

BBC Radio Essex interview with Rachel Jele, Head of Advocacy and Engagement at Stagertext with Akylah Rodriguez, 25th July 2025

AKYLAH RODRIGUEZ: So, I mentioned this a bit earlier. I'll try to describe it and, hopefully, our guest will be able to describe it a lot better than I am – or I can right now.

Going to the theatre and having subtitles explaining what's going on. That was my vision of the concept, but we are going to talk about it here on the show.

In the southeast of England, 4.3 million adults are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing. That's a third of the region's population and, according to the national deaf charity, Stagertext, many of those are unaware of the access they could have to music, theatre and other cultural venues. It's something that we have talked about on the show and would like to continue raising awareness of. So, if you know anyone who could benefit from this, make sure you pass on this information.

A Colchester-based charity have recently received £20,000, a grant from the National Lottery Community Fund, for a community outreach project which will help raise awareness of deaf access to arts and culture in the southeast.

Rachel Jele is Head of Advocacy and Engagement for Stagertext and joins us on the show now. Rachel, welcome to BBC Essex first of all. Lovely to have you.

RACHEL JELE: Thank you for having me, nice to see you.

AR: It sounds like it's been a very busy time for you, casually securing a £20,000 grant! As you do!

RJ: That's right. That's all down to the hard work of my colleague, Liz Hilder, who did a fantastic job of putting in an application to get the funding. So, we're really delighted that the National Lottery Community Fund has awarded us this money, because, honestly, it's so important to raise awareness that there is deaf access out there for people.

I've been deaf since a young child and I've worn hearing aids most of my life – all my life apart from the very early days – and it was life-changing for me, absolutely life-changing.

Going to the theatre, seeing the caption boxes on the side of the stage, looking at subtitles, and just suddenly, a light going on inside my head. It felt like I could follow everything. And it's one of those things that you don't necessarily sort of understand why you're getting headaches going to the theatre or you just feel really tired. It's because you have that mental fatigue of trying to listen, to try and catch every word, to really fill in the gaps of what you're hearing.

There's a lot of hidden disability around deafness because you have a lot of people who are hard of hearing, so they may just have a tiny bit of difficulty with hearing,

and then you get people who are very, very deaf and use British Sign Language. But for a lot of people who are deafened or deaf or hard of hearing, it's not something they always talk about and it's not necessarily even visible, so lots of people don't know that this is available. But honestly, when you experience it, it's so life-changing and you feel so passionate about what you've just experienced that you want everybody to know about it.

AR: That's wonderful to hear and I'm glad to know that it exists. We've talked about things like this on the show before, accessibility for those who are deaf or hard of hearing, and I remember the last conversation we had was, essentially, the lack of accessibility. You know, if you wanted to go to something that was catered for you, you'd potentially have one matinee on a Wednesday – when you're probably at work! So, have things gotten better in the past few months? This show's only been going since October last year, so it's been less than a year since we had that conversation, I know.

RJ: Yeah, I think the pandemic acted as a catalyst for a lot of different people because suddenly technology was much more available than it used to be. Everybody was using Zoom and Teams and there are captions on that which are auto generated, so they're not accurate, but it exposed more people to the idea of them being a bit more available. Then we worked a lot with companies like the National Theatre. They had a lot of digital versions of plays that were available, and we helped with the digital subtitles for that. So, during that time, people's exposure and obviously the culture nowadays – you're watching Netflix and TV and a lot more things on demand that you choose to put captions or subtitles on for, and of course we expect them on social media. So, people's expectations have changed.

I do think arts and culture is making a big change. There's been a sea change of people being much more aware of diversity and inclusion, deaf access. But, you know, it's still something that we really need to encourage theatres to embrace and that's what we're here for. We're here to help them and advocate for deaf access. We can show them how to do it – what good quality access looks like. Because, like I say, you can have automated captions, but the quality's just not there because they're not accurate, as good as they could be. Whereas, if you go to a live event like a comedy, or maybe to a museum talk or a tour of one of the exhibitions, you can have live subtitles come through to you on your hand-held device, it could be a phone, and they're done by an actual live person so they're so much more accurate than relying on something which is automated.

