

ND Inclusion Guide

How should organisations support freelance neurodivergent artists?

Created by Athac

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If you need this guide in a different format, please contact:

info@athac.co.uk

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CHAPTER 1 – INFORMATION ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Who is this guide for?

- This is a guide for staff members of organisations who are hiring neurodivergent (ND) people to work as freelance artists in any genre/medium.
- This guide is based on lived experience of autism, Tourette's and ADHD, but will also talk about ways of supporting artists who have other neurodivergent profiles, too.
- The guide will help you support neurodivergent artists who are working with you:
 - once (for example, with a touring show)
 - or as a worker whose work repeats (for example, as a workshop facilitator).
- The guide is not about working with neurodivergent people as employees with regular hours over a longer time, or about artists working in other jobs like admin or ushering. Some of the ideas in this guide might be helpful for supporting those people too, though.
- This guide is not about learning disability. Although learning disabled and neurodivergent artists can have similar experiences, and face similar barriers, some of the principles in this guide are still helpful for working with learning disabled and Profound and Multiple Learning Disabled (PMLD) artists. Learning disabled and PMLD people are some of the most vulnerable communities within the ND umbrella of artists, whose needs are most often ignored and whose voices are most often silenced. It's important that this guide doesn't accidentally speak over them, or contribute to their silencing. We encourage you to listen to them, too.

How to use this guide

This guide is quite long: it might take you 2 hours to read the whole thing, so you could be tempted to "dip in" and use it like a textbook. If you click the contents, it will take you straight to that item. If you really have to do this, **make sure you read these chapters in order first:**

1. About this guide
2. Neurodivergence
3. Support

BUT it is best if you can read or listen to the whole thing first, using it like a novel: for example, you could read or listen to it on the bus, or listen while you're doing the washing up. Then afterwards you could use it like a textbook, looking for relevant references.

Who wrote this guide?

- The guide was written by professional neurodivergent artists, including those with personal experience of being autistic, tourettic and ADHD, and of managing projects. They were supported by a project manager and leaders at arts organisations that work with neurodivergent artists.
- This guide was written **mainly** by white, middle class people, and without input from learning disabled or PMLD artists: Athac recognises this is a flaw, and welcomes responses and criticisms from neurodivergent artists working in the West Midlands who have different lived experiences of working in the arts.

Can I get this guide in a different format?

- You can request a plain text word version, an audio version and an Easy Read version by contacting info@athac.co.uk
- This guide uses a format that's accessible to lots of ND people, but it will not work for everyone:
 - slightly lower contrast between text and background
 - non-serif fonts without italics or lots of colours
 - increased font size and spacing
 - lots of clear subheadings

- bullet point lists

Sadly, not many people who like Easy Read documents are working in arts organisations at the moment: we think most of the arts workers who need this information might find the Easy Read format more time consuming, so we're providing it separately.

How can I find out more?

Here are some links to websites which have more information about these important issues

Working with disabled freelancers

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/our-work/policies-and-practices/working-with-freelancers/>

The Social Model of disability:

<https://www.scope.org.uk/social-model-of-disability>

Spoon theory:

<https://neurodivergentinsights.com/the-neurodivergent-spoon-drawer-spoon-theory-for-adhders-and-autists/?srsIid=AfmBOornp-10ZUcMkZ0p84rjuqLPqq12-BTMcjgzxexEUXa077RkNHFK>

ADHD Task Initiation:

<https://www.tiimoapp.com/resource-hub/task-initiation-adhd>

Autism:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/about-autism>

<https://cloudcuckoolandtheatre.com/2024/04/16/nd-unmasked-autism/>

Meltdowns:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/meltdowns/all-audiences>

NonSpeaker

www.thenation.com/article/society/autism-hot-vehicle-deaths-communication-bill-rights/

<https://neuroclastic.com/directory-of-nonspeaker-pages-blogs-media/>

Easy Read Documents:

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/easy-read>

PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System)

<https://aacnewsletter.substack.com/p/lets-talk-about-pecs-babyand-why>

Tourettes

<https://www.touretteshero.com/safe/2026/03/16/take-up-space-jamie-beddard/>

<https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/67-what-is-ts.html>

<https://www.touretteshero.com/safe/category/blog/>

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CHAPTER 2 – NEURODIVERGENCE

Important words

- **Neurodivergent / “ND”:** A neurodivergent person is someone whose brain develops, works, behaves, learns or processes information differently from the majority of people’s brains. This non-medical word covers a very wide range of experiences and perspectives: including autism, sensory processing disorders, Tourette’s, Down syndrome, ADHD, AuDHD (autism and ADHD together), dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and learning disabilities. Some people also include personality disorders and mental health conditions under the ND umbrella. Lots of neurodivergent people are disabled, but others are not — the relationship between neurodivergence and disability is really complex.
- **Neurotypical / “NT”:** A neurotypical person is someone whose brain develops, works, behaves, learns or processes information in a similar way to the majority of people’s brains: this can mean NT people fit more easily into the systems society sets up for us all to live and work in (although they may face other barriers, such as disability or racism).
- **Neurodiverse:** A neurodiverse group of people is a group including people whose brains work in different ways – this may or may not include NT people
- **Neurodiversity:** This can just mean 'involving people whose brains work in different ways' – but it is often used to mean a movement of ND people advocating for their rights, for respect and for their voices to be heard on ND issues (for example, autistic people campaigning for identity-first language).
- **Learning Disability:** A learning disabled person might have difficulty learning new skills, understanding complex information, and looking after themselves / living on their own. Learning disabilities affect the way people learn new things, as children and as adults. They are individual: every learning disabled person is affected differently. Some health conditions make you more likely to be learning disabled, such as Down syndrome and Cerebral Palsy.

This guide doesn't talk specifically about the needs and experiences of learning disabled artists, but some of the advice here will be helpful for working with them.

