



Slovenija

# **CINEMA WITHOUT BARRIERS**

**Handbook on Accessibility  
and Inclusion in Slovenian  
Cinemas**

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# INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a place of stories, emotions and shared experiences. In order for a cinema experience to be truly shared by all, it is important that film content and the cinema itself are accessible to everyone – regardless of sensory and motor abilities. In an inclusive cinema, viewers with different needs can participate equally in film art and cultural life.

This handbook is intended for film exhibitors who want to open their cinemas to a wider audience. It provides an overview of data and facts about the blind, visually impaired, deaf and hard-of-hearing communities, legislative requirements and guidelines, and theoretical foundations that help understand the meaning of accessibility. It also contains practical recommendations for adapting film content – from subtitles and interpretation into Slovenian Sign Language to audio descriptions – as well as technical solutions, spatial adaptations, and guidelines for creating a pleasant user experience.

Emphasis is put on the importance of working together with communities of people with various forms of disability and having an ethical, sustainable approach to implementing change. With appropriate adaptations, we enable all viewers to immerse themselves in the film story, as well as empower audiences and build cinemas as open, inclusive, and vibrant cultural spaces.

The chapters below are organised in a way that guides the reader from a broad overview of the situation, through theoretical foundations, to very specific practical instructions.

# 01

## **STATISTICS AND CURRENT SITUATION IN SLOVENIA**

In order to properly plan accessible screenings, it is first necessary to know the characteristics of the target groups. A significant proportion of the population in Slovenia lives with hearing and vision loss. According to expert estimates, approximately 7–10% of the population has some degree of hearing impairment, which in absolute numbers is around 140,000–200,000 people. Among them, approximately 1,000 deaf people use Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ) to communicate, and 78,000 people of all ages use hearing aids. In addition, Slovenia is home to almost 200 deaf-blind people (with combined vision and hearing loss). With the aging of the population, the number of people with hearing loss is increasing further, as hearing loss often affects the elderly.

According to the Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Slovenia (ZDSSS), there are more than 10,000 registered blind and visually impaired persons in Slovenia. It is estimated that approximately 8,000–10,000 people have very severe vision loss (blind), and an additional 30,000–40,000 people have serious

vision impairments that significantly affect their daily lives. This data includes both people who are completely blind and those with residual vision (low vision).

These figures clearly show that a large part of the population needs appropriate adaptations for equal access to audiovisual content, but the current accessibility of cinemas and film screenings in Slovenia for these groups is limited, so accessible cinema screenings are still a rarity. In the past year, such screenings were available at the Cerknica Culture House as part of the Cinema Without Barriers project and at the Kinodvor City Cinema in Ljubljana. Both institutions put on film events for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, which are equipped with Slovenian (descriptive) subtitles, interpreted into Slovenian Sign Language and include discussions after the films, which are also accompanied by interpretation into Slovenian Sign Language. In addition, by means of audio descriptions, screenings at the Cerknica Culture House and Kinodvor are also made accessible to blind and visually impaired viewers, and both halls are further equipped with an induction loop that improves the sound for users of hearing aids. In September 2025, the Linhart Hall in Radovljica and the Union Cinema in Celje also started putting on accessible screenings.

Despite Cerknica Culture House, Kinodvor, Linhart Hall, and Union Cinema leading by example, such practices are still rare. Accessibility for the blind and visually impaired is particularly lacking in regular cinemas, as audio descriptions of films are played almost exclusively at special screenings. This means that currently, most blind and visually impaired people only have the opportunity to experience films with audio descriptions on special occasions, not during regular cinema visits. The deaf and hard of hearing also often depend on whether the film already has (descriptive) subtitles (in Slovenia, foreign films are regularly subtitled, but these

subtitles are not adapted for the deaf, as they usually do not include information about the sound). In regular cinemas, Slovenian films and other content in Slovene sometimes lack even basic Slovenian subtitles, let alone descriptive ones, which excludes deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers who cannot follow the dialogue.

Based on these facts, we can conclude that there is still a gap between the needs of the audience and the current offer of accessible film content, which opens up room for development and upgrades: by introducing adaptations, film exhibitors can expand accessibility, include all viewers, and allow cinema to become a space open to everyone.

In the following chapters, we will present the relevant legislative requirements and guidelines in more detail.

# 02

## **SLOVENIAN AND EUROPEAN LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**

The basis for ensuring accessibility at the global level is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), which Slovenia ratified in 2008. In Article 30, the Convention specifically obliges signatory states to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to cultural life on an equal basis with others, which includes access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities in accessible formats. The CRPD emphasises the right to use one's own language (e.g. sign language) and access information in adapted formats. By ratifying it, Slovenia has committed itself to enabling persons with disabilities to have equal access to cultural goods, including audiovisual media content and public cultural services.

In 2021, the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia was amended with the adoption of Article 62a, which was of great importance, as it explicitly recognised for the first time the right of deaf and deaf-blind people to their own language. This recognised Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ) as a language, and deaf and deaf-blind people

as a linguistic and cultural community with the right to their own language and interpreters. In the field of culture, this requires the use of Slovenian Sign Language where it is key to accessibility – for example, at public events, in museums and, of course, in cinemas (interpretation of speech in SZJ, preparation of materials in SZJ, etc.).

The Act Regulating the Use of Slovene Sign Language (ZUSZJ) has been in force since 2002, guaranteeing the deaf the right to use SZJ in procedures before authorities and regulating the financing of SZJ interpreters. In practice, this means that public institutions must provide deaf persons with sign language interpreters upon their request, with the costs covered by the state.

The key regulation in the field of disability policy is the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities Act (ZIMI) of 2010. The ZIMI prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in access to goods and services available to the public. It explicitly requires that persons with disabilities be enabled to access cultural goods and public events by removing barriers (whether architectural or communication). The ZIMI introduced the obligation to gradually adapt all public facilities (which includes cinemas), both in terms of physical accessibility and adaptations for persons with sensory disabilities. The deadline for ensuring full accessibility was set by the amendments for December 2025. This means that by then, all cinemas should have removed architectural barriers (i.e. ensure wheelchair access and appropriate infrastructure) and installed the necessary technical adaptations (e.g. induction loops, audible warnings, Braille signage, etc.).

A key breakthrough in the legislative field was the adoption of the Accessibility of Products and Services for Disabled Persons Act (ZDPSI), which was published in the Official Gazette of the Republic

of Slovenia No. 14/23. This act transposes the requirements of the European Directive (EU) 2019/882, known as the European Accessibility Act. The ZDPSI sets out technical standards and obligations for a range of products and services, including audiovisual services. Based on Article 10 of the ZDPSI, the Ministry of Culture issued the Rules on Detailed Conditions Regarding the Accessibility of Services That Ensure Access to Audiovisual Media Services for People with Disabilities. These rules, which came into force on 28 June 2025, specify which adaptations AV content providers must provide and in what quality. They list four basic types of accessibility services: subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, audio description for the blind and visually impaired, spoken subtitles, and sign language interpretation. The Rules emphasise that these services must be provided in full and in appropriate quality – subtitles must be accurate, readable and synchronized, audio descriptions must cover key visual elements in terms of content, etc. A recent innovation is spoken or audio subtitles intended for the blind and visually impaired, which allow them to follow foreign-language films by hearing the subtitles read aloud. It is either a speech synthesis or a recorded voice that reads Slovenian subtitles during the foreign film so that someone who is blind can understand the dialogues. The Rules are considered an important milestone, as they systematically regulate the quality and presence of adaptations in the audiovisual sector for the first time. Although they are primarily aimed at television and online media, they will also indirectly affect film screenings, as they oblige all AV content providers to ensure accessibility for people with disabilities.

The strategic documents at the national level are the Action Programme for Persons with Disabilities 2022–2030 and the National Programme for Culture 2022–2029. Both of them highlight among their goals the improvement of accessibility of

cultural institutions and programmes. The National Programme for Culture specifically emphasises that cultural institutions must be more open to vulnerable groups and increase accessibility, in which new technologies for adapting programmes can also play an important role.

Accessibility in the film sector is set out through precise technical standards, including the Technical Standards for the Submission of Film and Audiovisual Materials, adopted on 21 September 2018 as part of the archival act of the Slovenian Film Centre (SFC), which explicitly define accessibility elements as part of the mandatory submission documentation. The Standards include specific definitions of Slovenian audio description for the blind and visually impaired and Slovenian subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing. While these attachments are formally listed as optional for short films, their inclusion in feature films is an established standard and is generally expected of creators. At a concrete level, concern for accessibility is also reflected in the SFC's tender procedures. In the cost estimates submitted by producers when applying for the 2024/2025 calls for tenders, the preparation of Slovenian subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing, as well as audio descriptions for blind and visually impaired audiences, was included among eligible costs, allowing these key accessibility elements to be financed within the production budget.

