies relevant to their roles but nearly a third were “Dissatisfied”. Barriers relating to costs and access to training were highlighted and work is needed to ensure accessible technologies in production spaces. There has been rapid progress over the last 20 years in social media. Because this is primarily a visual medium it is an area where support is required by BVI professionals if they do not have the ability or confidence to produce content, present themselves online, and develop a professional “image”. In 1995, access to new technology was often limited and many musicians felt marginalised.

2.5 Professional representation and agents

Representation remains a significant issue for BVI musicians in 2023. Just four out of 44 respondents with V.I. reported using an agency, and 2 a manager, to find work. Even the most active blind musicians in the research are unable to find representation. This issue was also problematic in 1995, and few musicians reported having an agent or management of any kind. Whilst not essential, most were actively seeking some kind of representation to provide specialised support (e.g., to deal effectively with record companies, venues, etc., and use the correct language to promote themselves effectively).

2.6 Recording and sound engineering

Four respondents were paid, and 7 unpaid, for sound recording and music production work over the last 12 months. Accessibility issues are apparent in recording environments. Recording hardware which operates through LCD has no speech software interface, making it difficult to operate independently. Music software is also problematic, and ultimately requires sighted support.

In 1995, many respondents expressed an interest in obtaining help with recording, with a general view that the recording studio was suited to sighted people only. However, a number of respondents had their own studios, dispelling the notion that a BVI professional would be unable to function effectively in these spaces.

2.7 Formal training

The majority of respondents in 2023 had undergone some formal music training; 61%, for example, had undertaken graded examinations. Participation in workshops or short courses and formal instrumental or vocal training at a conservatoire or other institution were also common. Only a small proportion had not undertaken any formal music training. This may reflect an overall trend over the last 20 years of increasing numbers of young people attending higher education

institutions, and potentially, increased access to courses and training for BVI musicians. This is in marked contrast to the 1995 report when around 50% of respondents lacked formal training and relied on self-taught skills. The vast majority would have welcomed formal music education.

2.8 Social inclusion and networking opportunities

There is a lack of networking opportunities within the industry which would enable BVI to benefit professionally. In the current study, the most common reason given by BVI participants for not working in the industry was not having enough contacts to secure regular employment, followed by not feeling confident enough to pursue a career in the industry and not having the right skills to do so. The importance of access to peer support, particularly from those in similar roles and with similar experiences with V.I., was highlighted, along with difficulties accessing this support. In 1995, the need for networking was also highlighted, and isolation was identified as a major issue.

2.9 Discrimination and employment opportunities

Despite a general positive shift in the landscape of access, inclusion, and diversity, the 2023 study found that discrimination remains a significant concern. Participants reflected on the impact of 'invisible' discrimination, feelings of missing out on opportunities because of negative attitudes towards V.I., incorrect assumptions about BVI and their abilities, and concern over revealing a V.I. to employers for fear of negative reactions. A continued lack of employment opportunities was highlighted. Over a third of BVI respondents were "Very dissatisfied" with their ability to secure regular work, and nearly a third with the variety of work available to them. Indeed, almost half worked less than 1-2 days a week, just 19% reported that all of their income came from the music industry, and 32% reported having one or more jobs outside the music industry. By far the most common paid and unpaid musical activity amongst BVI respondents was live performance.

Results reflected those from 1995, which found that discrimination was a key concern. The need to highlight injustices and discrimination through direct action and awareness raising was noted, and the role that IVO might take in doing so was also highlighted.

2.10 Disability arts

'Disability arts' remains a contentious issue for respondents. The existence of movements, projects and initiatives targeted towards greater inclusion of BVI and those with other disabilities has provided many with employment and development opportunities which do not exist elsewhere. However, there are concerns amongst BVI respondents and employers/providers that these could potentially damage employment prospects if they are confined only to disability arts opportunities and not integrated into the mainstream. Given the continued challenges experienced by

BVI in the industry, ensembles and organisations supporting these individuals still have a vital role to play in providing opportunities, support, and promotion, and sharing best practices with other organisations. Those individuals who had been involved with Inner Vision Orchestra (IVO) noted its positive impact on confidence, well-being, team working skills, and learning opportunities. However, as one provider noted, there must also be work done to ensure that 'mainstream' musical environments are available to these musicians too.

Similar findings were reported in 1995. 'Disability arts' was felt to have little relevance to BVI musicians, although there was support for an organisation dedicated to the interests of BVI musicians. This was the reason Inner Vision Orchestra was formed, with the Paraorchestra following.

2.11 Views of employers

The 1995 study focused mainly on musicians, but the current study also surveyed employers and industry representatives. There is a lack of BVI working in the industry, particularly in leadership or management roles. The most common reason given by employers who had not worked with BVI professionals was that they had rarely come across them in their field of work (90%). Consequently, BVI participants highlight a lack of role models for BVI professionals. Whilst nearly half of employers felt "Very confident" about hiring someone with V.I., a third were "Not confident at all" about ensuring recruitment materials were accessible or using schemes such as Access to Work. Just 3 out of 30 reported being a "Disability Confident" employer and 10 were not sure if their organisation was part of this government scheme. Given the self-selecting nature of the sample of employees in the current study, it is likely that awareness of the needs of BVI professionals may be lower amongst the wider music industry.