- **PMLD:** This stands for Profound and Multiple Learning Disability. An artist with PMLD has learning disabilities that have a major impact on their ability to communicate and be independent. Artists who experience this degree of learning disability will need support to help them with eating, washing or personal care. They might have difficulties hearing, seeing, moving or speaking, and often have complicated healthcare and social care requirements. They may communicate using sign language, Makaton, or PECS (Picture Exchange Communication Systems). PECS can be controversial: some ND/LD people think they're unhelpful. More info:

<https://aacnewsletter.substack.com/p/lets-talk-about-pecs-babyand-why>

PMLD people can make decisions about their lives, be independent, enjoy themselves and be creative. They can be professional artists, innovate and create high-quality work.

- **The Social Model of Disability:** The Social Model of disability is defined by disability charity Scope as

"a way of viewing the world developed by disabled people. It says people are disabled by barriers in society, not by their impairment or difference.

Barriers can be physical, like buildings not having accessible toilets. Or they can be caused by people's attitudes to difference, like assuming disabled people can't do certain things.

The Social Model helps us recognise barriers that make life harder for disabled people.

Removing these barriers creates equality and offers disabled people more independence, choice and control. Not everyone uses the Social Model and that's ok.

How anyone chooses to talk about their impairment is up to them."

More info: <https://www.scope.org.uk/social-model-of-disability>

- **Neurodivergent Profiles:** We talk about ND profiles instead of talking about 'disorders' or 'conditions': some neurodivergent people describe their experiences in those medical

ways, but others find those words offensive – viewing their neurodivergence more as a feature of their identity, even if there are ways that the world disables them as a result of it. Some examples of different ND profiles include ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette's: people who have each profile will have lots of experiences in common with other people who share that profile – but they will also experience their profile in a way which is unique to them.

- **Traits:** The word 'traits' has often been used to describe the experiences associated with a specific profile: so for example, autistic people often have intense special interests and enjoy info-dumping about them (talking about them in great depth). The word 'traits' has often been used to imply that these things are negative, but actually a lot of traits can be reframed as skills – autistic people are really good at in-depth and thorough deep-dives, so often acquire a high level of specialist knowledge in certain areas. To say this isn't to ignore the very real disabilities associated with autism – but the Social Model of disability says that these are caused by society failing to make systems in which the autistic person can thrive, rather than by the autistic person being fundamentally flawed. With the right support, the autistic person can use their 'traits' to achieve great things.
- **Support needs:** These are the specific practical support actions that an ND person needs to function at their best (often called "access adjustments" or "accommodations").

Masking

Masking is a way neurodivergent people consciously or subconsciously change their behaviour to fit in with neurotypical society and people. It's especially associated with autism. Autistic people often develop complex systems to help them seem less autistic. They learn to camouflage their true selves, over a lifetime of other people responding negatively to their genuine responses. They do this by analysing other people's behaviour, both face to face and in the media, and learning how to mirror it so they can 'pass' as neurotypical.

The National Autistic Society quotes autistic people who describe masking as:

- hyper-vigilance for and constant adaptation to the preferences and expectations (whether expressed, implied or anticipated) of the people around you
- tightly controlling and adjusting how you express yourself (including your needs, preferences, opinions, interests, personality, mannerisms and appearance) based on the real or anticipated reactions of others, both in the moment and over time

Masking might involve changing body language and tone of voice, engaging in eye contact despite it causing discomfort, suppressing stims, tics and sensory discomfort, and scripting conversations in advance or learning what to say in specific circumstances 'off by heart'.

Different kinds of language

Person first vs identity first

'Person-first' language used to be considered the most inclusive way to refer to disabled and neurodivergent people: it means you literally name the person first, e.g. describe them as a "person with autism" or a "person with disabilities". In contrast, 'identity-first' language is just that: you mention the autism or disability first, ie. "autistic person", or "disabled artist". The use of person-first language around neurodivergence has largely been driven by high-profile NT-led organisations which speak "for", and all too often over, genuine ND voices. In fact, a lot of ND people these days feel that person-first language pathologises their identity: for example, making autism sound like solely a disease or a condition, and so further stigmatising and excluding the autistic community. The same goes for talking about "having autism". Institutional language will also act as a barrier to ND artists who are either undiagnosed, newly diagnosed, or otherwise isolated from support systems; in this instance, it might be the only language around neurodivergence that they are aware of.

There's a lack of studies exploring what ND people actually think, and perspectives obviously vary from one ND profile to the next, and from each individual to the next. A lot of autistic people find "person-first" language offensive, but the same may not be true of some profiles. Some people with autism still prefer person-first language, and we respect their wishes, too.

These contrasting opinions might feel difficult to negotiate: we recommend using identity-first language as a standard, while remaining flexible and open to referring to people in another way (including person-first), if they ask you to – or if they themselves do so.

This is a good rule for other language questions, too: try to follow the lead of how a disabled or ND person talks about themselves.

"High or low functioning"

Please avoid using words which seek to define the finite 'severity' of a person's autism (or other ND profile). The reality is that while there can be significant differences between the ways autism affects different people, and the extent to which it is disabling, people considered "low-functioning" or "severely" or "profoundly" autistic can often be high functioning in many ways, given the right tools and support.

For instance, many non-speaking autists previously branded "intellectually disabled" by other people, have used digital tools alongside their high intelligence, to get college degrees and publish acclaimed blogs or books: check out this article by non-speaking autist Jason Jacoby Lee www.thenation.com/article/society/autism-hot-vehicle-deaths-communication-bill-rights/

Here's a list of links to other non-speaking writers' work:

<https://neuroclastic.com/directory-of-nonspeaker-pages-blogs-media/>

Equally, people labelled "high-functioning" can be rendered low-functioning by being forced to cope with challenging, high-stress circumstances with the wrong tools and no support: this might lead, for example, to a person having a shutdown and becoming non-verbal.