That's not to say we're against any tech development – of course, we're all for that – but it's about the quality. It's the quality that gives me the equal experience.

AR: Which is amazing! We will continue talking about this, and I will have to get the actual definition, Rachel, as opposed to just “going to the theatre with subtitles”! So, I am glad you are here because I think I butchered that a little bit!

Rachel Jele, Head of Advocacy and Engagement for Stagetext, joining us on the show. We're going to continue talking about deaf accessibility in the arts here as

well. This sounds like such an amazing concept so I'm glad we get to champion it today.

MUSIC/TRAILER/JINGLE

If you've just tuned in, we are catching up with Rachel Jele. You very politely corrected me when I said it wrong! I'm so sorry. I don't think I said it right then either, did I?

RJ: No, don't worry!

AR: We are talking about Stagetext, which is a charity that is bringing more accessibility to the deaf community in the arts.

I did just want to touch on something you mentioned earlier, Rachel. You said when it comes to the deaf community, there are more people in it than you think – it's a hidden disability. It's not just what we as hearing people might assume are members of the deaf community. So, who might we be missing and might need to be thinking of going forward in our lives to make sure that they are being included?

RJ: Well, like anything, deafness is a huge range of different experiences and situations. So, in a very, very small nutshell – I don't want to do a history of this without... I know I'll be missing people out but, basically, you have a scale of people who are deaf and their first language is British Sign Language. Then, on the right other end will be people who may just have a little bit of deafness, and it might just be age onset related deafness.

Some people may not need hearing aids, some people do wear hearing aids. Some people have cochlear implants et cetera. So, there's a huge range and I certainly do not speak for all of them, but I can talk about my experience as a deaf person who grew up wearing hearing aids. This charity, Stagetext, aims to speak to all people, regardless of what type of deafness they have.

We were set up by people who had a range of deafness, and they didn't speak and don't use British Sign Language – and there are lots of people who are deaf who don't, for various reasons. So, if you go to a theatre and there's a British Sign Language interpreter, they may not be able to follow that. It's really important to have those interpreters and we're not about saying one is better than another, because that's so important. But there are also lots of people who don't hear as well that just need some text-based access that fills in the gaps.

If you've got friends and family who are deaf, deafened or hard of hearing, some of the good things you can do to help them is just make sure you're facing them when you talk to them so they can lipread you. Just try to make sure that you're not in a really noisy environment. There's all sorts of things you can do. Your body language will also help convey what you're saying.

People like myself, you get a lot of mental fatigue because you're constantly navigating through visual clues as well as what you can hear, and people's deafness is very different. So, for me, I don't hear the really high sounds, but other people may

have a different level of hearing which gives them different sounds. So, you know, it's very hard to say one size fits all, because it really doesn't. The best thing you can do is just ask them, "How can I help you?" "Can I speak to you in this way?" "Does this help?" Don't be afraid to say that.

AR: Hm. Thank you for sharing that. I wanted to touch on it because if you're listening and this is ringing any bells for you or know anyone who says something similar and they don't realise that they're part of this community, Stagertext could be something for them.

So, this is a charity that is bringing, essentially, subtitles to the arts, to the theatres, to the... are we saying music shows as well? If you go to a festival, could it potentially be there?

RJ: So, music isn't our forte – we'd love to do that – but what we do often is festivals like Edinburgh Book Festival. So, we're at Edinburgh Book Festival and we live subtitle the interviews that authors have with people while they're there – they discuss their books. We do musicals. There's lots of different types of culture and arts that we provide deaf access for. I'd love to do music and festivals, but, funnily enough, that's not what we have our funding for, but I think theatre, talks. When we say talks, we mean interviews with people. I once saw Neil Gaiman being interviewed on stage at the Barbican, that kind of thing.

We do tours as well. So, you could have a tour in a museum of a really interesting exhibition that you've got going on. So, it's a wide range of deaf access that we can provide and advocate for and I think it's just really about making sure that people know about that. That's why the funding that we've got is so important because it enables us to bring in a freelance outreach coordinator who can help us reach those different deaf communities. So, we're trying to go out more into Essex and the surrounding area to find people who may benefit from it.

