



CULTURE
HEALTH &
WELLBEING
ALLIANCE

Come as You Are:

Guidance for embedding access in creative health work



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A Note on Language

We will be using the term disable, disability, D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent interchangeably throughout this document. This follows the Social Model of Disability.

We will be using the term access need to describe any support or alternative considerations needed for someone as a result of disability.

Introduction

The Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance (CHWA) is the sole free-to-join membership organisation for creative health across England. We provide

- networking
- advocacy
- support
- resources

for people using culture and creativity to improve health and wellbeing.

We are funded by Arts Council England.

Our work includes planning events, and many attendees have lived experience of disability, neurodivergence or other dis-abling factors. Prioritising and embedding access into the organisation is a vital part of our work.

We often hear people say they would like to be more accessible, but are unsure about how to do this and where to start. This resource is designed to help.

Our team have a lot of experience in access, but we are not an access organisation, so we have added a list of organisations who have more detailed expertise at the end of this document.

Accessibility is constantly developing, which means there is no one tick-box list for every scenario.

Improving access takes time; you don't need to achieve everything right away.

The most important thing is an awareness and commitment to improving access, approached with curiosity and compassion.

Please reach out if you have any questions, comments or suggestions for further examples of great practice.

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Why Access and Why Now?

What is Access/Accessibility?

The word 'access' broadly refers to making information, activities and/or environments as available, safe and meaningful for as many different people as possible.

This often includes considering people with disabilities, neurodiversity or health conditions, who may need different options or considerations when engaging with an activity or service.

According to disability charity [Scope](#), there are 16 million people in the UK living with a disability, health condition, or access need.

Over the last 20 years, the [social model of disability](#) has become more widely used.

The model says that people are dis-abled not by a diagnosis, but by the way the environment or society has been set up. In other words, it's not the person but the environment that needs to change.

Why is it important for people working in creative health?

Organisations and individuals play a huge part in creating environments where disabled people can contribute in the same way as non-disabled people.

According to ONS Employment data, 24% of the UK's working age population has a disability, and 70% of disabilities in the UK are non-visible*, which means access as a vital component of any event or project.

In creative health, this number is higher. CHWA's most recent [State of the Sector Survey](#) noted that 31% of respondents identified as D/deaf, disabled or neurodivergent.**

Access is linked to representation - the more accessible the sector is, the more disabled people will be able to engage, the more diverse the sector will be. By talking publicly about access, it encourages others to do the same.

Developing your idea

The most important aspects when developing your idea are:

- understanding some of the common access considerations
- offering choice
- being realistic in what can be achieved.

It's impossible to make an environment fully accessible; sometimes peoples' access needs might clash with each other. It's important to remember that every person is unique – there are as many access requirements as there are people.

Accessible by Design

A good access offer should feel seamless. To ensure that access remains a priority, conversations about access should start as soon early.

This will probably affect how you build your budget, and might involve forming a steering or advisory group, or getting input from lived experience or consultancy services.

Common Access Considerations

Every access approach will be unique, and will depend on the scale, type of activity, audience and resources available. Some common considerations are listed below.

Wheelchair spaces

Ramps

Door widths

Accessible toilets

Large Print

Audio Descriptions

BSL

Quiet Spaces

Mental Health First Aid

Hearing Loops

One to One Access Support

Alternative Formats

Dietary Requirements

Visual Stories

Captioning

[CHWA's Creative Health Quality Framework](#) provides a great starting point for ensuring your work is person centered, equitable and safe.

Building strong foundations

In-house or specialist services?

It's important to recognise your limits, and know when you need to contract a specialist service. A good example of this is BSL or live captioning; It's important to budget appropriately for this. This can sometimes mean making the event smaller to allow more budget for access.

If you're working with a specific community, tailoring support is really important. For example, if the project is aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing, do you need more Mental Health First Aiders, counsellors or support staff?

Steering and Advisory Groups

Groups can be a fantastic way of including disabled people right from the start of your project. Recruit a wide variety of lived experience to get the most from the group.

Be clear what's expected of them, and make sure you note any access support they might need. The group can help with practical ideas and suggestions, and can also look at agendas/schedules/session plans.