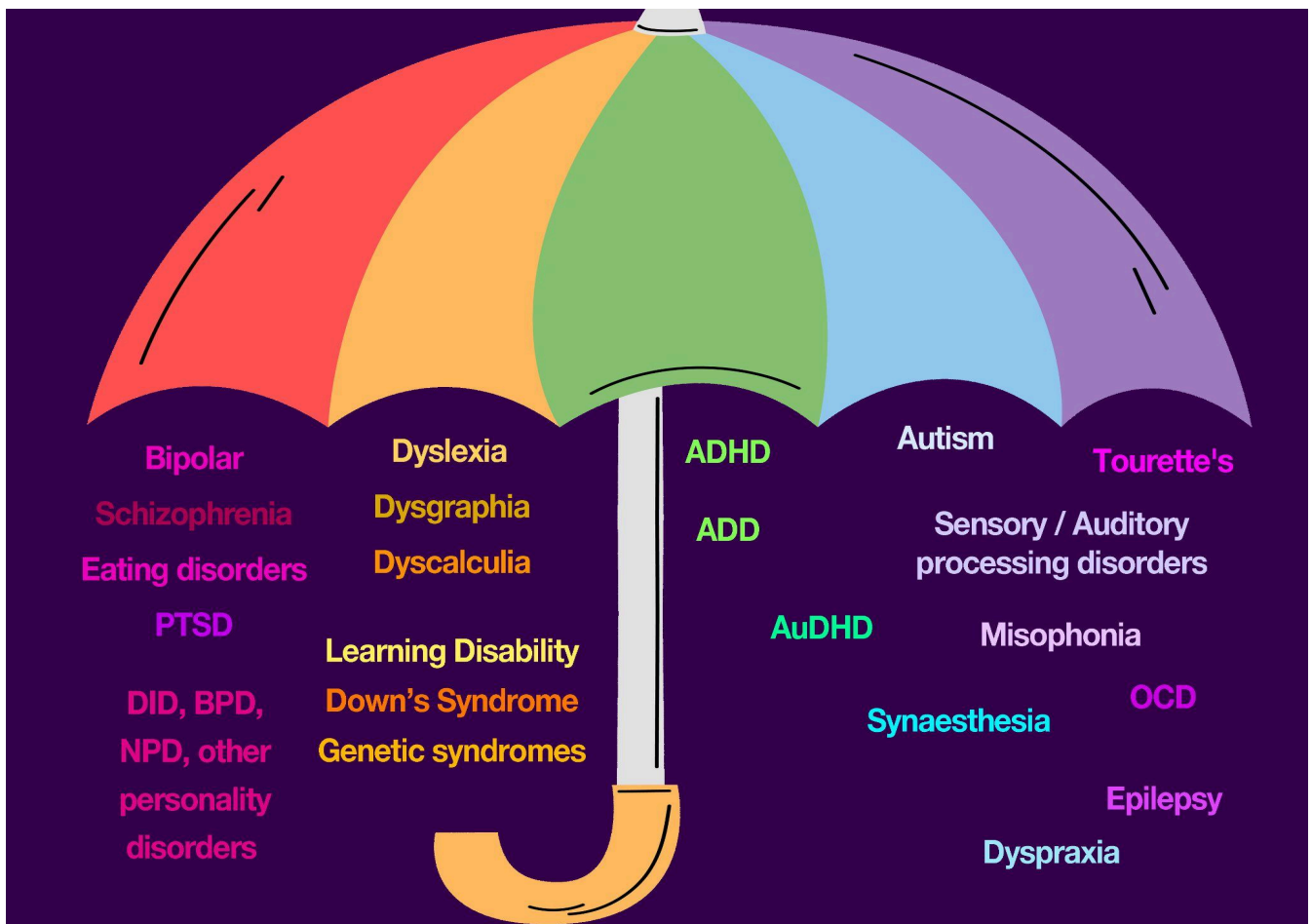
Functioning levels are misleading and inaccurate, because the level at which any individual ND person functions is variable: it can be affected positively or negatively by their environment, support, resources, stress levels and physical health. A person's level of function can vary from hour to hour, from day to day, and from year to year. It's important to remember that lots

of ND people have learnt to mask their disabilities really well, so they might appear to have a much higher functioning level than they actually do.

Lots of different experiences

The picture below shows a rainbow umbrella over the names of lots of identities people can be talking about when they say "neurodivergent". There isn't one list that everyone agrees on.

People who have some of these profiles will share experiences with people who have others: for example, many autistic and Tourette's people have auditory processing differences, which means they experience sound in ways that are unusual and different from most people.



Alt text: A rainbow coloured umbrella showing different neurodivergent profiles listed under the umbrella, grouped by colour in the following way:

- ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and ADD (attention deficit disorder)

- Dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia (impairments affecting reading, writing, numbers and movement)
- Autism, AuDHD, sensory / auditory processing disorders, misophonia, synaesthesia
- Learning disabilities, Down syndrome and other genetic syndromes
- Tourette's Syndrome, OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) and epilepsy
- Bipolar, schizophrenia, PTSD, eating disorders, personality disorders inc. DID, BPD, NPD (sometimes ND people are misdiagnosed with these things when they are actually autistic)

