



Accessibility of Ballroom Dance Competitions for Blind and Visually Impaired Participants and Audiences

Research report prepared by VocalEyes for Step Change Studios

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Executive Summary

This report explores how ballroom dance competitions could be made more accessible for blind and visually impaired participants and audiences, with a particular focus on the feasibility of live audio description. The research was commissioned by Step Change Studios in partnership with VocalEyes and based on research carried out by audio describer Willie Elliott.

The research combined consultation, observation and desk-based review, including conversations with blind and visually impaired people, observation of a live ballroom competition environment, and review of existing approaches to audio describing dance and movement-based performance.

The findings suggest that ballroom competitions present distinctive accessibility challenges compared with theatre dance performance. Competitions are fast-paced, visually complex and socially dynamic, often involving multiple couples dancing simultaneously, rapidly changing visual focus, high music levels and short competitive rounds.

The research identified that traditional continuous audio description models may not always be practical or effective within live competition settings. Instead, ballroom competitions are likely to benefit from more flexible and layered approaches combining:

- selective live description;
- commentary-style delivery;
- preparatory and contextual information;
- venue orientation and familiarisation; and
- supplementary access resources.

The report concludes that live audio description appears technically feasible in many ballroom competition venues using relatively lightweight and flexible delivery approaches. However, the most significant challenges are likely to relate to staffing, specialist knowledge, operational coordination, and cost-effectiveness.

The research also highlighted the potential value of collaborative approaches involving audio describers working alongside ballroom practitioners or teachers, particularly where specialist terminology and complex movement vocabulary are important.

One of the clearest findings from the research is that preparatory and supplementary resources may offer a practical, scalable and cost-effective starting point for improving accessibility. Potential resources may include:

- pre-recorded introductions to competition formats and terminology;
- pre-recorded introductions to ballroom and Latin dance styles (see descriptive examples in Appendix A);
- accessible schedules and competitor information; and
- venue orientation materials.

The report recommends prioritising:

- development of reusable preparatory resources;
- collaboration between describers and ballroom specialists;
- pilot accessibility activity within live competition settings; and
- ongoing consultation and evaluation involving blind and visually impaired participants, audiences, describers and ballroom practitioners.

Overall, the research suggests there is both strong interest in and genuine potential for improving accessibility within ballroom competition settings. Blind and visually impaired participants and audiences expressed a clear desire to participate more fully in the cultural and competitive experience of ballroom dance. The findings suggest that meaningful improvements are achievable through flexible, phased and collaborative approaches which balance audience experience, practical delivery considerations and long-term sustainability.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Step Change Studios approached VocalEyes to undertake exploratory work into accessibility within ballroom competition settings, both to support immediate learning and to inform future planning.

Ballroom competitions present a number of distinctive accessibility considerations compared with theatre or dance performance. These include fast-paced competitive formats, multiple dancers performing simultaneously, rapidly changing visual information and the technical nature of ballroom competition structures.

Ballroom competitions also combine elements of performance, competitive sport and social participation, creating a distinctive environment and context. Approaches to audio description may therefore need to differ from more traditional performance-based models.

Throughout this report, consideration has been given not only to what may be desirable from an access perspective, but also to what may be practical, proportionate and cost-effective within a live competition environment.

The purpose of the research was not to produce a definitive operational model, but rather to identify key considerations and opportunities that may inform future planning.

1.2 Research Partners

VocalEyes

VocalEyes is a UK audio description organisation that champions equitable access to arts and culture for blind and visually impaired people through audio description, training, research and advocacy.

VocalEyes

Step Change Studios

Step Change Studios is a UK dance organisation committed to increasing access, participation and inclusion within dance, including ballroom dance, through classes, performances, training and community-based programmes. [**Step Change Studios**](#)

Researcher – Willie Elliott

Willie Elliott is an experienced audio describer who has worked across theatre, dance, opera and live events since 2001 and has a long-standing professional relationship with VocalEyes. His work has included productions and events for organisations including the National Theatre, Royal Opera House and Channel 4's Paralympic Games coverage, alongside ongoing work exploring audio description approaches for dance and movement-based performance, including description delivery for Step Change Studios.