People should always be paid for their contribution. CHWA's policy on [Paid Engagement with Freelance, unwaged, part time or low waged individuals](#) is one example of how you could approach pay for Lived Experience Experts.

Asking Questions and Challenging Assumptions

Having disabled people involved in the planning is a great way to get new ideas and consider things you may not have thought of. Just because something has always been done a certain way, it doesn't mean it can't be re-imagined.

For example, at CHWA's national conference we decided on a 'slow start' on the first day. This allowed people time for travel and to arrive feeling rested.

Many access adjustments are also welcomed by those without access needs.

Making Detailed Plans

Make Access Visible

Make sure you talk about access in your advertising. Consider a dedicated access page on your website with common FAQs, and an email address for access enquiries. Invite people to get in touch with access suggestions – it shows that you are taking access seriously, and is a good way to pick up on anything you've missed.

Invite people to detail their access needs when they sign up. This gives you time to plan or ask more questions if needed.

Remember that your access offer isn't fixed; new needs may emerge, and what's right for one project may not be for the next one.

Venue Considerations

If hiring a venue, step free access, suitable toilets, lifts, a quiet space, and light, welcoming rooms is a good start.

Visit the venue at least once and spend time walking the routes your attendees will take. Taking someone from your steering group will add another perspective.

Think about:

- Are light levels suitable?
- Do stairs have handrails and are they wide enough?
- Are doorways wide enough for wheelchair access?
- What is the venue provision for D/deaf people (eg. Hearing loops/space and sightlines for BSL interpreter)
- What is the access like immediately around the building?
- Does the surrounding area feel safe for someone who may be more vulnerable?

Considering the route from the nearest carpark or train station is also very important. Some people may need maps or instructions in a different format. Multi-day events may need accessible accommodation. Having staff or volunteers visible to welcome and direct people, and offer extra support, is also important.

If you're running parts of the event online, don't forget that these people may also require access support.

Budgeting and Time Management

Making something accessible comes with additional costs. It's important to be aware of this, to avoid budgeting issues or overpromising.

Start by making a list of essential access elements, then 'nice to have' additions, and get quotes for these. We would recommend keeping 10-30% of your budget aside for access related costs.

Ticketing Options

If your event is ticketed, offer an additional free ticket for an assistant for those who can't attend independently.

The disabled person should not need to provide proof of disability. Other things you can offer are subsidised ticket options. Don't forget that assistants may also need accommodation.

Pre-Information – in multiple formats

Offer clear, detailed information as early as possible. This could include:

- schedules
- maps
- joining instructions
- visual stories

Offering information in multiple formats, such as easy read, large print or audio is really helpful and easy to do. RNIB have a [guide to producing large and giant print documents](#) on their website.

If you are going to be discussing anything distressing, a content disclosure (or trigger warning) may also be helpful. CHWA has some good examples of [previous conference information](#) on their website. Sharing pictures and biographies of staff in advance, so that people feel more familiar with you, and can see specialist skills within the team, helps create a safe and welcoming environment.

Diversity of Contributors and Attendees

How can you better reach the disabled community so that they are represented at your event? Lived experience is vital for creating a safe and inclusive space. If the work is engaging with a certain community, we recommend someone with lived experience to lead on the project.

If you are recruiting freelancers or staff for the event, don't forget to consider access. See Curating for Change's ['We are not all the same' Action Plan](#). Creative Access also has an [accessible recruitment checklist](#) available on its site.