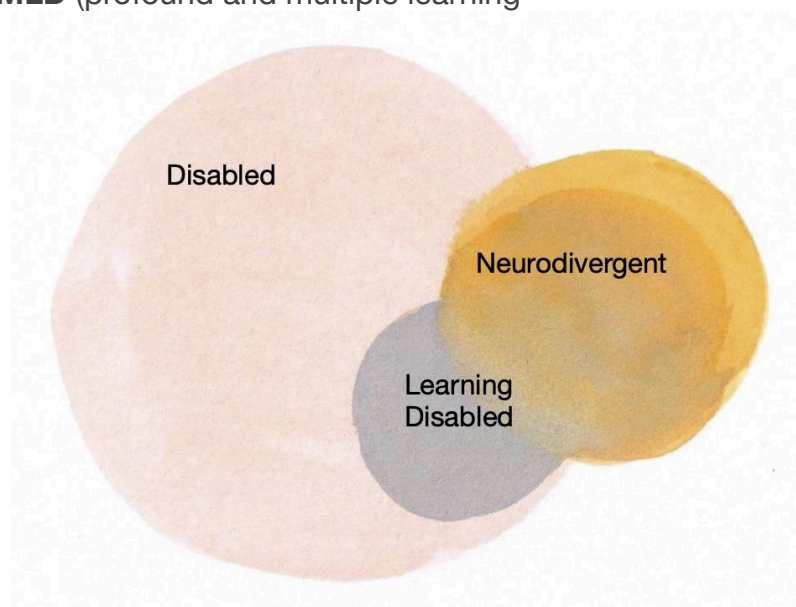
About learning disabilities

Learning disabled and neurodivergent artists are not exclusive groups:

- Most **neurodivergent** people are **disabled** – but some are not
- Most **learning disabled** people are **neurodivergent** – but some are not
- Some **neurodivergent** people are **learning disabled** – but most are not
- Some **learning disabled** people have **PMLD** (profound and multiple learning disabilities) – but many do not.

This guide is specifically about neurodivergent artists' experiences.

It is written by artists who are neurodivergent and disabled, but not learning disabled.



Alt text: An illustration of three pastel coloured circles showing the overlap between Disabled, Neurodivergent and Learning Disabled profiles.

Because learning disabled and neurodivergent artists can have similar experiences, and face similar barriers, some of the principles in this guide are still helpful for working with learning disabled and PMLD artists.

But it is important to remember that learning disabled and PMLD people are some of the most vulnerable communities within the ND umbrella of artists, whose needs are most often ignored and whose voices are most often silenced. It's important that this guide doesn't accidentally speak over them, or contribute to their silencing.

We encourage you to listen to them, too.

About non-speaking artists

Some ND people, including many autistic people, are unable to speak either sometimes or all the time. There are some autistic people who don't ever speak: this does not mean they are 'non-verbal', or 'without words': in fact, they can be brilliant writers and artists. In the internet age, we're lucky to be able to read the words of lots more non-speaking autists via their blogs, as well as published works from better known, non-speaking authors. In spite of this increased visibility, completely non-speaking ND people are among the most vulnerable and most silenced in our community, whose needs are least often met. We urge you to read their words.

A lot of people think an ND person is either speaking or non-speaking. But some autistic people are diagnosed with selective mutism growing up, which means not being able to speak some of the time – and many continue to have this experience as adults. It's surprisingly common for autistic people to have a few hours every day, or a few days every month, when it's very difficult for them to communicate through speech – yet they can easily write fluently.

About meltdowns and shutdowns

When autistic people get completely overwhelmed, they can have a meltdown or a shutdown.

A meltdown is when someone temporarily loses control over their behaviour: it might include crying, lashing out, kicking, shouting, screaming or other intense responses like biting. It is not a temper tantrum, and the person cannot stop it from happening.

A shutdown is a bit like going into 'safe mode': it means becoming unable to interact, withdrawing from a challenging situation. Someone might become non-verbal or unable to move.

The ways people respond to meltdowns or shutdowns can make them worse: for instance, physical touch or hugging can intensify sensory overload – but for some people, it's helpful.

If you're working with an autistic artist, check during your planning / access audit whether there's anything they find helpful if they have a shutdown or a meltdown.

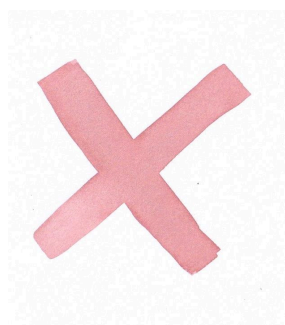
Neurodivergent folk often try hard to avoid conflict, which can make them less likely to take opportunities, or cause them to suffer shutdowns and burnout when faced with experiences they haven't been equipped to deal with. You can also help make meltdowns and shutdowns less likely to happen by using many of the listening processes we talk about in chapters 4 and 6 which can reduce conflict: for example, access audits and check-ins.

Common myths and misinformation

People we see in the media and meet face to face sometimes share untrue, unhelpful perspectives like those listed below, which cause real harm to ND and disabled people.

Don't let yourself be tricked into believing them.

The best way to learn the truth about neurodivergence is to spend time with neurodivergent people in your professional and personal life, and really listen to their perspectives.



FALSE

TRUE



"Giving disabled people work is a favour to them,

d/Deaf, disabled and ND artists are equally capable of creating high quality work or performances

<p>because disabled artists don't create high-quality work"</p>	
<p>"d/Deaf, disabled and ND artists are 'hard work' and make projects harder"</p>	<p>d/Deaf, disabled and ND artists are often highly skilled at creative problem solving, creating a productive and supportive work environment, and helping projects run smoothly for everyone</p>
<p>"Neurodivergent people aren't really disabled"</p>	<p>Neurodivergent profiles can be associated with a wide range of different disabilities and medical conditions, and are often (but not always) disabling in themselves</p>
<p>"All neurodivergent people are disabled"</p>	<p>Many neurodivergent people view their ND profile as an identity, as well as being disabling – or even, for some, instead of being a disability. For example, many ND people are proud of their ND identity and wouldn't ever want to be neurotypical – because of the experiences and skills their neurodivergent brain gives them.</p>
<p>"Autism is caused by vaccines so we shouldn't use them"</p> <p>"We should work towards 'curing' autism"</p>	<p>Setting aside the lack of any evidence of a link between medical interventions and autism: if you don't give your child a vaccine for something that could kill them because you're worried it might make them autistic, you're saying you'd rather your child was dead than autistic, which is deeply offensive to autistic people out here in the world, thriving and surviving.</p> <p>Many autistic people would not want to be cured, as that would erase their personalities and talents.</p>