1.3 Scope and Methodology

The research combined desk-based research, consultation and observational study. This included conversations with blind and visually

impaired people, both as audiences and participants, alongside individuals with experience of dance competitions and teaching, as well as a review of existing approaches to audio describing dance and movement-based performance.

The research also included observation of a live ballroom competition event, review of ballroom competition footage and commentary, and consideration of competition formats and operational structures.

Video examples reviewed included footage of the World Dance Sport Federation Grand Slam Latin competition in Blackpool and audio described broadcasts of BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*.

As this was exploratory research rather than a formal pilot project, the findings within this report should be understood as indicative rather than conclusive. The report focuses on identifying themes, practical considerations and potential approaches that may warrant further testing and development.

2. Understanding Ballroom Competition Environments

2.1 Competition Structure and Format

Ballroom competitions are fast-paced and visually complex events, ranging from small local competitions to large national and international championships. Formats vary according to venue size, competition level and governing structures.

Competitions are typically divided into ballroom and Latin categories, each involving a range of dances with distinct musical styles, tempos and movement qualities. Ballroom dances commonly include the Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Foxtrot and Quickstep, while Latin competitions may include the Cha Cha Cha, Samba, Rumba, Paso Doble and Jive.

Competitions commonly involve multiple rounds, including heats, semi-finals and finals. In earlier rounds, several couples may dance simultaneously, making it difficult to focus attention on a single pair for any sustained period. Couples are generally identified using competition numbers attached to their clothing, with adjudicators selecting competitors to progress through successive rounds.

“There can be a lot happening at once, especially in the earlier rounds, and audiences often follow particular couples or competitors throughout the event.”

Rounds are typically short, often lasting between 60 and 90 seconds, with limited pauses between dances or heats. Music, applause, announcements and commentary may also occur in quick succession, contributing to a constantly changing environment.

Unlike scripted dance or theatre performances, ballroom competitions combine choreographed routines with improvisation and real-time responses to the movement of other couples sharing the dance floor.

Competition formats and expectations may also vary according to category and participant level, potentially creating additional accessibility barriers for audiences unfamiliar with ballroom terminology and conventions.

A ballroom dance teacher and competition practitioner consulted as part of this research highlighted the importance of understanding the overall flow and atmosphere of competitions alongside the dances themselves.

“The whole environment is part of the experience — the music, the anticipation, the costumes, the movement around the floor and the social atmosphere between rounds.”

These characteristics have important implications for audio description and access provision. The combination of simultaneous activity, short competitive rounds and rapidly changing visual focus means that highly structured or continuous description models may not always be practical within live competition settings. Coupled with the limited availability of traditional describer preparation materials (such as prior performances, rehearsals or video recordings), some level of responsiveness and confidence in real-time decision-making is highly likely to be necessary.

2.2 Venues and Spatial Layout

Ballroom competitions can take place in a wide range of venues, from hotel function rooms and community halls to large-scale conference centres and traditional ballrooms. As one contributor noted, competitions may take place in “magnificent ballrooms”, but also in hotels, sports halls and church halls, creating very different audience and accessibility environments from one event to another.

Competitions are typically centred around a large dance floor, with audiences seated around the perimeter and adjudicators positioned at different points around the room. In larger events, audience attention may shift rapidly between dancers, judges, announcements and other activity across the space.

Music levels are often high, particularly during Latin rounds, while applause, announcements and conversation may continue throughout

events. In some competitions, live commentary or compère announcements also form part of the audience experience.

“People are not just watching the dancing. There’s a whole atmosphere around the event — conversations between rounds, audience reactions, music changes and anticipation building throughout the day.”

The observational research also identified a number of environmental and practical factors likely to affect accessibility provision, including sightlines, background noise, audience positioning and access to competition information.

Although not a central focus of this research, consideration should also be given to the wider practical accessibility needs of blind and visually impaired competitors participating in ballroom competitions. This may include factors such as the location and accessibility of changing areas in relation to the ballroom and competition floor, navigation between spaces, and the availability of adequate space and support for competitors and dance teams within busy event environments.

Compared with traditional theatre settings, the more informal and social nature of ballroom competitions may also create opportunities for flexible approaches to accessibility, including orientation time and informal interaction with describers or support staff.

These environmental factors have important implications for how accessible support may be delivered within competition settings, particularly in relation to audio clarity, audience and participant orientation, and the balance between commentary, music and description.