# 03

## UNDERSTANDING ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility is not a matter of the individual, but of the environment. Barriers arise when the space or society does not provide the conditions for equal access. A deaf/hard-of-hearing viewer is not at a disadvantage because of their deafness, but because the film does not have subtitles or a sign language interpreter to help them understand it. Similarly, a blind/visually impaired viewer is not excluded because of their blindness/visual impairment, but because of the absence of audio description. Disability is thus “created” only when the environment does not enable different ways of perception and participation.

Film is an audiovisual medium that, by its very nature, is not equally accessible to all. Because it relies on the simultaneous operation of image and sound, it creates a full experience only for hearing and sighted individuals. This is precisely why adaptations are needed to bridge the gap between the work created and the different needs of the audience. If thoughtfully designed, the adaptations not only benefit people with disabilities, but often improve the experience

for everyone. For example, subtitles are not only helpful for the deaf and hard of hearing, but also for the elderly or viewers in theatres with poor acoustics. Similarly, audio description, which provides access for the blind/visually impaired, also benefits people with reading disabilities or autism, as clear narration makes it easier to follow the story.

Adaptations are the means to ensure the film's accessibility to a wider audience. Their purpose is to provide an experience that may not be exactly the same for everyone, but allows everyone to enjoy following the story.

It is key to understand that viewers with different forms of disability are not a homogeneous group. The deaf often need a sign language interpreter, the hard of hearing are helped by technical solutions such as induction loops or FM systems, the deaf-blind need a combination of approaches, the blind need audio descriptions, and the visually impaired benefit from larger fonts, better contrast and adapted seating. The best approach is to offer a variety of options and let the individual choose the one that suits them best. The key is that each viewer receives information in a form that they can perceive. This means that audio information must be converted into visual information for the deaf and hard of hearing, and visual information into audio information for the blind and visually impaired. It is this very interplay between the senses that forms the essence of accessibility in an audiovisual medium.

Accessibility is not a single solution, but a set of options that adapt to diverse needs. Thoughtful adaptations transform a cinema not only into a technically better-equipped space, but also into a venue where the art of film becomes a shared experience.

In the context of diverse audience needs, it is important to understand that technical adaptations are only the basis of accessible cinema. Accessibility requires the introduction of adaptations that enable an individual to enter the cinema and watch the film screening without any disruption – from architectural solutions to subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing and audio descriptions for the blind and visually impaired. But even if such solutions open the door, they do not in themselves create a sense of belonging. Inclusion goes beyond simply removing barriers and refers to the quality of the entire experience – to relationships, values, communication and the culture of the community. An inclusive cinema is a place where every viewer feels genuinely welcome, respected and equal, regardless of their needs. Therefore, accessibility is only the first step, and the ultimate goal is inclusion: a state in which the art of cinema becomes a truly common, shared and full experience for all.

# 04

## **ADAPTING FILMS FOR THE DEAF/HARD OF HEARING AND BLIND/VISUALLY IMPAIRED**

When it comes to film accessibility, there are two main groups of adaptations: visual adaptations, which convert audio information into visual information and are intended for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, and audio adaptations, which convert visual information into audio and are intended for blind and visually impaired viewers. Various practices have emerged in different media. The most important of these practices are presented below.

### **DESCRIPTIVE SUBTITLES FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

Descriptive subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing are a special type of subtitles designed to capture all of the key audio information



of a film, not just the dialogue. Unlike the usual translated subtitles used with foreign films, descriptive subtitles include:

- transcripts of dialogue for all characters, often with speaker identification (especially when the voice comes from the background or a character outside the frame); the speaker may be identified by name, colour, or special symbol,
- descriptions of significant sound effects, such as [loud explosion], [phone rings], or [soft background music], which bring the sound atmosphere and action closer to deaf viewers,
- transcripts of textual elements in the audio, such as a song being played on the radio, when the text is important to the story,
- symbolic markings for intonation or manner of speaking, such as the musical note ♯ for a song or special markings (e.g. (bang) for a gunshot).

The aim of descriptive subtitles is to give deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers as much of an audio experience as hearing viewers. For example, a long silence in a film interrupted by creepy music is labelled [creepy music] in the subtitles. If two characters are arguing off-screen, the subtitles include their names and the content of the argument so the viewer can understand who is arguing and why.

Descriptive subtitles can appear either in the original language of the film or in translation. In cinematographic practice in Slovenia, this means that:

- **with foreign language films:** Slovenian translation subtitles are usually already available for hearing audiences, but for the deaf and hard of hearing, an extended version is required, which, in addition to the translation, also includes all additional elements of descriptive subtitles. Sometimes, such subtitles are already prepared in the original language (e.g. English descriptive subtitles) and only need to be appropriately translated and adapted into Slovenian.
- **with Slovenian films:** Since hearing audiences understand the words spoken, subtitles are not always prepared in advance, but for the deaf and hard of hearing, it is essential to create Slovenian descriptive subtitles that include all dialogues and audio descriptions, which is a special process that requires linguistic knowledge and a good understanding of the standards for the preparation of descriptive subtitles.

When preparing quality descriptive subtitles, it is crucial to consider several aspects: timing (subtitles must be synchronous with the sound), readability (appropriate font size, good contrast, no more than two lines at a time, sufficient display times considering the reading speed), and placement (they must not obscure important parts of the image; when written words appear in the lower part of the frame, the subtitles move higher). The preparation of quality descriptive subtitles should follow the Guidelines for the Preparation of Descriptive Subtitles in Slovene, which were prepared at the initiative of the Kinodvor Public Institution by a working group that included representatives of the Association of Slovenian Film and Television Translators, RTV SLO's Programme

Accessibility Service and Translation Service, the Association of Slovenian Sign Language Interpreters, and the Slovenian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. The document, which represents the first attempt to establish uniform standards for the preparation of descriptive subtitles in Slovenian, was created after a review of specialised literature and in line with similar documents abroad. The basic starting point are the Guidelines for Subtitling in Slovenian (Association of Slovenian Film and Television Translators, October 2020). The document is freely available at: [www.kinodvor.org/smernice-za-pripravo-opisnih-podnapisov-v-slovenscini/](http://www.kinodvor.org/smernice-za-pripravo-opisnih-podnapisov-v-slovenscini/).

Deaf people who do not have a good command of written Slovenian may also have problems understanding the subtitles themselves. Since deaf people have not learned the language through hearing since birth, their level of literacy in the Slovenian language is often lower. This is why many deaf adults say that subtitles do not ensure their full understanding. It is therefore sensible to also add a sign language interpreter (more on this below) where possible. Subtitles are essential for hard-of-hearing people and people who lost their hearing later in life but can still read well – for these viewers, descriptive subtitles are mostly a completely sufficient adaptation, as they understand written Slovenian without any problems.

## **AUDIO DESCRIPTION**

Audio description is an adaptation intended for blind and visually impaired viewers, in which a narrator uses spoken words to describe what is happening on screen and supplement the dialogue. It is an additional sound layer that is precisely synchronized with the film. Classic audio description is designed to be placed in the gaps between dialogues or in moments when there is no key

audio information in the film, so as not to overlap the existing sound. The audio describer prepares the text in advance, and then a professional speaker records it in a studio, reading it in a vivid and concise way, thus bringing the key visual elements of the story closer to the blind/visually impaired viewer.

Audio description includes various elements that bring the action on screen closer to the blind/visually impaired viewer. These include:

- actions, movement and scene changes, e.g. “Peter slowly opens the door and peers into the dark hallway.”
- context of the scene – the time and place of the action when this is not clear from the dialogue, e.g. “The next morning, in the hospital..”
- characters and their characteristics – appearance, clothing, facial expressions and gestures when they are important to the story, e.g. “A look of disappointment appears on her face – Maria frowns and lowers her gaze.”
- on-screen text and symbols, such as signs that a blind or partially-sighted viewer would not otherwise perceive,
- atmosphere, setting and key props, e.g. “The room is messy; books and clothes are scattered everywhere.”

