



# SPOTLIGHT ON: VILLAGAIETY

As part of Autism Acceptance Month we spoke to the VillaGaiety, who've made a host of changes across their venues to ensure that they are as accessible as possible.

With events and shows held across the Villa Marina, Gaiety Theatre and Broadway Cinema, as well as the Dragons Castle Play Area, the VillaGaiety looked at each venue individually to see what they could do to meet customer needs.

One of the biggest changes is the introduction of relaxed performances – where lighting and noise levels are adjusted, and breakout rooms are provided.

They've also recently launched VR Tours of their venues for people who are unfamiliar with the layout, as well as updating their website with information about access.

**Sean Kenny, Events and Programme Development Manager, told us more:**



**Q: Tell us about the adjustments you've made to make VillaGaiety more inclusive and accessible**

Work to improve accessibility and inclusivity at VillaGaiety began in 2019 and has resulted in the introduction of a number of initiatives across the VillaGaiety Complex as part of on-going efforts to help remove any identified barriers to attendance and work to create an accessible experience for customers of varying needs.



In the Gaiety Theatre we've introduced Relaxed Performances for select shows and performances. Relaxed Performances are open to anyone, although structured specifically for those who would benefit from a more relaxed environment. This can include, but is not limited to, people with autism, sensory sensitivities, Tourette's syndrome, learning disabilities, or dementia, as well as people living with anxiety or people who have experienced trauma. These performances offer the following:

- Lights in the auditorium are kept low so it's not too dark
- You can make noise during the show
- You can move around or come and go as you please
- If you need a break there are chill-out areas in the foyer/bars
- Small changes are made to the lights and sound (such as taking out strobe lights and loud pyrotechnics) so that the performance is more accessible if you have sensory sensitivities



In the Broadway Cinema we've also introduced Relaxed Screenings following consultation with relevant organisations. At a relaxed screening sound levels are reduced and lights are at a low level so the cinema is not in complete darkness. There are no trailers or advertisements before the film starts and customers are free to move around the cinema or take a break.

In 2020 Dragon's Castle Play Area underwent a refurbishment to enable essential upgrades to the play area structure and equipment. The refurbishment also afforded us the opportunity to make Dragon's Castle an equal access soft play facility and an inclusive play environment that is welcoming and accessible to children of varying needs and abilities. We therefore introduced of a brand-new sensory area on the ground level, especially for babies, younger children and children with additional needs. This new area includes fantastic equipment including chrome tubes, fibre optic lighting and chandeliers and some bubble stubs and beads, plus there are some comfy bean bags inside too. By introducing and offering a sensory play experience, we're able to provide a fun and engaging way for both young children and children with additional needs to be positively challenged with visual, sound and tactile opportunities to help them develop certain skills and actions.



In the Villa Marina we also appreciate that a large venue or concert/show environment can be overwhelming for customers, especially when there are large crowds of people. If any customers or family member needs any support or time out during a visit to our venues, we encourage them to please speak to a member of staff and they will do their best to assist you and show you to a quiet space. Where possible, VillaGaiety will work with show promoters to operate an early entry service for any

customers with additional needs who would like to enter the auditorium and find their seat just before we open the doors for the main audience. More information about this can be found on VillaGaiety's accessibility webpages.



**Q : Why is it important to make adjustments for people with disabilities/ people who face barriers to access?**

VillaGaiety strive to do their very best to give customers as full and equal access to our services as possible. To achieve this we have an on-going commitment to ensure provision (where possible) to make any reasonable adjustments to our facilities and services are to help create and maintain an accessible experience for all customers.

At all large entertainment venues, when customers attend a performance, they may need to collect their tickets, have them checked or exchanged for a wristband, usually follow signs to the bar, navigate through crowds to get interval drinks, navigate inevitable queues to the toilets, take their seats or position and get ready for ninety-plus minutes in the dark. Whilst this is a familiar routine to a regular theatre or gig goer, the environment, rules and unspoken etiquette of many events, particularly theatre, present significant access barriers to audience demographics – for example, those who find crowds make them anxious, who cannot sit still and quiet for long periods of time, who find sudden loud noises a significant challenge. Autistic audiences can experience some of the most disabling barriers to attending arts events. It is these aspects of the customers that VillaGaiety have tried to account for when making adjustments or improvements.

Use of language is also something we've considered. For example, most UK theatres and venues have adopted the term relaxed performances (and relaxed cinema screenings) in place of the term 'autism friendly performance'. The relaxed performance terminology acknowledges that it's not only autistic audiences that benefit from a relaxed environment. When the key components of these performances are considered, almost everyone could benefit from or enjoy a relaxed performance, especially children with young families and for many it's often the difference between being able to attend an event or feeling too uncomfortable or stressed or anxious to be able to consider going into the venue at all.



**Q: What made you think about making adjustments? What precipitated the changes you've made?**

As VillaGaiety's venues are intended to provide an entertainment experience for both Island residents and visitors, we wanted to ensure equality of access to our facilities and services, as much as possible. The experience of customers and their varying needs is something we try to keep at the forefront of our minds and as such, accessibility features heavily in the venue's audience development and diversity plan, which has been developed over the last 18 months. Planning for and making provision for reasonable adjustments has been and remains to be, a very important part of the plan, as is receiving and addressing feedback from customers and staff.



**Q: Was it expensive or difficult to make adjustments to accommodate autism and ASCs?**

In short no, it's really about changing the way we do things and ensuring that when we do make changes we are making reasonable adjustments, doing it for the right reason and with those with additional needs at the forefront of our minds. A good example of that would be the refurbishment of Dragon's Castle in 2020, the refurbishment was planned and needed to take place anyway, it afforded us the opportunity to make Dragon's Castle an equal access soft play facility and an inclusive play environment that is welcoming and accessible to children of varying needs and abilities.



**Q: How did you know what adjustments to make – did you ask any other organisations for help or advice?**

We consulted with various charities, organisations, service users and customers. Listening to their collective feedback and suggestions as well as speaking with other arts venues who are just as committed as us to ensuring their venues and the arts remains accessible to all, was very beneficial and afforded us the opportunity to share ideas. Listening to service users was vital and proved to be very insightful as we wanted to make sure we were doing the right things to make these performances welcoming and accessible and there is no better way to learn about this than to engage with those have lived experience.



**Q: What benefits have you noticed since you started making inclusive adjustments?**

We've had a lot of positive feedback from organisations, service users as well as customers which is great to receive. Our relaxed performances and screenings have and continue to prove to be very popular not just with those with additional needs but also families who enjoy bringing their younger children to events, safe in the knowledge they know their children aren't going to 'disturb' other audience members.

Plus we now also welcome specialist clubs to Dragon's Castle who can hire the play area at a discounted price and utilise the accessible features available to their service users.