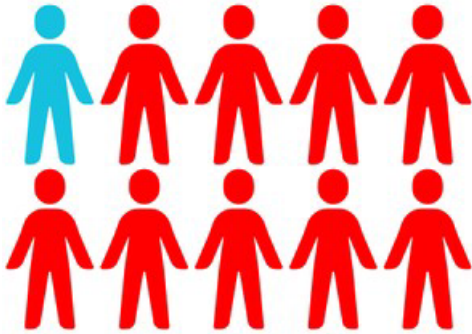
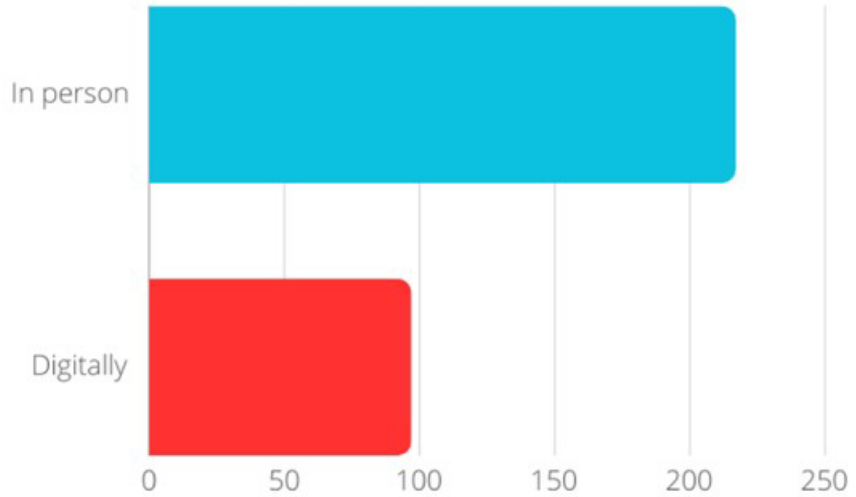
Case Study: CHWA 2023 Making Change: A Snapshot

217 people

attended the Making Change national conference in Barnsley

97 people

attended the event digitally



92 individuals

shared their work or practice

The main access considerations were:



Free companion tickets



Travel and accommodation supplied



Quiet and Safe Spaces



Reserved Seating



Hearing loops

Advance information including

Videos, maps and access guides



Visual Story



Pictures of spaces and staff, highlighting particular skills such as Mental Health First aid

- **Options for carers and those with dependents to discuss specific needs**
- **Guidance for those with caring responsibilities, breastfeeding and more**
- **Tiered pricing and bursary options**
- **Additional staff support (meetings, navigating the space etc)**
- **Additional attention to pacing/setting the tone for each day, with an emphasis on care and taking rest when required**

157 people filled out an EDI form

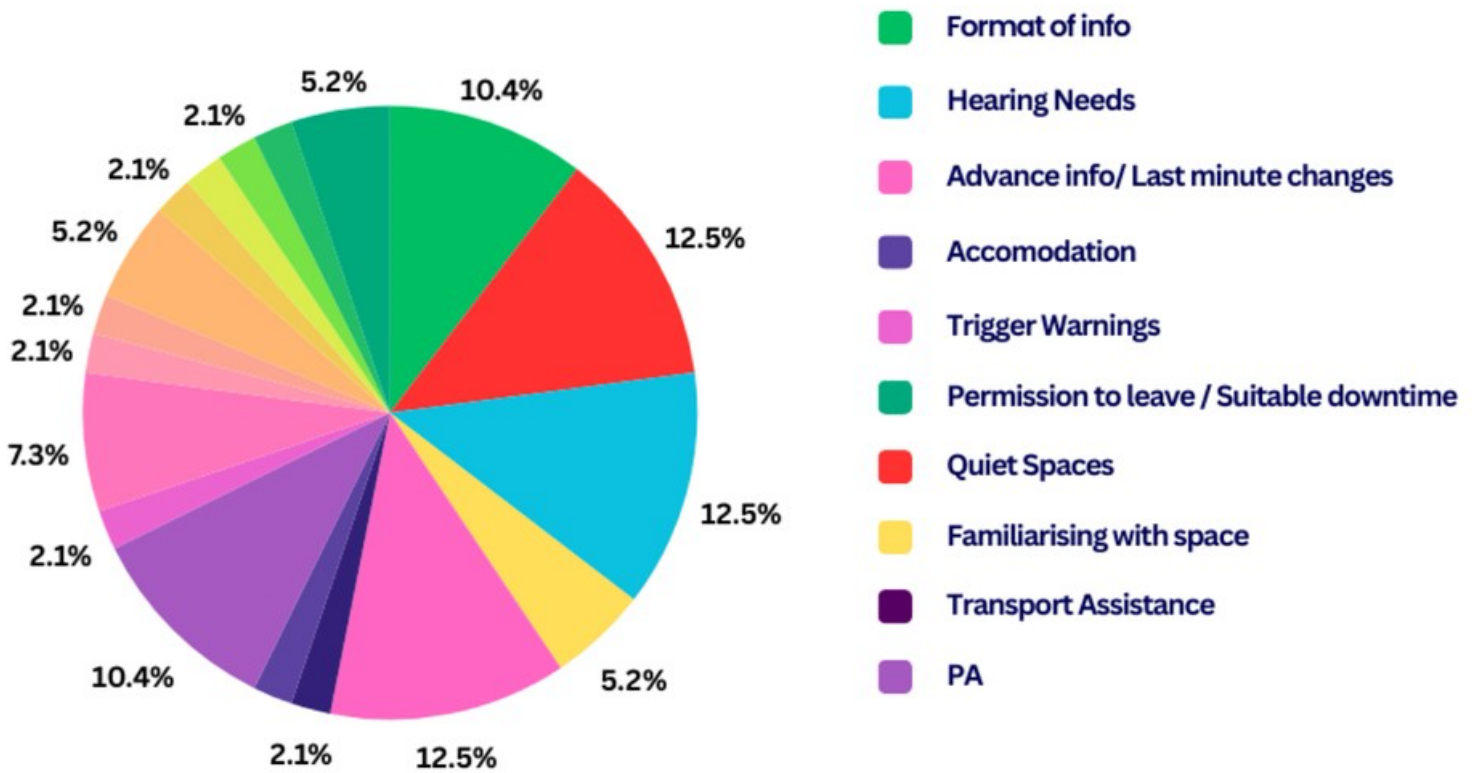
24% of those people identified as D/deaf, disabled or having a long-term health condition



