

Accessible places

Cities Unlocked at The Oracle, Hammerson

Reading City Council, Microsoft, Guide Dogs for the Blind and The Oracle shopping centre collaborated on a creative wayfinding initiative enabling blind or partially sighted people to confidently navigate Reading town centre and a shopping centre environment. The initiative was part of the "Cities Unlocked" project aimed to make urban areas comfortable to navigate by those with sight and visibility issues and ultimately to create an inclusive and accessible place for all.

Beacon style technology was placed throughout the shopping centre, making it possible for blind and partially sighted people to use specially designed headsets to positively engage with an everyday experience. The technology provides very high quality and 3D sound effect to the user, which acts as an efficient audio guide.

As the user walks through the centre they are given a clear audio guide allowing them to navigate around and get a cognitive sense of the actual direction of the place they are aiming for, such as individual shops, lifts, escalators and other facilities.

This initiative has been positive for all those involved – Blind and partially sighted people are empowered with the right type of technology supporting them in undergoing everyday activities at the Oracle. It has also paved the way for further areas of improvement to be made at the Oracle to include individuals and families that experience access issues for a variety of disabilities. Staff at the Oracle have also engaged with retailers to train and support with strategic schemes such as wayfinding to ensure it is a positive experience for both the retailer and consumer.

Considering the future of the project, the Oracle is developing further improvements supporting wayfinding for individuals, including improved navigation from local transport links to the centre and ways in which the technology infrastructure required for the Cities Unlocked project can be supported.

Trialist Gerald James says on his experience of Reading and the Oracle:

"It does paint a picture of the town. It told me all the different shops on each side of the road. But it also told me the names of the streets and also the compass direction. I just think it gives you greater freedom really. And gives you more independence."

See Gerald in action trialling the technology.

[Watch the video now](#)