<p>"You can tell from looking at someone if they're disabled / neurodivergent"</p>	<p>1 in 5 Brits are disabled, but many of them have "invisible" disabilities, which means you can't tell by looking at them – from hearing loss to bowel conditions to dementia, and of course neurodivergent disabilities. It's much, much more likely that someone is hiding their true level of disability from their colleagues due to fear of judgement, than that they are pretending or exaggerating the challenges they face. NEVER accuse someone of 'putting on' or exaggerating, or ask invasive questions about the details of their diagnosis or experiences, because this can cause profound harm by making disabled people more likely to try and hide their very real support needs.</p>
<p>"People's disability affects them in the same way every day"</p>	<p>Most disabled people have experiences that change from day to day (e.g. because of pain or tiredness changing them) or year to year (e.g. because of changes in health or medicines). Someone might need to use a wheelchair one day and be able to walk without aids the next day. The same goes for ND people: someone might be able to speak, tie their shoelaces or make a spreadsheet one day, and not the next.</p>
<p>"d/Deaf, disabled or ND people can't take on creative or leadership roles"</p>	<p>There are lots of outstanding d/Deaf, disabled and ND leaders in the arts, like the brilliant Keith Saha (who founded 20 Stories High): however, most of them don't share this information publicly, so you might not know who they are.</p>
<p>"Most ND or autistic people are white, male, cis or straight"</p>	<p>Medical and educational systems have historically been biased towards white / male / cis / straight experiences, so more of those people have been diagnosed (and they've had access to much more support): e.g. it took researchers many decades to realise that autistic girls present quite</p>




	differently from autistic boys – previously, they just assumed autistic girls didn't exist!
<p>"Neurodivergence is made up by privileged people to take back space from systemically marginalised communities"</p>	<p>Neurodivergence is real, and ND people who also face other kinds of exclusion are much more likely to be misdiagnosed, unsupported and suffer severe challenges as a result of the dual barriers they face. For example, Black autistic people are much more likely to be misinterpreted as aggressive, misdiagnosed with personality disorders, excluded from education, arrested and mistreated by police, and so on.</p> <p>Silencing more privileged ND voices ultimately harms less privileged ND communities most of all.</p> <p>Louder and more privileged ND voices must always be challenged to speak up for the most marginalised in our community, whose voices go unheard due to other barriers they face: but not to speak over them – instead working to create space and then stepping back so they can step into it.</p>

Things you might say that could upset ND artists

As either individuals or as employers, there are many mistakes we can make in how we treat ND and LD arts freelancers. Mistakes can be systemic (i.e. mistakes made through a larger system of people, technology, laws and opinions) or personal (i.e. in our individual interactions with each other). There are a vast variety of mistakes that you could make for yourself - with the features of yours varying depending on where you are, the background or appearance of the people involved, the roles or ranks people possess, and prejudices or truths held by the people involved, to name a few factors.

Common mistakes

When supporting ND artists to work with you, it's easy to go so far trying to avoid one mistake that you make the opposite one, and cause the artist harm, frustration or confusion. For example, if a producer had booked an artist with high communication needs but didn't want to be patronising or overbearing (a common issue), they could risk leaving the artist unsupported by not asking in detail about how to meet their support needs. This is why we need to be sensitive, pay attention to the people we work with, and adjust our procedures as we work. Inclusive management can require you to find the "Goldilocks Solution": not too hot, not too cold, but just right!

UNHELPFUL ("Too hot")	HELPFUL: Avoid either extreme ("Just right!")	UNHELPFUL ("Too cold")
Not considering how a carer or access support worker might fit into the artist's schedule	 <p>Alt text: Illustration of Goldilocks' braid</p>	Prioritising the access support worker's voice and needs in the space over your artist's.
Assuming ND or learning disabled artists' work will be of lower quality		Not recognising additional support might be required in work's creation
Failing to adjust working practices (like minuting meetings, or distributing tasks with deadlines following a meeting) when agreed		Assuming that because nothing has been discussed, no adjustments are needed.

<p>Having no-one available to discuss artists' medical or access needs</p>		<p>Requiring disclosure of private medical information or punishing people for not disclosing information about a protected characteristic</p>
<p>Blaming an outside issue on the artist's neurodivergence (e.g. "you're complaining about [blank] due to your support need, we don't need to do anything")</p>		<p>Not acknowledging how a pre-existing profile or condition can affect an outside issue.</p>
<p>Discussing private medical details outside of relevant locations (e.g. 'oh you know Farhid, he's got [blank]')</p>		<p>Failing to share any relevant support needs (as opposed to medical info) with the right people.</p>
<p>Providing a structure of work that feels too restrictive in an individual workplace</p>		<p>Not creating enough structure and leaving ND artists feeling unsure or fearful.</p>
<p>Repeating unpleasant or harmful myths and untruths around conditions like autism (e.g. how autistic people have low empathy or autism is caused by vaccines)</p>		<p>Never creating space to discuss openly how neurodivergence or a disability affects a working life.</p>

Hiring and treating an ND artist without consideration or care (or as a 'token') in a project



Failing to bring in an outside ND viewpoint into your work when it's for ND audiences or explores issues which affect ND people

It's really important to work flexibly and carefully with whoever you work with, and adapt as you go.