3. Access Needs and Audience Experience

3.1 Insights from Blind and Visually Impaired Participants and Audiences

As with all audiences, the research highlighted that blind and visually impaired people may engage with ballroom competitions in a variety of ways, depending on prior experience of dance, familiarity with competition structures, and personal preferences around access provision.

Participants consistently identified the importance of contextual information and scene-setting alongside the description of movement itself. While the dancing remained central to the experience, contributors also highlighted the importance of atmosphere, music, costume, audience reaction and the broader social environment surrounding competitions.

“It’s not just about knowing where people are on the floor. I want to understand the mood, the excitement and what makes one couple stand out from another.”

Contributors noted that ballroom competitions involve a high level of visual and technical information, much of which may be difficult to communicate through continuous detailed description alone. Participants expressed interest in understanding:

- the style and quality of movement;
- the relationship between dance partners;
- the emotional tone of performances;
- costume and visual presentation;
- standout moments or particularly successful routines; and

- audience and adjudicator reactions.

At the same time, participants highlighted the importance of balance within any live access provision. Continuous uninterrupted description was not always seen as desirable, particularly where rhythm, musical interpretation, and atmosphere form an important part of the audience experience.

“Sometimes too much description can become overwhelming. You still want space to experience the music and atmosphere for yourself.”

The research also suggested that blind and visually impaired audiences may benefit from preparatory or supporting information before and during competitions. Participants highlighted the potential value of:

- introductions to different dance styles and competition formats;
- explanations of judging criteria and terminology;
- competitor information and running orders;
- venue orientation and familiarisation; and
- audio introductions or explanatory material available in advance.

Some contributors noted that familiarity with ballroom dance conventions could significantly affect how accessible competitions felt. Audience members with prior experience of dance, music, or performance often described finding it easier to build a mental picture of the event, while others suggested that competition structures and technical terminology could feel inaccessible.

The research also highlighted that access needs may differ between audience members and participants. For some blind and visually

impaired competitors, access requirements may focus more heavily on orientation, navigation, timing and practical information, while audience members may prioritise interpretive or atmospheric description.

“People often come for the whole experience, not just a single dance. There’s a sense of community and shared excitement that’s important to the atmosphere of competitions.”

Across the interviews and discussions, there was no single preferred model of access identified. Instead, the findings suggest that ballroom competitions may benefit from a flexible and layered approach to accessibility, combining live description where possible, preparatory information, and broader orientation or support measures according to the scale and nature of the event.

3.2 Orientation and Preparatory Information

Preparatory and orientation-based support may offer a practical and reusable approach to improving accessibility within ballroom competition environments.

Several contributors suggested that accessible information provided in advance could help audiences build familiarity and confidence, including:

- introductions to dance styles and competition formats;
- accessible schedules and running orders;
- competitor information and numbering systems;
- explanations of judging terminology and criteria; and
- venue orientation information.

Several contributors highlighted the potential value of audio introductions or short pre-recorded guides similar to those used within theatre and gallery settings.

“If you already understand the structure of the event and the kinds of things you’re listening out for, it becomes much easier to follow what’s happening during the competition itself.”

Depending on the scale and nature of the event, audiences and participants may also benefit from opportunities to familiarise themselves with venues before competitions begin, including information about dance floor layouts, seating areas and the positioning of judges and officials.

4. Feasibility of Live Audio Description

4.1 Approaches and Practical Considerations

Live audio description within ballroom competition settings will require more selective and flexible approaches than those typically used within scripted performance environments.

Rather than attempting continuous description throughout competitions, contributors consistently highlighted the importance of prioritisation, atmosphere and responsiveness. This may involve focusing on:

- key moments or standout performances;
- changes in pace, energy or mood;
- broader scene-setting and competition context;
- audience and adjudicator reactions; and

- selected movement or visual detail most relevant to audience understanding.

The relationship between music, commentary and description was identified as a particularly important consideration. Any live description approach would need to consider audio clarity, timing and the balance between different sound elements within the venue environment.

Describers may need to decide quickly:

- which couples or moments to focus on;
- when scene-setting may be more useful than detailed movement description;
- how much technical information is appropriate for different audiences; and
- when silence or space for music and atmosphere may be more effective than continuous commentary.