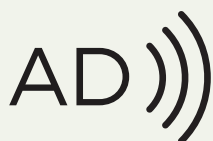
A good audio description is unobtrusive, but rich in information that is substantively important to the story. It typically uses the present tense, the third person, and clear and simple language that maintains the level of the original work. It does not interpret unnecessarily – it lets the listener draw their own conclusions

about the emotions and development of the story, except when these are completely obvious from the visual cues. For example: instead of “The mother is angry with her son,” the describer will say “The mother is looking menacingly at her son, her hands on her hips.” – from this, the blind/visually impaired listener can form their own idea of her mood. When a film contains visual symbols or clues that cannot be perceived without vision (e.g. the murderer leaves a characteristic mark at the crime scene), the audio description must necessarily include them, as the blind/visually impaired viewer would otherwise be deprived of a key part of the story.

Technically, audio description is usually prepared as a separate audio file (a recording of the narrator's voice) that is played synchronously with the film. In cinemas, this means that a system must be available through which a blind or visually impaired viewer can independently play this additional audio channel without it being heard by the rest of the audience. Many modern films – especially abroad, mostly with English versions – already have audio description prepared in advance, but for the Slovenian audience, a new audio description needs to be prepared in the Slovenian language. Some Slovenian films already have audio description prepared in advance, while some others need it to be written and recorded separately.

In Slovenia, audio description of film and television content already exists and is gradually expanding. RTV Slovenia includes it in some shows and films, and some festivals (e.g. FeKK, LIFFe) have offered it in selected screenings. Among regular cinema schedules, accessible screenings with audio description are currently provided by the Cerknica Culture House, the Kinodvor Public Institution, the Linhart Hall in Radovljica, and the Union Cinema.

It is important to note that audio description is not just for blind and partially-sighted viewers. It is also useful for the elderly with partial vision impairment, people with reading or learning disabilities, dyslexics, and individuals with intellectual disabilities. Additional verbal explanation can also provide assistance to some people with autism, making it easier for them to follow the film's narrative.



## **AUDIO OR SPOKEN SUBTITLES**

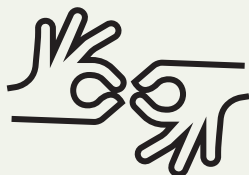
Audio or spoken subtitles are a service related to audio description, intended primarily for the blind and visually impaired when watching foreign-language content. If the film is not in a language that the viewer understands, and the translation only exists in written form (as subtitles), the text of these subtitles is converted into speech. While the film is playing, the system recognises the subtitle file and reads the translated lines in Slovenian (or another target language) in real time using artificial synthesis or a recorded voice. This way, the blind/visually impaired viewer hears the translation of the dialogue, instead of having to read it.

The audio subtitle service is still relatively new and has already been mentioned as a mandatory adaptation in the Rules on Detailed Conditions for the Accessibility of Audiovisual Media Services (MK). In some countries, mobile applications have been developed for this purpose, which work in such a way that when the

user launches the application, it listens to the film, synchronizes with it and then reads the subtitles directly into the user's ear using speech synthesis (TTS – text-to-speech).

The advantage of audio subtitles is that the dialogue does not need to be separately interpreted or translated while watching, as existing translations are used. In cinemas, where most foreign films are already subtitled, audio subtitles represent a relatively simple but important next step towards greater accessibility for blind and visually impaired viewers.

When using audio subtitles, it is crucial that their sound does not mix with the original soundtrack of the film. This is why the blind/visually impaired viewer receives this separate audio through headphones, similar to audio description. When a film is not dubbed into Slovenian and does not have a narrator, audio subtitles fill the gap and enable the viewer to understand the story.



## **INTERPRETING INTO SLOVENIAN SIGN LANGUAGE**

When interpreting audiovisual content into Slovenian Sign Language (SZJ), all spoken text and important audio elements of the film are translated into sign language, which deaf viewers can follow visually. It can be done in several ways:

- Live interpreter next to the screen – during screenings, the SZJ interpreter can stand at the stage and translate dialogues and describe key sounds. This allows the audience to alternate their attention between the film and the interpreter. It requires good lighting for the interpreter and their prior familiarity with the film. This approach is more suitable for shorter films, as the execution is more demanding for feature films.
- Pre-recorded interpreter on video – similar to television, where we see the interpreter in the corner of the screen, it is also possible to pre-record the interpreter providing dialogues and sounds in sign language to be used during film screenings.

Interpreting in SZJ is an ideal form of access for deaf/hard-of-hearing viewers, as it eliminates the need to read (which can be difficult) and allows them to experience the story in their own language. However, this method also has its limitations:

- simultaneous interpretation of feature films with multiple characters and fast-paced dialogue is very demanding; interpreters would have to change frequently for longer films, which increases costs and logistical complexity,
- an interpreter on stage can distract from the film, as the viewer has to constantly switch their focus between the screen and the interpreter,
- films with very dynamic dialogue, numerous characters and overlapping speech are particularly difficult for simultaneous interpretation.

In addition to the film itself, it is important to also interpret the accompanying programme in cinemas (e.g. introductory speeches,

presentations or post-film discussions) so that deaf visitors can fully participate in the event.

If we decide to use an interpreter, it is advisable that they prepare well: they receive the script or film footage, become familiar with the terminology and prepare the appropriate names in sign language. During the screening, the interpreter should be adequately illuminated with soft lighting and positioned so that all viewers can see them clearly; it is also advisable to reserve seats in the first row for deaf visitors.

## **OTHER CONTENT ADAPTATIONS**

Beyond the main forms of accessibility adaptations, there are also the following:

- Customised soundtracks (clean audio) – an audio mix of a film in which the intelligibility of dialogue is increased (the volume of music and background sounds is reduced). This is particularly useful for hard-of-hearing viewers who can hear but have difficulty understanding sound when it is unclear. Some systems allow the selection of a separate “clean audio” track. This solution is already included in television standards (e.g. DVB), but is currently rare in cinemas.
- Simpler language or subtitles in an easy-to-read format – for users with reading difficulties, it is possible to prepare a version of subtitles with simpler vocabulary and shorter sentences, or accompanying material that explains more complex concepts of the film. Such a solution is particularly

suitable in an educational context and for film programmes for children, but not as suitable for art films.

- Adapted colours and images – although cinemas do not prepare special versions for viewers with colour blindness, it is important that subtitles are designed with sufficient contrast and in colours that are also readable for people with daltonism (e.g. avoiding red-green combinations).
- Titles and opening credits – since these elements are mostly visual, it is recommended that key information (film title, important names, credits) be read out with an audio recording or provided to the audience by a moderator before the screening.

Key adaptations for deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers, therefore, are subtitles, sign-language interpretation, and sound-amplification technologies, while for blind and visually impaired viewers, essential adaptations are audio description and spoken transmission of textual information. It is the combination of all these elements that allows the film content to be fully understood and experienced by a wider range of viewers. In the next chapter, we present technical solutions that enable these adaptations to be implemented in the cinema in a way that is accessible to individuals but does not disturb other visitors.

# 05

## **TECHNICAL SOLUTIONS FOR CARRYING OUT ACCESSIBLE PROJECTIONS**

Introducing subtitles or audio description into a cinema screening requires an appropriate technical infrastructure. Modern digital cinema – using a DCP server and a digital projector – already enables support for many such adaptations; often, all that is required is their activation or the addition of devices for individual use. Below, we present the main technological solutions and the associated equipment.

### **INDUCTION LOOP AND FM SYSTEM**

Induction loop and FM system are sound amplification technologies intended for hearing aid users.



An induction loop is a wire placed around the hall or part of it, which creates an electromagnetic field. Hearing aids set to T mode (telecoil) receive this signal directly and provide the user with clear sound from the system – similar to listening to the radio – without any distracting noise from the environment. Many cinemas abroad and some in Slovenia (e.g. Cerknica Culture House, Kinodvor, Union Cinema, Linhart Hall) are already equipped with induction loops.

An alternative is the FM system (wireless sound transmission via radio frequencies) or the infrared system. In this case, the user receives headphones or a receiver. The headphones can be used by the hearing impaired without hearing aids (when they only want louder sound), while cochlear implant users without a telecoil can connect to a special induction neck collar. An alternative audio mix, such as a separate channel with clean dialogue, can also be transmitted over this channel.

## **AUDIO DESCRIPTION SYSTEMS**

Modern digital films often already contain an additional soundtrack with audio description in different languages. The cinema server can play it simultaneously with the main sound, but via a separate output that is directed to an infrared transmitter or to the aforementioned FM/induction system. A transmitter is installed in the hall to cover the entire area, and blind/visually impaired viewers

are given a small receiver with an earphone (often only one, so that they can still perceive the general atmosphere of the hall with the other ear). They select the audio description channel on the receiver to listen to a voice in the earphone describing the events in the film during the projection, while the rest of the audience cannot hear it. It is essential that the playback is completely synchronised with the film.