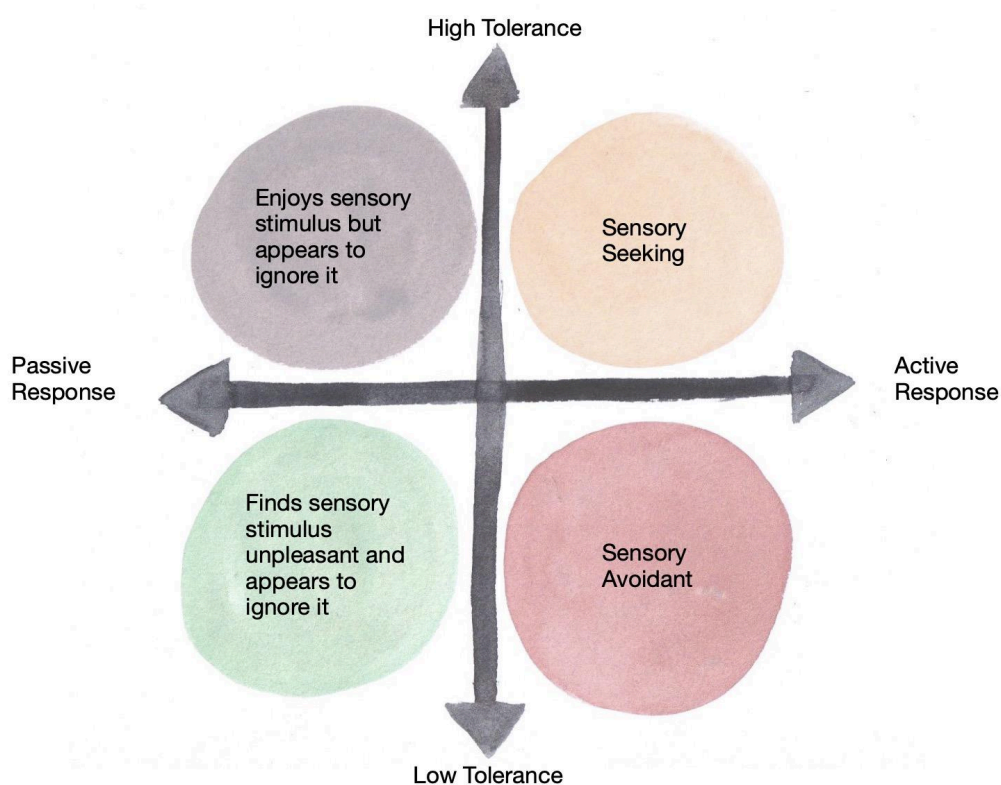
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CHAPTER 3 – ABOUT SUPPORT

All neurodivergent artists are different from each other, so each needs unique support.

It's really important to remember that even people with the same profile or diagnosis can face very different barriers from each other, so they might need very different kinds of support to be able to work.

For example, all autistic people process sensory information differently from the majority of people – but the nature of this difference varies a lot, so you can't use the same types of support for each person. Autistic people can be either "sensory-avoidant" or "sensory-seeking" across a wide range of types of sensory information.



Alt Text: A painted diagram showing four circles with text and two axes which end in four arrow heads. On the top the arrow points to “High Tolerance” and on the right it points to “Active response”. The circle in that quarter reads “Sensory Seeking”. The arrow on the bottom points to “Low Tolerance” and the circle in that quarter reads “Sensory Avoidant”. The arrow on the left points to “Passive Response” and the circle in that

quarter reads “Finds sensory stimulus unpleasant and appears to ignore it”. The left arrow points to “Passive Response” and the last circle reads “Enjoys sensory stimulus but appears to ignore it”.

- Sensory-seeking means a person finds that kind of sensory experience pleasant or calming, and getting a lot of it helps their wellbeing.
- Sensory-avoidant means a person finds that kind of sensory experience unpleasant, stressful or painful, and having even a small amount of it badly affects their wellbeing.

So in a rehearsal room, one autistic person might find fluorescent lights are painful and loud background music helps them focus, but another might need silence and bright lights to be able to function. Another might enjoy loud white noise (like fans), but find the upholstery on the chairs excruciatingly itchy. A fourth might prefer the same light and sound levels as their NT peers, but also need to move around and have stims and tics throughout the rehearsal. This is sometimes called "access friction" – see page 50 for more information.

So the most helpful thing you can do is be flexible, open and listen really carefully to what each artist tells you they need.

Some support is free and easy to achieve, e.g. opening a window or switching off a light. Other support is really expensive or is more effort to achieve.

How easy/hard or cheap/expensive it is to support someone is not their choice, and the artist's need for it is equally valid.

Support Needs

Support needs are different from disorders, health conditions and disabilities. In fact, everyone has support needs, whether or not they are disabled or ill. In a workplace or creative collaboration, it can be useful to discuss support needs rather than someone's medical condition or disability. When working with freelancers, employers should not ask for medical histories. Any discussion of health or disability should only happen where it is genuinely

relevant and always with the individual's consent. Instead of focussing on what someone can't do, it's useful to think about what positive actions you can take by focussing on how you can support each person to do their very best work. It is always helpful to ask yourself and them:

"What can we do to help this person flourish in this role?"

You know that the law says employers must make "reasonable adjustments" for disabled employees, which includes freelancers: but you might not be sure what that can mean in relation to neurodivergent people. Here are a few examples of some common support needs and adjustments they might have.

This is just a short list and there are many, many different kinds of support needs – and even more different kinds of adjustments. There is no one-size fits all approach: different adjustments could be needed by two people who at first seem to have very similar needs. Each artist's needs should be investigated individually and intuitively.

Examples of challenges, support needs and solutions

CHALLENGE	SUPPORT NEED	ADJUSTMENTS AGREED
An individual, private experience – often framed negatively	Relevant information for work	Solutions which make the work accessible to the artist
Struggle to find information in large blocks of text.	Need text to be broken down into short paragraphs and formatted so it's clear and easy for the artist to process.	Share colour, font, spacing, formatting (e.g. bullet points) to use in all admin or creative documents with the whole team, so the artist can read them as easily as the rest of the team.
Struggle to	Need written summaries and	A support worker or employee

remember information from verbal discussions.	to-do lists with deadlines.	supports the freelancer by taking minutes in meetings and producing to-do lists.
Have less precise motor skills.	Need support with fine-motor tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Arrange a support worker ● Question whether the level of fine motor skill being asked of the artist is key to the role/piece ● Reframe their role to avoid or reduce fine-motor work
Spaces with metallic clanging noises trigger meltdowns.	Need to work in spaces without metallic clanging noises.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Avoid working in/near kitchen spaces, coffee shop counters, bars, or building works ● Provide ear protection if effective. ● Inform sound designer / musicians: they work with the artist to check which percussion instruments are ok for them

Common support needs

It can save time, money and resources to make some common ND access adjustments available to everyone, so you don't need to source/facilitate them for specific artists on an individual basis.