4.2 Skills and Knowledge for Live Description

Effective live description within ballroom competition settings may require a combination of audio description expertise, improvisation, prioritisation and some understanding of ballroom competition formats and movement vocabulary.

Following an initial approach from Step Change Studios to VocalEyes regarding the possibility of describing an upcoming ballroom competition, VocalEyes contacted a number of experienced audio describers to explore potential delivery approaches. While there was strong interest in describing ballroom events and improving accessibility, no describer identified themselves as having specialist knowledge of

ballroom dance, leading to concerns about having sufficient confidence to do the competition justice.

The research highlighted the potential value of collaborative approaches involving describers working alongside ballroom practitioners or teachers. Such models may help combine accessibility expertise with technical or contextual dance knowledge, although such approaches would have additional staffing and cost implications.

The scale and format of competitions are also likely to influence the most appropriate approach to provision, alongside the intended audience and purpose of the access support. Audio description designed primarily for blind and visually impaired competitors may differ significantly from provision intended for audience members attending as spectators, particularly in relation to the balance between contextual information, live commentary and detailed dance description.

Overall, the findings suggest that ballroom competition audio description is likely to depend on flexibility, selectivity and responsiveness, supported by preparatory access materials and proportionate delivery models appropriate to the scale and nature of individual events.

4.3 Technical and Delivery Considerations

Live audio description within ballroom competition settings appears technically feasible in many venues using relatively lightweight and flexible delivery approaches.

The research highlighted a number of practical considerations likely to affect delivery, including:

- background music and ambient noise levels;
- maintaining audio clarity within large or busy venues;

- describer positioning and sightlines;
- access to running orders and competitor information; and
- staffing and operational coordination during live events.

Portable wireless audio systems may offer a flexible solution for pilot activity and smaller-scale live provision, allowing a describer to move more freely within competition environments where appropriate (see Appendix C).

Where collaborative delivery models are used, including partnerships between describers and ballroom specialists, more fixed commentary or technical positions may be necessary.

Overall, technical delivery is unlikely to be the primary barrier to accessible provision. More significant considerations are likely to relate to delivery methodology, staffing, specialist knowledge, operational coordination and cost-effectiveness.

5. Preparatory and Supplementary Access Resources

Preparatory and supplementary resources offer a practical and reusable way of supporting blind and visually impaired participants and audiences, either alongside live description or as a standalone access offer.

Potential resources could include:

General resources

- short introductions explaining competition formats and terminology;
- introductions to individual ballroom and Latin dance styles;
- introductions to judging structures and scoring approaches; and
- introductions to costume conventions.

Specific resources

- venue orientation information;
- accessible schedules and running orders; and
- competitor and category information.

Resources could include video, audio or accessible digital documents. Videos should include clear audio description, while digital documents should be screen reader accessible, with audio versions available where possible.

Where appropriate, opportunities for informal orientation and familiarisation within venues may also support access and confidence-building for blind and visually impaired attendees. For example, events could offer an allocated time for blind and visually impaired participants or audiences to take part in a guided walk-through of the venue, similar to a simplified touch tour.

In some audio described dance and ballet settings, touch tours and pre-show orientation sessions may include movement-based workshops or demonstrations, allowing blind and visually impaired audience members to gain a more physical understanding of dance positions, gestures or movement styles. While the fast-paced and space-limited nature of ballroom competitions may make this more difficult to deliver consistently, adapted workshop or demonstration activity may still be possible where time, space and staffing allow, particularly where describers and ballroom specialists are working collaboratively.

Preparatory and supplementary resources would also support a phased approach to developing access provision, while longer-term live description models continue to be explored.

6. Recommendations and Next Steps

6.1 Prioritise Preparatory and Supplementary Resources

One of the clearest findings from the research is that preparatory and supplementary resources may offer a practical, scalable and cost-effective starting point for improving accessibility within ballroom competition settings.

As an initial next step, priority should be given to developing a small number of reusable introductory resources that could support blind and visually impaired participants and audiences across multiple competitions and events. This may include:

- short introductions to competition formats and terminology; and
- introductions to individual ballroom and Latin dance styles.

These resources could provide important contextual understanding in advance of events and may reduce the need for extensive explanatory information during live delivery.