## **MOBILE APPS FOR AUDIO DESCRIPTION AND SUBTITLES**

In recent years, mobile solutions have been introduced that do not require additional equipment in the cinema, as they are based on the users' smartphones. Apps such as Greta (Germany) and Earcatch (Netherlands) allow the user to download audio description to their phone before the screening. During the film, the app listens to the sound in the hall via a microphone, synchronises with it, and then plays the audio description into the user's headphones.

The advantage of such solutions is that the cinema does not need additional equipment, as the user can simply bring their phone and use the service (the exception is older individuals who are not skilled in using mobile phones). The disadvantage is that the audio description for a specific film and version must be prepared in advance and uploaded to the application database. Furthermore, the use of the phone in the hall should be encouraged with caution – promoting dimmed screens and airplane mode so as not to disturb other viewers.

Despite these limitations, mobile applications represent an important part of the future. Some newer solutions, such as Syncro

and All4Access, already combine several functions: the transfer of audio description, spoken subtitles and also the display of written subtitles directly on the phone. In Slovenia, such applications have not yet been used in cinemas.

## **STANDARDS AND FORMATS**

Technical standards play an important role in delivering accessible projections, so it is useful to be familiar with some basic ones:

- **Digital cinema projectors and DCP (Digital Cinema Package):** In addition to the video image and the basic audio, a DCP can also contain an XML file with subtitles (for translation or for the deaf/hard of hearing (SDH)) and additional audio files for audio description. The SMPTE ST 428-7 (DCDM Subtitle XML) standards define how these elements are integrated. Implementation will be the simplest if the distributor provides a DCP that already includes accessibility options. The cinema server then allows the selection of appropriate subtitles (newer ones allow switching between different options; sometimes two versions of the DCP are provided – one with open subtitles and one without).
- **Audiovisual Accessibility for Digital Cinema standard (ISO TS):** Defines protocols for synchronising applications with film content, enabling mobile accessibility solutions.
- **Induction loops (IEC 60118-4):** Basic standard that regulates signal strength and uniform coverage of the hall. When installing, it is necessary to ensure that the signal reaches all seats and that metal structures do not cause interference.

- Light signals: For the safety of deaf viewers, it is essential that the hall has visual alarms (e.g., flashing lights in the event of a fire alarm). Although this is not part of the audiovisual content, it represents an important technical aspect of inclusion and safety.

## **MAINTENANCE AND USE**

Ko je oprema enkrat nameščena, je ključno, da jo osebje zna. Once the equipment is installed, it is crucial that staff know how to use it, which requires basic training: how to switch on the audio description channel in the server, check the operation of the transmitter, issue and inspect headphones and batteries, and test the induction loop (with a test hearing aid or measuring device). Wireless receivers should be regularly charged, headphones should be cleaned for hygiene reasons, and box office staff should be aware of the equipment and offer it to users when needed. It is also important to have appropriate signage, such as an induction loop sign at the entrance or a note in the programme saying “Audio description headphones are available, ask the staff.”

By using additional technology, the cinema can more easily respond to the different needs of its audience. The combination of classic approaches (e.g., open adapted screenings for specific groups) and individual technological solutions (subtitles, audio description via headphones) provides the greatest possible flexibility and allows the film experience to be accessible to the widest possible range of viewers.

# 06

## ADAPTATIONS TO THE PHYSICAL SPACE OF THE CINEMA



A cinema's inclusivity is reflected not only in adapted film content, but also in ensuring that people with various disabilities can easily access the cinema and use its equipment. Adaptations can be divided into two main groups:

- Accessibility for people who need adapted routes and spaces to move around, including wheelchair users, the elderly and parents with prams.
- Sensory adaptations of the space, intended for people with hearing or vision impairments and sensory sensitive visitors, such as people with autism spectrum disorders or epilepsy.

## ARCHITECTURAL ACCESSIBILITY AND MOBILITY ADAPTATIONS

For visitors who require adapted routes and spaces to move around, it is crucial that barrier-free access is provided to all public areas of the cinema – from the entrance, box office and toilets to the cinema hall and seats. This usually requires:

- **Entrance to the building:** If the entrance is not at ground level, it must have a ramp with a not too steep slope and a resting place at the top. The door should be at least 90 cm wide and easy to open (preferably automatic).
- **Interior and passages:** Thresholds either removed or fitted with sloping ends, doors wide enough, corridors at least 120 cm wide. If the cinema has several floors, a lift or lifting platform of an appropriate size for a wheelchair must be available.
- **Cinema hall:** Wheelchair spaces arranged – usually 2-4 seats are removed in the front row or at the top to make room for wheelchairs, with space for a companion at the side. In halls with stands (stadium seating), these spaces are often arranged on the landing in the last row. Passages should be wide enough, and the ramps inside the hall should not be too steep.
- **Seating:** For visitors who do not use a wheelchair but have limited mobility, seats with movable armrests are more suitable, as they make it easier to transfer from a wheelchair or stilts. It makes sense to install a few seats with removable backrests in the front row to make it easier for people to transfer from a wheelchair.

- **Sanitary facilities:** They must be adapted for people with disabilities – with enough manoeuvring space for a wheelchair (at least 150 cm in diameter), grab bars on the side and a raised toilet bowl, an adapted sink and easily accessible taps. Braille signs or at least relief symbols for gender and disability are also welcome.
- **Parking:** If the cinema has parking, at least one wider parking space reserved for people with disabilities should be provided at the entrance. If the cinema does not have its own parking lot, it should direct visitors to the nearest suitable parking lots.

## EVACUATION AND SAFETY

When ensuring safety, it is crucial to consider how people who need adapted access to move can leave the hall in an emergency. An appropriate evacuation plan is required: despite a triggered fire alarm, the use of a lifting platform must be possible or at least safe access to the fire escape must be ensured. Like everyone else, visitors with disabilities must be able to leave the premises independently and safely.

For blind/visually impaired people, it is essential that evacuation routes are clearly marked with tactile and audible directional signs that enable orientation in an emergency. For the deaf and hard of hearing, it is essential that warning systems are supplemented with visual signals (e.g. flashing lights) and that evacuation information is available in written or visual form.

## SPATIAL ADAPTATIONS FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

When visiting a cinema, blind and partially-sighted people often face challenges in navigating and moving safely in a space that is typically designed for sighted people. Accessibility can be improved in the following ways:

- **Tactile markings and directional paths:** The building can be equipped with tactile floor markings, which are ribbed guide lines that lead from the entrance to key points, such as the box office, elevator, or entrance to the hall. At points where the path changes direction or in front of the stairs, warning tactile tiles (bumps) are added, which the blind/visually impaired can detect with a white cane. There are domestic manufacturers and standardised samples of these markings in Slovenia.
- **Braille and relief markings:** Key spaces (halls, rows of seats, toilets) should also be marked in Braille and relief printing. The door frame, for example, can be clearly equipped with the inscription »Hall A« in both Latin script and Braille.
- **Lighting and contrasts:** Good, but not dazzling, lighting is essential for the visually impaired. Soft lighting of steps and rows (e.g. with LED strips) facilitates orientation, and contrasting markings on the edges of the steps (white or yellow strip on a dark background) prevent trips and falls.
- **Access to information:** Schedules, price lists and notices should also be accessible to the blind and visually impaired. This includes websites designed in accordance with accessibility standards (WCAG), and the possibility of physical materials in large print or Braille (e.g. a monthly programme

in cooperation with the Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Slovenia).

- **Staff:** Blind/visually impaired visitors often rely on the help of staff. It is important to train staff in properly accompanying blind and visually impaired individuals and to provide guidelines for effective and successful communication with them. It is crucial that staff know how to approach them appropriately – offer a hand, help with directions and describe the surroundings with clear instructions (e.g. “Watch out, three steps down.”).

## **SPATIAL ADAPTATIONS FOR THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING**

The following adaptations are important for deaf and hard-of-hearing cinema visitors:

- **Visible alarm systems:** All security alarms (fire, evacuation, etc.) must be supplemented with a light signal – a flashing strobe light (according to the SIST EN 54-23 standard) – installed in the hall, toilets, changing rooms and other key rooms.
- **Room acoustics:** Hard-of-hearing users of hearing aids are sensitive to noise and echo. Cinema halls are usually already acoustically treated and soundproofed, but additional attention should be paid to the lobby. If speeches or gatherings take place there, it is sensible to reduce noise and echo by using sound-absorbing materials (carpets, wall coverings), as

it is difficult for the hard of hearing to follow the conversation in a noisy environment.