15% identified as neurodivergent



Types of Need



The most common types of access need were:

- Hearing needs
- Access to a quiet space
- Additional planning and preparation meetings

Accessibility Costs

Item	Budget	Actual
Quiet room	300	300
Equipment hire - ramp for venue	450	0
Companion travel costs	500	260
Companion accommodation costs	0	580
Companion tickets	0	500
Consultancy	1200	1200
BSL(access)	2100	0
Live streaming	5050	4510
Captioning	3000	3000
Unforeseen access costs	250	0
Staff time @ approx 5 hours per week 21.54 inc. on costs	0	2050
Total	12850	12400

Keeping It Relevant

Access decisions should be

- Proportionate
- relevant
- applicable to the type of work

It's fine to adapt your approach as you go along. Specialist services need to be pre-booked far in advance and confirmed a couple of weeks before.

These services can be a large chunk of your budget, so if nobody has requested needing them, it's OK to not have them, and to use that money on other access needs. The most important thing is clear communication about this.

Reasonable Adjustments

We recommend doing everything possible to make your work accessible, it's important to know your limits.

Over promising can damage trust – Don't promise things you can't deliver. It's OK to not meet a need, as long as you can demonstrate that you've tried your best and there are reasons why.

Delivering the work

Most of the work comes in the planning stage, but there are a few things you can do to create a supportive and inclusive environment during the day.

Set the Tone

An inclusive environment helps reassure disabled people that they are welcome, and their needs have been considered. Remind people of what's available, and of particular staff members they can go to for access support.

If you are happy for people to take breaks, move around, make themselves comfortable however they need to then let them know – this allows people to manage their own care.

Staffing

Make sure you have enough visible staff to deal with access enquiries, and that they have been properly briefed.

You may want to have one 'access lead,' but all the team should be aware of access needs, and where to find useful information.

Access Register

Detailing access needs on a register is a good way to ensure any agreed adjustments happen smoothly and seamlessly.

Making it easy for attendees/participants is key – for example clear signage to hearing loops/quiet rooms/accessible toilets.

Disabled people shouldn't have to work harder to attend.

First Aid / Pastoral Care

Ensure suitably knowledgeable/trained people are available to deal with any unexpected events.