Where possible, resources should be made available in accessible digital formats, allowing blind and visually impaired participants and audiences to engage with information at their own pace and according to their preferred format.

Collaborative approaches to developing, hosting and sharing these resources would be beneficial, particularly where accessibility organisations, ballroom practitioners, competition organisers and relevant membership or governing bodies are able to contribute expertise, platforms or distribution networks.

Event-specific resources, such as orientation guides, schedules and competitor information, would need to be developed as part of future pilot activity and event planning.

6.2 Support Collaborative Practice and Specialist Knowledge Development

Future development work should consider opportunities for shared learning between audio describers and ballroom specialists, recognising that ballroom competition accessibility may require both specialist access skills and increased confidence with ballroom terminology, structures and movement styles.

As an initial next step, consideration could be given to a workshop-style development day, bringing together audio describers, ballroom teachers, commentators and blind and visually impaired participants or dancers.

This could explore:

- ballroom terminology and competition structures;
- different approaches to commentary and description;
- the differing needs of participants and audience members; and
- practical approaches to describing movement, posture and spatial relationships.

In addition, future pilot activity at competitions themselves could provide opportunities to test audience-facing workshop or demonstration activity. This might include short introductions to dance styles or guided movement demonstrations, similar to approaches sometimes used within audio described dance and ballet programmes.

Where practical, these sessions could be led collaboratively by describers and ballroom specialists, helping audiences develop a more

physical and contextual understanding of ballroom movement and performance styles.

6.3 Develop Pilot Activity

Future development work should prioritise pilot activity within live competition environments to test and evaluate different approaches to access provision.

Competition organisers, governing bodies, accessibility organisations, and participant groups could work together to identify suitable opportunities for pilot activity. This could explore different combinations of:

- solo live audio description;
- commentary-style collaborative approaches;
- venue-specific preparatory resources;
- audience orientation support; and
- workshop or demonstration activity.

Consideration should also be given to the differing needs of blind and visually impaired competitors and audience members, recognising that the purpose and focus of access provision may vary between settings.

Pilot activity should include opportunities for feedback and evaluation involving blind and visually impaired participants, audiences, describers and ballroom practitioners. This may help identify:

- audience preferences and priorities;
- appropriate balances between commentary and description;
- effective approaches to preparatory resources and workshop activity; and

- practical and sustainable delivery models for different competition environments and scales.

Ongoing consultation and evaluation will be important in ensuring that future accessibility provision remains responsive, proportionate and informed by lived experience.

Appendices

Appendix A — Descriptions

The Dances

It is interesting to note the difference between those participants who have less experience, compared with those who have been doing it for many years. An example of this might be that in Waltz, beginners will perform the basic steps of the dance in a small space, while those with a lot of experience cover the whole of the large dance floor.

In competition, couples typically perform five dances in Ballroom and Latin divided as follows.

Ballroom: Waltz, Tango, Viennese Waltz, Slow Foxtrot and Quickstep.

Latin: Cha Cha Cha, Samba, Rumba, Paso doble and Jive.

Different dances have their own styles and rhythms. The following is an overview of the characteristics of each.

In **Ballroom**, the movements of the **Waltz** are characterised by partners clasping one hand on long extended arms, with the lady's other hand on the man's shoulder and his, placed gently on her shoulder blade. The dance includes graceful turns with tilted heads, away from the partner, always a beaming smile on their lips. The couples rise and fall as they turn around the floor, punctuating their movement with pauses, then continue their round.

The **Tango** has lots of eye contact, fast spins, and sharp head and shoulder flicks. The couples are proud and upright and unsmiling. The feet stamp loudly and they kick high. They move around the floor with long strides and fast synchronised footwork and shoulder rolls.

The **Viennese Waltz** is a beautiful, graceful dance that involves tilting rotations in wide circles and spins around the edge of the dancefloor. There is a constant flowing movement covering a large distance. It is interesting to note that two or three couples, at times, can accidentally fall into precise synchronisation, with identical steps and turns, then drift apart into their own choreography again.

The **Slow Foxtrot** has swelling, rocking turns that roll like waves around the ballroom. It's a fast-stepping dance and the ladies lean back away from their partners, with bright toothed smiles. They pause briefly, then smooth into flowing dreamy turns.