- **Speaker lighting:** When the programme before the film includes a speech or presentation, good lighting of the speaker must be ensured. Deaf and hard-of-hearing lip readers may rely heavily on facial expressions and lip movements, which can be difficult in low-light conditions.
- **Written notices on displays:** If the hall uses LED screens or other displays, they can also be used for urgent written notices (e.g. “The show starts in 5 minutes.”).
- **Accessible communication at the entrance:** If the entrance is equipped with a bell or intercom, the signalling should also be visual (flashing light) so that deaf visitors are not left without a response.

## SENSORY-FRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

Adaptations that benefit people with sensory sensitivities include, in particular, solutions for people with autism spectrum disorders, ADHD, epilepsy, and similar needs:

- **“Silent screenings” or screenings with reduced stimuli:** Some cinemas abroad offer screenings that are friendly to people with autism. In these screenings, the sound is slightly quieter than usual, the lights in the hall are not turned off completely (a dim light remains for a sense of safety), and the audience is encouraged to be tolerant of any movement or comments during the film. It is also important that the

screening does not contain strongly flashing lights, as these can trigger epileptic seizures.

- **Retreat area:** The cinema can arrange a small quiet corner in the lobby or a special room, where visitors can retreat when they are feeling overwhelmed. Such a space can have dimmed lighting, a few chairs and, possibly, headphones to mute the sound. Such an area is especially valuable for parents with children with autism, who sometimes need a break during the screening.
- **Consideration for allergies and service animals:** While not a typical sensory barrier, it is important that the cinema is also friendly to service animals, such as guide dogs. They should have space near the owner's seat (usually in front of the feet). Seats with removable backrests also come in handy, as they make it easier for the dog to sit beside its owner.

The physical space of the cinema should be designed according to the principle of universal design – without obstacles to movement, with clear markings that are simultaneously visible, tactile and audible, and with the comfort of different groups of visitors in mind. Many of these adaptations also benefit the wider public: illuminated stairs and railings help the elderly, ramps make the visit easier for parents with prams, while clear directions and safety measures contribute to the well-being of all viewers.

# 07

## **ASPECTS OF THE USER EXPERIENCE OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Technical adaptations alone do not guarantee full inclusion. It is crucial to understand the experience of viewers with disabilities when visiting a cinema. The user experience does not begin with the film and does not end when it is finished, but encompasses the entire visit – from arrival to departure. In this chapter, we highlight some key aspects from the users' perspective.

For some blind/visually impaired visitors, it is very important to be able to navigate the cinema independently – with the help of a white cane, tactile guidance lines or Braille signs. Every step that they are forced to take with the guidance of another person can reduce their sense of autonomy. The environment must be accessible, as this allows the person to be more independent and maintain autonomy, and at the same time, staff must be educated on how to help the person if, despite the accessible environment, they cannot do something on their own or ask for help.

Some visitors often point out that the attitude of staff and other spectators has a significant impact on their overall experience. If a deaf person does not understand instructions at the box office and the employee reacts impatiently, the resulting feeling of discomfort can carry over into the entire visit. Conversely, a friendly, tolerant approach – for example, if the cashier calmly and clearly writes down information or uses some basic SZJ signs (e.g. “hello” or “thank you”) – can create a sense of inclusion and welcome. Some visitors also appreciate when staff offer practical assistance in a respectful and discreet manner; for example, a wheelchair user will often be happy to be escorted to the elevator, as long as the offer is not made in a patronising manner.

Just like hearing and sighted individuals, blind/visually impaired and deaf/hard-of-hearing individuals should have the opportunity to regularly engage in cinemas. If accessible screenings are included in the regular programme, blind and visually impaired viewers can attend any of them, knowing that the film contains audio description and that they will be able to follow it. The same applies to deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers: if the cinema supports subtitle devices and the film includes data for descriptive subtitles, they can use them at any time. The goal of these adaptations is flexibility and normalisation, allowing a person to be free from being tied to a predetermined time and to be able to attend the regular programme whenever they so choose.

Watching a film is always a social experience, as people often come to the cinema with friends or family. If there is a person with a hearing or visual impairment among them and has not been provided with appropriate adaptations, they may feel excluded from the conversation after the screening because they had not perceived or understood certain content in the same way as others. Adaptations prevent this: for example, when deaf and hearing

people watch a film together with subtitles, everyone has the same opportunity to follow the story and can discuss the impressions, characters and message of the film on an equal footing after the screening. Accessibility is therefore not only tied to technical support, but also to how it directly affects the sense of belonging and shared experience.

For some people with disabilities, going to the cinema can be stressful if they do not know what to expect. They worry, for example, about whether the staff will understand their needs, whether they will have to explain their deafness at the box office in front of everyone, and whether, being blind/visually impaired, they will receive appropriate assistance when buying a ticket. It is beneficial for the cinema to anticipate and facilitate such situations. Solutions include, for example, providing the possibility of booking a wheelchair seat and the necessary equipment online, or having a clearly marked place where blind/visually impaired visitors can pick up their audio description headsets. Small details like these build a sense of trust and welcome.

User feedback is the key to continuous improvement, as each group – as well as each individual within it – brings its own needs and preferences:

- Some deaf viewers prefer subtitles to an interpreter because they find reading easier and faster, while others prefer sign language interpretation, especially if they come from a deaf community or have a lower level of literacy. When possible, it makes sense to offer both options, but in any case, it is best to coordinate needs with the community in advance.
- Hard-of-hearing viewers often say that they prefer certain seats, such as in the middle of the hall, closer to the main

speakers. In cinemas with multi-channel sound, it is important that the dialogue also comes from the central channel and is not scattered only to the left or right. If technical adaptations are not possible, a well-considered choice of a seat closer to the main speaker can help.

From the user's perspective, an inclusive cinema is one where everyone feels welcome, understood and independent. When technical adaptations work smoothly and the staff is friendly and trained, the cinema becomes a place of true inclusion. An important part of the experience is also the opportunity to connect, as accessible screenings often provide a chance to socialise within the community (the deaf/hard of hearing visit the cinema in groups, the blind/visually impaired come with companions), while also allowing all visitors to meet and have a shared film experience. This not only strengthens the equality of the individual, but also a sense of community and mutual understanding.

# 08

## **THE PROCESS OF DESIGNING AND CARRYING OUT AN ACCESSIBLE SCREENING**

Organising an accessible screening requires a bit more planning than carrying out a regular screening. In this chapter, we present concrete steps for preparing and carrying out a quality accessible film screening and the entire cinema experience.

### **PLANNING AND SELECTING CONTENT**

The first step in organising an accessible screening is choosing the film and identifying the target groups who will need adaptations. It is important to check what forms of accessibility are already available:

- Check with the film distributor whether subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing and audio description in the original language are available; for many foreign films, especially in English, English descriptive subtitles and audio descriptions are already available and can be translated or adapted.
- For Slovenian films, contact the producer or the Slovenian Film Centre (SFC), as audio description may have already been created as part of the production.
- Check the available technical formats and find out if a DCP with subtitles and audio description can be obtained. If not, consider alternative solutions, such as manually playing the audio description (playing the MP3 file over an FM system at the same time as the film) or manually projecting the subtitles from a laptop and projector.
- Decide what adaptations you will provide. If you are preparing a screening for the deaf and hard of hearing, consider also providing a live interpreter. If you do, it is necessary to book them well in advance, allow them to watch the film in advance, and include them in the moderation of the post-screening discussion, if one is planned. If we expect the presence of deaf-blind people, it is advisable to provide an interpreter for the deaf-blind (tactile interpretation is a demanding specialty). Alternatively, it is possible to offer the deaf-blind person a combination of audio description and subtitles.
- If we want to attract a wider community of people with disabilities, we can prepare a screening that includes both subtitles and audio description, thus enabling accessibility for the deaf, hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired at the same time. We must be careful not to play audio description

through the main speakers, as this would disturb deaf viewers who follow the film with the help of subtitles – audio description should always be available individually through headphones.

## **PREPARATION OF ADAPTATIONS (TRANSLATION, RECORDING)**

Once the planning is done and the target groups and necessary adaptations are clearly defined, the next step is to acquire or produce materials for the accessible projection:

- **Descriptive subtitles (in Slovenian):** If subtitles exist in the original language, they are translated by a subtitling expert who knows the specifics of descriptive subtitles. The timecodes are maintained, but the translation can be adjusted. If descriptive subtitles are not available, a description of the sounds important to the film must be added.
- **Translating an existing audio description:** If, for example, an English audio description is available, it can be translated into Slovenian. Translation often requires adapting cultural references (e.g., instead of “She looks like Venus de Milo,” we use “She looks like Aphrodite”). In the next step, the text is interpreted by a narrator who records it as a Slovenian version of the audio description.
- **Writing a new audio description script:** If the material is not available, an audio description scriptwriter must be hired. In Slovenia, such services are provided by the ZDSSS, AGRFT, Centre IRIS, and the Library for the Blind and Visually

Impaired. The scriptwriter prepares the text with precisely marked timecodes. When recording, it is important to use clear diction and appropriate intonation – neutral, but not monotonous. Experience shows that it works best when, in addition to describing the events, male characters are voiced by a male reader and female characters by a female reader.