You may need to consider specialist skills, such as Mental Health First Aid, Safeguarding Awareness, or knowledge of a particular disability or neurodiversity, such as Dementia or Autism.

Learning from the work

Attendee Feedback

Encourage feedback.

Give attendees/participants choice in how they feed back to you during and after. This could be

- Phone chat
- text message
- video
- voice note

You can also get creative with feedback methods.

Debrief with Team and Collaborators

It's important to reflect on the things that went well, and the things that could be stronger – this will make your future work better.

Notice any patterns or themes that stand out in your feedback. Don't forget to include access in your evaluation.

Access Evaluators

You could ask your lived experience or steering group members to provide some feedback to help you improve your offer next time.

Alternatively, you can ask a local disability charity or access consultant to do this for you.

Sharing Your Findings

it's important to be honest and look critically at the feedback and experiences of a variety of people.

Documenting the challenges or the things that didn't go as expected is just as useful – it gives you a benchmark to work from in future, and helps build trust.

Creating a 'call to action' list is a good way to prioritise future actions. A good example can be seen in [CHWA's Making Change Conference Evaluation](#), available on our website.

Conclusion

We hope this gives you some useful starting points when considering access. Not all of the suggestions will be possible or relevant, and that's ok.

It's fine not to have all the answers; the key things to consider are:

- Approach access with a curiosity, openness and try not to have pre-conceived ideas
- Include D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in your planning and delivery
- Be realistic in what you can achieve and the skills you have – ask for specialist help if needed.
- If you are unsure what access support someone might need – ask 'how can we best support you?'

Appendix 1

Access Guidance Questions

Below are some questions that can help with early planning of an event or project

What do you want to do and why?

Who is involved in the idea right now? Who do you want to be involved in the future? How will you ensure disabled people are part of planning and decision making around access in a meaningful way (including fair and equal pay)

If you want to include disabled people as contributors, what needs to happen? Do you need to offer longer timescales, multiple ways to read and respond to information, flexibility on interview processes and times?

What scale and scope do you want the event to have?

Who is your audience? Are there any particular access requirements that you know are high amongst the demographic, that need to be included as standard (for example, will a lot of your cohort benefit for large print, or would extra Mental Health First Aid be a good idea)? This will also help inform suitability of venues, and programme structure.

How are you hoping people will engage? Is there a way to add multiple options here?

How are you going to collect information about access needs, and action them? Is there anything you know you definitely cannot offer (for example, the event needs to be at a certain venue that you know doesn't have a lift). What alternatives could you offer instead?

Are there particularly links you have/can make with disabled-led communities that may benefit from the event? Is there also scope for them to offer professional input/advice?

Who is supporting financially? Do you know your budget or are you building it around the plans? Is it sufficient to make the event accessible? Or do you need to find more funding/scale down the activity? We recommend allocating between 15-30% of your overall budget for access costs.

Now would be a good time to gather quotes for specialist services to keep costs realistic

How are you planning on keeping people feeling safe and supported during the event (including your team)? What considerations/specialist skills/extra staffing might you need?

Who will be responsible for access on the day, or will the responsibility be shared?

How much time/resources will planning an accessible event take? Do you currently have that in your team? Trust and consistency are really important – try to avoid over promising on your access offer.

What kind of environment are you looking to create and how will you communicate this? Additional things such as photos, visual stories and videos, and language guidance will help reassure people that they have been considered.

How are you going to make your access offer most visible in the run up to the event?

If your event is interactive in any way, how can you provide autonomy and choice in how people get involved (e.g. Multiple ways of giving feedback)

Additional Resources

[Creative Health Quality Framework](#)

[Unlimited Arts](#)

[Scope Disability](#)

[Shape Arts](#)

[Attitude is Everything](#)

[Disability Arts Online](#)

[We Shall Not Be Removed](#)

[Disability Arts Cymru](#)

[Sense Arts](#)

[Accentuate/Screen South](#)

References

* House of Commons Library Research Briefing: Disabled People in Employment (18.03.2024):
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/>

** Creative Health UK: State of the Sector Survey, Tang, J. (01.02.2024):
https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/SectorReport_202040201.pdf