Finally, the **Quickstep** has fast precise turns, and bouncing, springing steps. Rapid synchronised footwork includes fast sprinting steps across the floor and bouncing circles, the dancers working as a single unit.

In **Latin**, the **Cha Cha Cha**, inspired by Cuban rhythms, uses fast reaching arm extensions and hand flicks. Their bodies stand tall and centred as their hips swivel. They take quick side steps away from each other, stepping side by side, and back again into a dance hold, with soft actions merging into staccato movement. Their feet press to the floor sending the rest of the body in the other direction. They pause in long low lunges, extending one leg back in a perfect line. The man palms his energy to his partner, spinning her away and drawing her back to him, always matching with the music.

The **Samba** utilises lithe swinging hips with flicking turns and fast spins left and right. The dance is sensual and inviting, bodies working in close contact, turning around one another and side-stepping side by side. They spin fast away from one another and back again.

The **Rumba** is slow and sensual, expressing love and romance. It uses long extended arms and flicking hips. There is undulation through their bodies, accentuated by punching turns, away and close. The woman teases and the man takes control, as they move close with gently rippling bodies.

The **Paso doble** is a dance of theatre, dominance and fearless authority. The man takes up the pose of the matador with upraised arms and proud chest. The woman's movement is inspired by Flamenco, with twisting wrists, and the charge of the bull, fingers pointed from the top of the head like horns. They turn quick, pose dynamically around each other, and take long side steps away with synchronised footwork.

Finally, the **Jive** is a fast upbeat dance with the explosive energy of flashing footwork, high knees and kicking feet, punctuated with freezes. Even when they spin rapidly apart, their synchronised footwork is precise and fast.

Costumes

In Ballroom, the men dress almost identically. They stand tall and formal with their hair cut short and square at the nape of their necks. Heavier on top, it is greased into a slick side parting and hair sprayed, so there is not a hair out of place. They wear a layer of foundation on their faces that smooths out their complexion. Their shirts are white, with a matching bowtie, worn under a tailcoat, with the tail hanging to the calves, and black patent leather shoes.

When they perform Latin, they are in sleek shirts, open to the waist, to reveal their smooth chests. Their trousers are close fitting.

The ladies' costumes are as individual as the dancers themselves. As a general rule the materials are light chiffon with feathers that add a

floating quality to the movement. The dresses for Ballroom are brightly coloured and fuller, bellling out from the waist, while in Latin they fit close to the body and reveal hints of flesh. Tassels and glitter create the movement of the skirts as they dance.

Appendix B — Example Description Preparation Checklist

- ☐ event dates, venue and timings
- ☐ main contact details
- ☐ describer get-in and setup time
- ☐ possibility of pre-event site visit
- ☐ running order
- ☐ competitor numbers and details
- ☐ competition format
- ☐ venue layout
- ☐ judging format and positions
- ☐ music and commentary setup
- ☐ technical setup requirements
- ☐ number of blind and visually impaired participants and audience members
- ☐ any restrictions affecting describer positioning

Appendix C — Equipment

Where a single describer is used, portable wireless systems similar to tour-guide equipment may offer a flexible solution. Lightweight belt-pack transmitters and receivers would allow describers to move around the venue and adjust viewing positions during competition rounds where appropriate. Examples of commercially available systems include:

- [20-Person Digi-Wave Tour Guide System - Williams AV](#)
- [ListenTALK Tour Guide Official UK & Ireland Representative](#)
- [Tourtalk tour guide system hire](#)

A two-day hire of a tour guide system may cost approximately £150–£250.

Some systems also include optional two-way communication functions which may allow limited interaction between listeners and describers in smaller-scale settings.

Receivers are generally lightweight and discreet, and typically allow users to connect personal headphones through a standard 3.5mm jack connection.

Fixed Commentary Positions

Where collaborative delivery models are used — for example involving two describers or a describer working alongside a ballroom specialist — a more fixed commentary position may sometimes be preferable.

Depending on the venue and delivery model, this could involve:

- a dedicated viewing position;
- access to power supply;
- a small audio mixer; and

- transmission equipment (this can be a similar tour guide system).

Overall, the research suggests that technical equipment is unlikely to represent the primary barrier to accessibility provision. More significant considerations are likely to relate to delivery methodology, staffing, specialist knowledge, operational coordination and cost-effectiveness.