So, whether you're part of a lipreading group or a deaf club, or it might just be that you're part of a local theatre group and you may know friends and family that could benefit from this. We're going to use our ambassadors – we have a fantastic group of ambassadors that I really dearly love because they all come with their own lived experience of deafness. We're going to bring them on board to help us spread the word because it's so much more powerful if you actually hear from people that it's benefitted. Like I said, for me, it's absolutely transformative and the impact it had on my life has just been amazing! I just don't know how I coped before, quite frankly.

Let's be honest, if it's a really complicated play by Harold Pinter, no one's going to understand necessarily what is going on! But, you know, if it's something that you should be able to follow quite simply but you're thinking, "I just can't understand what they're saying", it doesn't make you feel very good when you think, "I've spent all that money and I just can't follow a word that they're saying." Honestly, it's brought back the joy in my life of being able to go back to the theatre, to experience cultural events and to experience all sorts of arts that are happening local to me and nationally as well.

AR: So, how does it actually work, Rachel? Is it like subtitles on a TV?

RJ: That's the easiest way to describe it. So, imagine in theatre they will have their own caption boxes or we help supply them, and the caption boxes are like LED units. So, imagine them on the side of the stage and it depends on the type of theatre. National Theatre will look differently to a small intimate local theatre. I know, for example, the Mercury has them on the sides of the stage and they're permanent. What you do is, when you need to see the show as a member of the audience you just ask for the access tickets and they will ensure that you're sat in the right kind of place within the theatre so you can see those caption boxes.

We have very skilled captioners that, basically, take the script and they translate it in the way that they need to. So, when they actually put the script up onto the screen that you are seeing, it's not simply, "Oh, I'm just going to type it up." It's scripted, but they understand all of the nuance, the intake of breath, the pauses for delivering that vital punchline, all of those things. It's a massive skill that they've got. They basically create that, they put it together, so behind the scenes lots of work goes on. Then on the night, they're there. Sometimes you get the odd change in script maybe at the last minute so they're able to adapt that within the programme that they use.

But as an audience member, you don't need to know any of that. You just make sure you get your access seat. They sit you in the place where you can best view those caption boxes and away you go. Just enjoy the evening – you can see all of the words coming up on the screen and they come up in a way that you can read them with ease. And it follows the delivery of the actors and actresses, so it's not going to be too fast, it's not going to be too slow, it's right on pace, and that's a real skill doing that.

If it's a live event, like I said before, someone's being interviewed about their book at, say, Edinburgh Book Festival or somewhere in Essex, that's live and you have a stenographer. I don't know if you've ever seen a stenography machine, but probably most people are used to or are aware of the stenographers that work in court. They have this quite interesting little machine and I think they can type up to 300 words a minute. Because it works phonetically – they don't type the letters, they type the sounds. That's why it's so fast and it's so accurate and they can easily make changes and say, "Person B is now talking" et cetera. Recently, we helped with the launch of the Channel 4 Paralympics, so we did some live subtitles for them at the event that they were doing, and it was just fantastic! There was a whole host of people speaking and different voices and you could just see it all on the screen. It's just displayed on a big screen right in front of you and it's amazing. You can just follow everything that's happening.

AR: Gosh! How people can type that fast and get it out there is amazing!

RJ: It's a real skill.

AR: Are you looking for people to get on board with the charity and help out at the moment?



RJ: We are! Thank you for asking. This National Lottery Community Fund money will enable us to employ a freelancer as an outreach coordinator. They will work with our team of ambassadors to identify different groups of people – whether it's lipreading groups or other deaf clubs, et cetera – to go out and give talks about what Stagertext does, what deaf access looks like, what is good quality deaf access, to raise awareness and basically spread the word. I'm really excited about it because I think, hopefully, that will see a lot of change in Essex to get more and more captioned events happening.

AR: Well, congratulations on securing that £20,000 grant, and we're looking forward to seeing more Stagertext boxes around screens and around theatres and other places soon.

Rachel, cheers for your time. Again, that was Stagertext which, literally – well, not quite literally – but subtitles for theatres and art shows is an incredible thing. We look forward to seeing it help... I can't speak any more! Seeing it help... Do you know what? Shall we just go to the travel?