2.12 Employment support and training

In the 2023 survey, respondents were asked about the types of support that they received and sought. 44% of BVI respondents were "Dissatisfied" with the availability of training to support professional development. Whilst sight loss organisations are a source of employment support, there may be limits to what they are able, or willing, to provide. Tasks deemed non-essential (e.g., buying clothes) may not be supported, but may be essential to the image development for BVI professionals. Over a third of BVI respondents were "Very dissatisfied" with how easy it is to apply for the "Access to Work" scheme. Challenges with the scheme included the time required to set-up support, the need to claim back expenses (rather than be provided with financial support up-front), inaccessible forms, and a lack of understanding of the scheme for freelance workers.

3 Recommendations

3.1 Accessing venues and workspaces

Whilst venues typically provide some information online, this may not always be accessible or complete. All venues and workplaces (this might include schools and all public performance spaces) should develop a complete source of information about their venue/workplace covering key areas of importance to BVI people including:

- Public transport options to the location
- Car and taxi instructions for arrival, drop-off, and parking (including details or disabled parking spaces and charges)
- Walking instructions from local bus/train stations
- Description of entrance and exit locations, and details regarding the nature of entrances and exits (e.g., automatic doors, revolving doors)

For those travelling alone, support entering a building may be required. A contact number to arrange this prior to arrival should be provided.

3.2 Access and inclusion as markers of quality

Given the challenges still experienced by BVI professionals, it appears that access and inclusion still appear to be treated as non-essential. As one venue representative highlighted in the current project, access and inclusion should be seen as markers of quality, enabling representation of different groups in different musical and cultural spaces and workplaces.

An initiative run by individuals with lived experience of sight loss directed by an organisation such as the IVO should work with all relevant locations to ensure working practices and physical environments meet the needs of BVI professionals. This should be an accredited scheme and should cover:

- Recruitment or audition processes
- Recruitment materials
- Software and technological requirements
- Physical environments
- Provision of information (e.g., about a venue/workspace and about upcoming jobs and opportunities)

3.3 Initiatives to support greater inclusion of BVI professionals

Mentoring schemes which enable networking opportunities for BVI musicians should be set up by large promoters, producers, agents and record companies. These should be supported by organisations such as UK Music, the BMF and the Musicians Union. The work of Attitude is Everything has made significant progress in the accessibility of venues, and their Beyond The Music initiative is working to ensure that aspiring and active industry professionals with access requirements can forge careers in the industry. Promotion of this initiative to BVI professionals may increase awareness and access to support. This could be done directly through IVO or other organisations, of whom participants were commonly members (e.g., RNIB, the Musicians Union). All music organisations should be encouraged to reach out to BVI people, all disability organisations should include the specific

requirements of BVI people, and all diversity initiatives should address BVI-specific needs.

A database of volunteers who can act as sighted guides would help to provide essential support.

3.4 Marketing and PR training for BVI musicians

BVI musicians would benefit from support and training in how to present themselves as a public persona and through social media. The survey highlighted a lack of confidence and skill in communicating with the public in person and through social media. Sight loss organisations could provide one-to-one training or workshops in these areas including support in setting up an EPK to assist in promotion.

3.5 Partnerships between the cultural and the sight loss sector

Venues or employers in the music industry should consult the sight loss sector (e.g., local sight loss charities) to increase their understanding of the experiences and needs of BVI people. This would help to reduce discrimination and many of the barriers highlighted (e.g., increasing accessibility in key areas such as recruitment, information accessibility, and venue accessibility). These partnerships could facilitate collaborative events and bring BVI performers and audience members into a greater number of musical spaces.

3.6 Shared resources for employers/providers

A handbook of best practice relating to all aspects of accessibility for BVI people should be produced and shared within the music industry (e.g., venues, employers, agencies, event organisers etc.). This could be used alongside training workshops which raise awareness of the needs of BVI professionals.

3.7 Tailored information relating to Access to Work

It is essential that Access to Work improve its application process, including the accessibility of information and forms. There is also a need for information targeted towards self-employed, freelance BVI professionals working in the music sector. A collation of relevant information for this group may help to ensure the scheme is accessible to all eligible BVI musicians. This could be made available through, for example, RNIB's Music Advisory Service and/or other sight loss charities.

3.8 Locating BVI musicians

BVI musicians noted the challenge of identifying work opportunities, and employers highlighted the difficulty in reaching these individuals. A roster of BVI musicians and other professionals could be a valuable resource. This Should be hosted online by BMF and promoted via email to venues and organisations.

3.9 Networks and peer support

The BMF needs to expand its capacity to be able to list upcoming opportunities.

There needs to be a central repository of links to support and networking groups of BVI professionals, covering different areas of professional involvement e.g., music education, production, performance etc. Information on how to join these channels could be advertised via BMF, via sight loss charities, and musical organisations such as the Musicians Union.

3.10 Recommendations from BVI professionals other BVI professionals or aspiring professionals

- Be proactive in communicating needs clearly to others
- Make use of an Access Rider (a document that states the requirements of an individual)
- Provide feedback on accessibility to venues, organisations, and employers (individuals and organisations are unlikely to improve in areas such as access and inclusion without both positive feedback and areas for improvement being highlighted).