- **Interpretation in SZJ:** If interpretation is planned, it is necessary to book a professional interpreter in good time (the list is maintained by the Association of Slovenian Sign Language Interpreters) and allow them to view the film in advance. Interpreters should be paid in accordance with the legally established tariff, which is publicly available on the website of the Association of Slovenian Sign Language Interpreters, and the costs should be included in the accessibility budget. If the screening is accompanied by a conversation, two interpreters are recommended, alternating approximately every 20 minutes.
- **Materials in accessible format:** For blind and visually impaired visitors, it is advisable to prepare basic information about the film (title, director, cast), also in Braille or large print. Such printed materials are printed on request by the Library for the Blind and Visually Impaired.
- **Checking technical formats:** Once the files (e.g., .srt subtitles, .mp3 audio description) are ready, they need to be checked for compatibility with the cinema equipment.

## TECHNICAL PREPARATIONS IN THE CINEMA

Before the screening itself, we perform a trial accessibility test:

- **Induction loop:** If using a portable one, install it and check its operation with a test hearing aid or with the help of a member of the Slovenian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing. The sound must be evenly accessible throughout the hall.
- **Headphones and receivers:** Check the battery charge in all devices and prepare chargers nearby for any eventuality.
- **Test projection:** Play a few minutes of the film with subtitles and audio description. If using an IR transmitter, walk around the hall with the receiver and check for dead spots (IR only works with direct visual contact, so make sure the signal is not obscured). With an FM system, check for interference.
- **Interpretation:** Have the interpreter test the lighting. It is recommended to use a spotlight with a diffuser so that the light is not too strong, while making sure the background is dark so that the hands are clearly visible. Explain to the staff where the interpreter will stand, and reserve seats with a good viewing angle (preferably in the front rows).
- **Backup plan:** Once you are satisfied with the tests, also prepare a backup solution – what you will do if the technology fails.

## COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION

For an accessible screening to be successful, it is crucial that we first notify the target audience about the event. This requires thoughtful and targeted communication:

- **Cooperation with organisations:** We notify the Slovenian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ZDGNS) with 13 societies, the Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Slovenia (ZDSSS) with its own societies, and the Deafblind Association of Slovenia DLAN. If preparing sensory-adapted screenings, we also notify autism societies. We send an invitation to the organisations with a clear description of the event: when and where the screening will take place, what adaptations will be available (subtitles, audio description, interpreter, etc.), and whether prior reservation is required. We also ask them to share the invitation with members via mailing lists or social networks.
- **Accessible media:** We prepare online publications in accordance with accessibility standards (e.g., alternative texts for images for the blind/visually impaired). For deaf viewers, we can record a short video in the SZJ, in which the announcer says that the film will be shown with subtitles or an interpreter. Such videos have a much greater reach on social networks than just text posts. The ZDGNS has its own online TV, where the news can be published in sign language.
- **Local media and event calendars:** We publish announcements in local newspapers and on the radio (radio is often an important source of information for the blind/visually impaired, so presenters should specifically mention that the screening will be adapted with audio description). The event

can also be entered into online calendars (e.g., the dogaja.se website) with the label »deaf/blind-friendly«.

- **Informing the general public:** We clearly indicate in the programme that we are putting on an accessible screening. There is no need to discourage hearing and sighted viewers in doing so, just let them know that subtitles will be shown on the screen. This way, the general public is gradually becoming aware that inclusive screenings are part of the regular cinema offer.

When promoting, it is recommended to use pictograms and standard symbols that target groups recognise: e.g., the symbol of a crossed-out ear (subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing), the symbol of a crossed-out eye (audio description for the blind and visually impaired), and the symbol of an ear with the letter “T” (the room is equipped with an induction loop – a hearing technology that allows people with hearing aids to clearly hear speech on the T channel without noise and echo). These symbols immediately attract attention and clearly indicate for whom the projection is adapted.

## CARRYING OUT THE EVENT

On the day of the screening, it is crucial that the visit runs as smoothly and pleasantly as possible for all viewers:

- Staff at the entrance and box office: Everyone should be informed that this is an accessible screening. It does a lot for inclusivity if they know at least a basic greeting in sign language and some gestures such as “headphone” or “interpreter”.

Alternatively, they can get their message across by miming or writing.

- **Distribution of equipment:** One person should be in charge of lending headphones and receivers to blind and visually impaired visitors. It is important that they also introduce the device and explain how to use it (e.g., saying “You can adjust the volume with this button.”).
- **Assistance by escorting:** Upon request, we offer visitors assistance in finding and reaching their seats.
- **Opening remarks:** Before the film begins, we can make a brief speech on the microphone (the interpreter should simultaneously interpret the speech). We greet the audience in a friendly manner and explain what adaptations are available (e.g., “The film has descriptive subtitles for the deaf/hard of hearing and audio description for the blind/visually impaired. If you need headphones, you can still get them at the entrance.”). If there are any specialities, we address them (e.g., “The lights will not be completely turned off during the film.”).
- **Interpreter in the hall:** We make sure that deaf viewers are seated where that they can see the interpreter clearly and that they know where they will be standing from the beginning. We can briefly introduce the interpreter (e.g., “Tinkara Jerina will be with us today, she will be interpreting the conversation after the screening.”). If the interpreter is interpreting the film itself (which is rare, but possible for shorter films), they should be positioned so that both they and the screen can be seen at the same time.

- During the screening: The technician should monitor whether everything is working properly. If there is a problem (e.g., the subtitles are not working or the audio description is not reaching the headphones), it is better to stop the screening for a moment and fix the error than to leave the audience without any adaptations. People appreciate honesty and clear explanations (e.g., “We apologise, there was an error with the subtitles. We will try to fix it as soon as possible.”).
- Audience interaction: In sensory-adapted screenings (e.g., for children with autism), there may be more movement and noise in the hall than usual, so staff should not alert parents if the child stands up or reacts loudly.
- After the screening: We ensure that visitors with disabilities leave the hall safely and comfortably. The team can assist blind/visually impaired individuals with navigation and transportation organisation. We collect the borrowed equipment back and ask for brief feedback (e.g., “Could you hear the description well? Do you have any suggestions for improvements?”).

## FEEDBACK AND ANALYSIS

After an event – or a series of events – it makes sense to conduct an evaluation, as feedback enables improvements for future implementations.

- **Visitor feedback:** We can collect this through a simple survey, available in several formats – printed in large font for the visually impaired, online for those who prefer it, or even

verbally when they return their headphones. We ask what they liked the most, where they noticed problems, and what suggestions they have for future events.

- **Partner engagement:** If the screening was carried out in collaboration with deaf/hard-of-hearing/blind/visually impaired associations or other groups, it is very important to have a brief conversation with them as well; associations and groups often receive direct feedback from their members, who can offer a first-hand insight into their experience.
- **Technical review:** The technical team prepares a short report on the performance and highlights any complications that occurred (e.g., batteries running low, interpreter lighting too dim, signal interference). We store this data and use it as a starting point for improving future screenings.
- **Holistic reflection:** It is also worth looking at the bigger picture, asking ourselves whether the attendance was good, whether we reached the target group, and how successful the promotion was. The evaluation is not only technical, but also programmatic and communicational.

Below, we address the question of how to build lasting, systematic cooperation with communities of people with disabilities.

# 09

## **CONNECTING WITH COMMUNITIES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Inclusive cinema can only be created in close collaboration with the people for whom it is intended. People with various disabilities know their needs and desires best, so they must be our key interlocutors and programme co-creators. Only with their participation can we create a programme that is truly accessible and open to all.

We suggest some ways to establish dialogue and build cooperation.

### **WORKING WITH UMBRELLA ORGANISATIONS**

There are strong national organisations operating in Slovenia that play a key role in representing and connecting people with various disabilities:

- The Slovenian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ZDGNS) unites 13 inter-municipal societies and has its own media house (Spletna TV, magazine Iz sveta tišine).
- The Association of the Blind and Visually Impaired of Slovenia (ZDSSS) unites 9 inter-municipal societies and manages its own library.
- The Deafblind Association of Slovenia DLAN represents people with deafblindness and fosters their empowerment and inclusion.