This will also make your workplace more inclusive and accessible for a wide range of people, including those who may not have felt comfortable sharing their support needs, and those who may not realise they are neurodivergent or understand their support needs yet.

But it's really important that adding general ND access improvements doesn't reduce the chances of people being provided with access adjustments that are more specific to them.

Here are some examples of simple adjustments that can support the challenges faced by lots of ND artists:

Admin and creative documents:

- Range of colour overlay sheets provided for reading documents
- Standard range of accessible documents used across the organisation
- Including a standard 'more accessible' format implemented across all documents including contracts, scripts, etc which might include Sans Serif fonts (eg. Arial, Helvetica), increased font size and line spacing, no italics, short paragraphs, bullet points and lots of subheadings

Spaces:

- Provide sensory resources for each work space (or, at least 2 or 3 portable sensory resource trolleys which can be provided to ND artists), containing: fidget toys, weighted blankets, body sacks, textured cushions, warm soft-tone table lamps, colour changing lighting, colour overlays, gentle sound creators (e.g. a fan for white noise, a conch shell)
- Create a permanent, large, quiet, comfortable sensory space with sensory resources and dim lighting, rather than putting some fidget toys in an office or green room
- Replace fluorescent overhead lighting with more ND-friendly lights all over the venue, or if that's not yet achievable, consider using colour overlays or lampshades to make them warmer (eg. rose, amber)
- If you're meeting the freelancer in a public space or meeting room, always chat to them about which kinds of spaces, or which specific spaces, are accessible to them.

People:

- Make 2 or 3 of your core regular team access specialists who have extra training and who act as a key point of contact for all d/Deaf, disabled and ND artists
- Create simple access rider and food/drink rider forms in a couple of formats: for more information see page 49.
- Normalise employees being offered reminders to eat, drink, take breaks or use the loo: create a simple, discreet system for this so it's easy for ND people to ask for them
- Always teach movement sequences both mirrored and facing the same way

Regular and one-off relationships

You'll need to think differently about supporting artists who are working with you on a regular basis and artists who are working with you as a one-off job.

Here are some examples:

REGULAR	ONE-OFF
Monthly workshop facilitator	Acting in a touring show
Associate Craft Artist	Craft specialist doing an artist talk
Writer doing development scheme	Composer for an R&D week

Remember, this guide is not about working with neurodivergent people as employees with regular hours over a longer time, or about artists working in other jobs like admin or ushering.

Your journey with an artist isn't just the time when they are actively working with you:

- The journey starts with your first contact with them as an artist
- The journey ends with your last contact with them as an artist – but it shouldn't end

The importance of listening

Listening is the most important way you can support neurodivergent artists.

It should:

- **Be ongoing all the way through the process:** for instance, you might check-in about support needs when offering a pitch meeting or interview, at the point of booking a show, the week before the show, when they arrive for the get-in, after the get-in, at the half hour call, after the show, the day after, and before invoicing – as well as offering a contact method they find accessible to reach a specific person who's available in working hours throughout the process (e.g. whatsapp).
- **Be offered via lots of different formats,** e.g. whatsapp messages or voice notes, email, docs, face to face, remote: it's important to offer verbal conversations as well as written forms or access riders, as many artists will unknowingly share different needs in these two different contexts. Regular reflective check-in chats (e.g. at the start and end of all rehearsal days) can transform processes.
- **Be gentle and supportive:** lots of freelancers are scared to share their needs for fear of being seen as a "diva" or "difficult" and never offered work again, so make it really clear that you genuinely want to support them to be able to do their best work with you. You can do this by showing empathy ("that sounds challenging") and giving the artist lots of time and space to articulate their needs: make sure these conversations don't feel rushed.
- **Don't assume artists will speak up when they need something:** many ND people, especially autists, find it hard to recognise and/or tell people what they need, especially in the middle of a busy working day or a sensorily busy environment. For example, they might not notice they're hungry or thirsty, so might need someone to notice they haven't eaten or drunk anything during the lunch break and remind them they have a packed lunch or offer to pick something up from the canteen.

- **Don't assume consent – tell artists they have a choice:** an autistic artist might be exhausted and desperate to leave at the end of the day, but not know how to say they want to go when people are hanging around discussing the project: so they might need someone to notice this, and tell them clearly they can go because the working day has finished. Or they might struggle to stop taking on extra hours that are too much for them, because they don't know how to say they can't do it: as an employer, it's important to be much more careful about consenting anything outside the agreed remit. You should always be looking out and listening hard for unspoken clues that an artist is uncomfortable.
- **Listening well helps everybody** working with your organisation, including neurotypical people and the organisation itself – for example, by improving relationships and strategic planning. Why not let supporting ND artists' needs inspire you to create a culture of active listening, with regular communication and shared reflection built into all of your procedures?
- **Listen at every level of your organisation:** The single best way to improve the experience of ND artists visiting your organisation is to make sure that ND people are represented within your regular team at every level. ND people are often quite knowledgeable and intuitive about the needs of other ND people, even when their experiences are quite different from our own: so they can find it easier to make the work environment accessible. As an artist, if I meet an ND person who works in a venue's cafe that might make lunchtimes easier; if I meet an ND producer, they're more likely to design a schedule which is accessible to them; and if they work in a venue which has several ND board members, I'm much more likely to be able to do my best work. Of these, board representation is the most crucial, because it will enable changes to the systems within your organisation which make it harder for individual workers to use an inclusive approach, which in turn make it harder for ND artists to work with you.