It makes sense to contact these organisations at an early stage of the planning phase, as they combine professional knowledge, extensive experience and direct contact with the communities we want to address.

It also makes sense to call on representatives of the associations to take part from the very first stages of planning. The associations bring together experts who can directly help in checking the technical solutions – for example, an expert from the ZDGNS can test the operation of the induction loop with their hearing aid, and an expert from the ZDSSS advises on the installation of tactile markings. Conversations with the community allow us to understand their needs and wishes in more depth, which is the basis for designing a programme that is accessible, useful and meaningful. This way, adaptations do not remain just technical solutions, but become part of a holistic and enjoyable experience of inclusive cinema.

Cooperation can develop into a formal partnership or an agreement on joint activities. There are several possibilities: associations can include cinema visits in their programmes, co-organise themed

events, or collaborate on larger projects. A good example is the European project Cinema without Barriers, through which Cerknica Culture House has partnered with national umbrella and local organisations to deliver accessible film screenings in a small town for the first time.

Disability organisations often keep organised records and statistics that are a valuable resource for accessibility planning. For example, the Slovenian Association of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing has data on the number of deaf and hard-of-hearing people in individual regions and on the share of people with cochlear implants. This type of information enables thoughtful and targeted decision-making – if a certain city has several hundred hard-of-hearing people and almost no deaf people, it makes sense to pay more attention to descriptive subtitles than to sign language interpretation.

## **INVOLVEMENT IN DESIGN AND TESTING**

One way to make cinemas more accessible and inclusive is to form a working group that includes representatives of different groups (e.g., the deaf, hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired). From time to time, the group can meet with the organisers – in person or online – and share their experiences, feedback and suggestions. Members can be nominated by associations and societies, as they are usually active individuals who are well-versed in the needs of the community. This way, the cinema can find out first-hand which films they want to see in an adapted format and what challenges they have encountered during previous visits.

For major technical decisions, it is advisable to test solutions with users first. The technology may seem appropriate at first glance, but

only testing will show whether it is really practical and easy to use. The same applies to the layout of a space, such as how seating is arranged. It makes sense to ask people with mobility impairments directly where they would like to sit. Some people want to sit in the middle of the hall and not in the front row, which could mean that adjustments need to be made to the layout. It may not be possible to meet all wishes, but it is important for the cinema to know the preferences of its visitors.

The contribution of the community in determining the film schedules and logistics is also valuable. Habits and needs differ between groups: older hard-of-hearing visitors often prefer morning or early afternoon shows, while younger deaf visitors prefer evening shows after work. Blind/visually impaired visitors are often more active in the morning or early afternoon, while children with autism may prefer to visit at a time when the hall is less crowded. Such information helps to design a programme that is as suitable as possible for different groups.

Another important aspect of accessibility is the price. In many cinemas, a companion of a blind or visually impaired person already receives a free ticket, which greatly facilitates the visit. This practice stems from statutory rights and is already being implemented. In addition, the cinema can consider price reductions for people with disabilities, as they are often quite financially burdened. Such measures are not just a gesture of goodwill, but an important step towards actual equalisation of opportunities and greater participation of people with disabilities in watching films.

## **INCLUSION OF BLIND, VISUALLY IMPAIRED, DEAF, AND HARD-OF-HEARING INDIVIDUALS AMONG STAFF**

For a truly inclusive cinema, we need to think beyond technical adaptations and the viewer experience itself. Another important step towards accessibility is the employment of people with disabilities. Their presence among employees strengthens diversity, enriches the team and contributes to a better visitor experience, as they bring a valuable personal perspective.

Inclusion is not solely limited to visitors and employees, since people with disabilities can also become co-creators of the programme. For example, the cinema can organise special film evenings dedicated to the creativity of people with disabilities, such as screenings of short films by deaf authors. There are several deaf film festivals around the world, whose content can also enrich the local programme.

This way, the cinema not only provides an accessible experience, but also gives the community a space and a voice, while allowing the audience to gain valuable insight into their stories, creativity and culture.

It is very important to turn the cinema into a space for dialogue. After screenings of films that deal with topics related to people with disabilities, we can organise conversations with their actual representatives. For example, if we are showing a film about a blind pianist, we can invite a blind musician to the stage to share their experience with the audience. This way, the blind and visually impaired are not presented as objects of observation, but as active interlocutors and co-creators of the cultural space. This allows the cinema to build bridges between the audience and the community and strengthen mutual understanding.

# 10

## **ETHICS, TERMINOLOGY AND SUSTAINABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHANGE**

Introducing inclusive practices in cinemas is not only a technical and organisational challenge, but also an important social and ethical act. In addition to adapting the space, technology and services, it is crucial to pay attention to softer aspects – the way we communicate, the choice of appropriate terminology and the relationship we build with the audience as an institution.

In this context, language has a special power: it can reduce stereotypes and open up a space for equality, or – if we are not careful enough – inadvertently reinforce prejudice. This is why caring for the respectful and inclusive use of language is an inseparable part of creating a cinema that is truly open to all.

When talking about accessibility, it is important to use respectful and inclusive terminology. It is important to avoid outdated terms such as “disabled” in the singular, or even derogatory terms such as “lame” or “deaf-mute”. Instead, we use terms that emphasise the person and not the limitation, for example: person with a disability, person with hearing loss, person with visual impairment, deaf person, blind person or person using a wheelchair.

In the Slovenian language, adjectives such as deaf and blind are often used as identity markers, which is entirely appropriate and in line with the perception of the community. It should be especially emphasised that the term deaf-mute is inappropriate, since deaf people are not mute, but communicate in Slovenian Sign Language, which is a full-fledged and rich language. By using language respectfully, we not only express politeness, but also actively contribute to breaking down stereotypes and opening up a space for equality and inclusion.

It is important to avoid overly emotional or stereotypical descriptions such as “suffers from deafness” or “is wheelchair-bound”. Such formulations create an image of helplessness that does not reflect the real life of people with disabilities. It is much more appropriate to use factual descriptions, such as “has been deaf since birth” or “uses a wheelchair”.

People with disabilities are complete individuals with different talents, skills, interests and life experiences. Respectful language therefore allows us to see them in their fullness and not just through one characteristic of their lives.

When advertising events, it is important to avoid labelling screenings as “special” or “intended for people with disabilities.” Such use of language creates a sense of separation. It is much

more appropriate to talk about “accessible screening for the deaf and hard of hearing” or “inclusive screening with interpreter and subtitles,” since the word accessible opens the door to everyone and emphasises equality.

Similarly, the term disabled is used less and less as a noun in official texts. It is being replaced by the formulation “person with disability,” which is oriented towards the human being and is therefore significantly more respectful and inclusive.

It is also sensible to pay special attention to Slovenian sign language. We always call it a language – never “gestures” or “sign parlance” – because it has been confirmed by a constitutional amendment as a full and equal language that deserves the same treatment as all other languages.

The same care applies to the technical terms we use to describe accessibility. Instead of abbreviations and technical acronyms such as “SDH subtitles,” it is clearer to write “descriptive subtitles (adapted for the deaf and hard of hearing).” Transparency and comprehensibility of terminology are essential, as we cannot expect all visitors to be familiar with technical terms.

When talking about people without disabilities, we can use terms such as hearing, sighted or simply general audience. It is important that we do not create the feeling that people with disabilities are unusual or an exception through our choice of words. The most inclusive approach is to always present events and communication in a spirit of equality and openness – as a cinema for all.

Carefully chosen language, thoughtful use of terminology and respectful communication are the foundation on which we can

build a lasting practice of accessibility and inclusion in cultural institutions.

## **PROMOTING POSITIVE NARRATIVES AND RAISING AWARENESS**

As a cultural institution, we have the opportunity to co-shape the social narrative about people with disabilities, so it is crucial how we choose content, what events we put on and how we communicate about them with the public. The films we include in the programme can reinforce stereotypes or break them down. When we choose films in which people with disabilities are presented as complete personalities – with their own desires, fears, humour and vulnerability – we reinforce the message that disability does not define a person, but is just one of their characteristics.

Accompanying activities have a similar power. Photo exhibitions depicting the everyday lives of deaf people, or workshops where visitors learn the basics of communicating with the blind/visually impaired, bring topics that are often pushed to the margins closer to the public. Such events not only broaden horizons, but also create a space for dialogue in which stereotypes can be dismantled and replaced with understanding and respect.

The way we communicate with the public is also important. In our press releases, social media posts and public speeches, we need to consistently express the values of inclusion and respect, avoiding portraying individuals with disabilities as special simply because they did something completely ordinary – for example, went to the cinema. For them, this is a completely normal experience, just like for all other visitors. The most important thing is to welcome

them with respect, provide them with quality service and create an environment in which they feel welcome.

We also need to be careful with the use of terms. Phrases like “overcoming barriers” may sound encouraging, but they shift the responsibility onto the individual. It is more inclusive to emphasise the systemic changes we are introducing as an institution. It is more appropriate to say: “By removing architectural barriers and introducing adaptations, we have made the cinema accessible.” In this way, we clearly show that accessibility is the result of thoughtful, responsible and community-oriented action.

With such an approach, cinema transcends its basic role and becomes a space for social change – a place where we together build an open, inclusive, and more just community for all.

## **SUSTAINABLE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHANGE**

Sustainable implementation of changes requires understanding that accessibility is not a one-off project, but a long-term commitment. For accessibility to truly come to life in a cinema and remain part of everyday practice, it needs to be woven into all levels of operations – from strategy and finance to human resources and community engagement.

First, it is important to document accessibility in strategic documents. If the cinema already has a business and programming strategy, it should include in it clearly defined accessibility-related goals – for example, a certain number of accessible screenings per year or a plan for when the facility will be physically fully accessible. Such a document is not only symbolic, but also allows for the

allocation of resources and setting a timeframe and responsibilities for achieving the goals.

Equally important is staff training. New employees should be introduced to the basics of inclusive practices upon joining the team, and it is a good idea to refresh the knowledge of existing staff as well. Special training – such as basic Slovenian Sign Language courses or seminars on the use of new technologies – can be a valuable resource that enables employees to face the diverse needs of their audiences with confidence.

Technical adaptations only make sense if they are maintained regularly. This means systematically testing hearing aid loops, changing batteries, updating applications and ensuring that the equipment is always ready for use. A specific item should be included in the cinema budget for this, as it is a fundamental part of ensuring accessibility.

Since adaptations also require financial resources, it is necessary to think about long-term financial sustainability. This may include finding sponsors, participating in calls for tenders from the European Union or national funds, as well as liaising with municipalities.

Sustainability also means regularly collecting feedback. Even when everything seems to be working flawlessly, it is valuable to occasionally ask visitors how they experience accessibility and include them in the evaluation. This can be done through surveys, meetings or informal conversations. Such dialogue allows for ongoing adaptation of practices as technology advances, user needs change and standards develop. A cinema that is willing to listen and upgrade adaptations stays in step with the times.

Personnel continuity is also important. It makes sense to appoint a person who will take on the role of accessibility coordinator within the institution and ensure that knowledge, practice and responsibility do not disappear when personnel changes occur. Incorporating accessibility knowledge into the standard induction process for new employees ensures that the culture is passed on.

Another aspect of sustainable operation is participation in broader initiatives. In Europe, there already exist networks of accessible cinemas that exchange knowledge and good practices. In Slovenia, it would also make sense for cinemas to connect with each other, harmonise terminology and use uniform symbols to mark accessible screenings. Such connections strengthen the community, create space for innovation and prevent individual institutions from operating in isolation.

At the ethical level, sustainability also means a willingness to admit mistakes and learn from them. If an attempt fails – for example, if attendance at an accessible screening is lower than expected or there are technical complications – it is crucial to deal with this transparently, analyse it together with users and partners and look for improvements.

Finally, it should be emphasised that accessibility in culture is not a finish line that is reached once, but a process of constant adaptation and dialogue. Technology is constantly evolving, demographic changes bring new needs, and social standards are shifting. A cinema that takes a step towards accessibility today must remain vigilant and ready for further changes, so that it will still be responding to the needs of all its visitors in a decade. This brings with it a long-term and ethical commitment to sustainable inclusion.

# 11

## **CONCLUSION: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AN INCLUSIVE FUTURE FOR CINEMAS**

Based on all of the above, we can summarise some key conclusions and recommendations for film exhibitors who want to make their cinemas as inclusive as possible. First of all, it is essential that cinema management is aware that accessibility is a strategic decision that goes beyond mere technical adjustments. Accessibility is part of a public service and at the same time an opportunity that opens doors to new audiences. Therefore, accessibility goals must be written into strategic documents and supported by resources and clear accountability.

The approach should be based on respect for the rights and needs of all visitors. People with disabilities are not a special category of guests, but equal members of the audience. Their needs must be an integral part of programming and infrastructure planning, which can

only be achieved in cooperation with communities. Without dialogue with the deaf, hard of hearing, blind and visually impaired, solutions quickly become meaningless. Because of this, it is valuable to involve them in collecting ideas, testing solutions and also disseminating information. Such a partnership brings credibility and ensures that measures really serve their purpose.

The foundation of any accessible cinema is the removal of physical barriers. Ramps, lifts, adapted toilets, wheelchair seats, tactile markings and induction loops must become the standard, not the exception. Each visitor must have easy access to their seat. Universal design should guide the entire process in new buildings and renovations. However, physical accessibility is only the basis – it is also essential to ensure the technical accessibility of film content. This means that the cinema provides equipment for subtitles and audio description, and trains staff to use it. Standardised symbols for marking accessible screenings must be visible and understandable, and the quality of subtitles and descriptions must be verified and consistent.

Equally important is the regularity and consistency of accessible programming. Audiences are not built with one-off campaigns, but with regular offerings. It is better to offer one accessible screening per month than several occasionally and then none for a long time. The long-term goal should be to include accessibility in as many regular screenings as possible – to have subtitles and audio description available for every Slovenian film, and to have every cinema technically prepared to enable this.

It is crucial to educate and sensitise staff to this goal. Staff should know the basics of communicating with the deaf/hard of hearing and the blind/visually impaired, and should be familiar with the basics of sign language and ways to offer assistance when needed. Internal

training or cooperation with disability organisations can greatly contribute to a better understanding of the needs of the audience. The friendliness and awareness of staff are what create a welcoming atmosphere for all visitors.

Accessibility should not be hidden in the fine print, but presented as a guideline for the cinema. Public communication should highlight that cinema is accessible to all, as this attracts not only people with disabilities, but also the general public who value social responsibility and an inclusive environment.

Expanding accessibility is even more effective when cinema connects with other sectors. Cooperation with schools for children with special needs, with homes for the elderly or other cultural institutions can bring fruitful joint projects, such as morning screenings and thematic or combined cultural events.

The future also brings new technological possibilities. Automatic real-time subtitling systems or advanced augmented reality solutions will probably soon be available to cinemas. Therefore, it makes sense for institutions to be open to innovation and willing to introduce and test new approaches in collaboration with users.

In addition to their role as film exhibitors, cinemas also have the opportunity to act as advocates for systemic change. If accessible copies of films are not available, it is right for cinemas to connect with each other and, together with organisations of these communities, address this problem with the competent institutions. The voice of cultural institutions can be an important lever in encouraging the film industry to become more accessible.

Patience is also required on this path. Results will not be visible overnight, as the audience of people with disabilities is relatively

small. At first, only a few individuals may come, but each of them deserves the same experience. Community is built slowly, with small steps.

The vision of the future is a cinema where the word accessibility will no longer need to be emphasised, as it will become a self-evident practice. Just as we can no longer imagine a film without sound today, we will one day find it difficult to imagine a screening without subtitles or an audio description. Accessibility will then be naturally woven into the film experience – as an indispensable part of it.

For such a future to become a reality, accessibility cannot be built solely on the enthusiasm of individual organisations. This is a shared responsibility that requires systemic support and public funds. Accessibility involves costs – both technical and personnel – which must not remain the sole burden of providers. It is crucial that the state establishes long-term and stable funding mechanisms: regular calls for tenders, dedicated support, and a clear strategy that recognises accessibility as an inseparable part of public cultural policy. Only with the support of the competent ministries will accessibility be implemented consistently, sustainably and in all environments – as a fundamental right, not an exception.

Finally, let us imagine a scene: A young deaf man and his hearing friend are sitting together in a cinema – the former reads the subtitles and follows the interpreter at the edge of the screen, while the latter listens to the dialogues and tries to make out a sentence in English because he is learning the language. Behind them sits an elderly couple – the man with a hearing aid uses an induction loop, and the wife follows the film without any problems. Somewhere in the hall sits a girl with a guide dog and listens to the audio description through headphones. There are also children with attention deficit disorder in the audience, who appreciate the slightly quieter sound and more

pleasant lighting. They all laugh together at the same scene, everyone holds their breath during a tense scene, and everyone applauds at the end. When they leave the hall, they exchange impressions – some talk, some gesture, some type on their phones, but all talk about the same film that they were able to experience together.