CHAPTER 4 - RECRUITMENT

Sharing information about roles

Try to provide information about roles in several formats, including:

- Standard format pdf with wide spacing, extra bullet points and subheadings, sans serif fonts and short paragraphs
- Large print pdf format (minimum 16pt used) and no images (include image descriptions)
- Dyslexia friendly pdf version with low-contrast, and a dyslexia friendly font
- Easy-read pdf version using plain language, clear formatting and symbols to support the meaning of the words: you might like to use a tool like Widgit to help you create them. Here is a guide which explains how to create easy-read:
<https://www.ukaaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/G030-UKAAF-Easy-Read.pdf>
- Audio version (mp3): record yourself reading it slowly, making sure there's not too much background noise and if you're able to, pull down the treble and bass frequencies a bit
- Open format word version laid out like the standard one, but editable by readers and screen-reader friendly
- Generally, avoid extensive use of italics, coloured text, serif fonts and type below 11pt
- Include this sentence in 16pt high contrast text at the START of the advert, not the middle:

"If you need this information in a different format,

please email or whatsapp"

- Make sure you tell people at the START what the fees and dates will be and whether there is a budget for access costs – this helps reduce the time and effort artists waste reading ads for jobs they can't apply for
- Remember that some ND people read things very literally, so avoid metaphors and idiomatic turns of phrase if possible, and be really careful about your choice of words: e.g. if you say "intensive rehearsal process" they might assume it will be long days and

full time, and so inaccessible to them, even if it's actually 3 days a week. Try to be very clear and specific about what you mean, and don't generalise.

- If you intend to create a working process that is inclusive and accessible, built around the support and access needs of the cast, then **add a statement** clearly stating that to your recruitment copy.
- **Don't judge artists' creative skills on the basis of their social skills:** Many freelance roles are still given on a "who you know" basis, which often excludes ND artists (as well as artists from many other marginalised communities). ND artists may be brilliant at leading a workshop, contributing to an R&D, or even making art, but find unpredictable, social situations without boundaries much more challenging. This means many ND artists are less likely to be good at networking – and those profiles which *do* lend themselves to networking (many ADHDers are social butterflies) can make following up such fleeting social relationships impossible. So make sure you advertise freelance roles publicly as often and as widely as possible, and don't judge artists' creative skills on the basis of their social skills.

First impressions and networking judgements

This section is **very important** if you want to make your employment processes more inclusive to neurodivergent artists – because it is about how your unconscious bias towards ND people might be stopping them ever getting through the door of the sector, without you realising it's having an effect at all. The majority of freelancers' employment in the arts comes via personal recommendations: this means there are vast, hidden reserves of talent going untapped because ND artists' reputations are damaged by the bias, excluding practices and lack of knowledge of those they meet in the sector.

- **Seriously, don't judge artists' creative skills on the basis of their social skills:** it's worth saying three times, because this type of exclusion is widely practiced and accepted across the arts sector.

- People's ability to come across well in social situations is NOT an accurate reflection of how they'll cope in the room or on the day. For example, they might seem edgy because the busy bar you're talking to them in is causing sensory overwhelm – but if you're not rehearsing in a busy bar, they will experience rehearsals differently. They could come across as vague or unmotivated because you chose a table next to the counter, and they're struggling to hear you over the painful noise of the coffee machines and clanking cutlery. If you're meeting them in a different context, it doesn't represent how they'd be at work.
- Even if you're meeting them in a similar context, if you haven't done an access audit you don't know how the space or time you've chosen might be disabling them: they might have bumped into you in a rehearsal room, but because they haven't had the chance to tell you that the high-contrast patterns on that particular wall trigger their tics, they're mainly focussed on masking their tics when talking to you because you're in a position of power, so they don't come across as very charismatic.
- **Think a certain role requires a certain kind of personality?** Think again! Any judgement you make about someone's personality outside of working with them in that role is potentially excluding. I might be a brilliant stage manager and still come across as messy and disorganised when I'm out and about. I might be brilliant at facilitating craft workshops in schools partly because the structure benefits me, but come across as distant and unengaging when I meet an acquaintance unexpectedly. I could be a charismatic and inspiring director in the room, but still come across as eccentric and awkward outside it.
- **Only judge people based on meeting them in a setting which is accessible to them.** If they aren't performing well, but haven't highlighted any specific issues, please consider gently asking them whether moving to a different space might be helpful.
- **Question your own and other people's reading of ND artists' behaviour when considering whether to employ them:** it's easy for neurotypical people to misread an

ND person's character or intentions, simply because they're using their words or body language differently from how you would use them. Before trusting your 'gut', try to unpick what information you're basing your judgement of that person on, and consider whether you might be misreading that information because they're neurodivergent.

Common examples are:

- **Do they seem unreliable, 'flakey', unprofessional or eccentric?** Many neurodivergent traits can make people come across in these ways to neurotypical people. It doesn't mean the person is actually less likely to do a good job – if you think it does, that's a bias. To overcome your bias, start by asking yourself exactly why you think that.
 - Is it because they're not making full eye contact with you, their body language is unusual or their sense of personal space doesn't match your own? These experiences are all common in autistic adults.
 - Perhaps their dress sense seemed haphazard? They might have sensory issues with clothing which impact what they can wear, or experience fine motor challenges which make getting dressed more difficult.
 - Are they a bit clumsy? They might be dyspraxic.
 - Do they need extra reminders about tasks? Common challenges for dyslexics include forgetting things, self-organisation and managing stress levels: it's not just about reading and writing challenges

If you can pin down *why* you have made a judgement about someone, rather than simply trusting your judgement, then you can consider whether it makes sense. Does an eccentric dress sense signify that someone is unreliable to work with? No, that's what's called a bias, and it's discrimination. If someone needs reminders, can these be easily provided as an access requirement?

- **Has their time-keeping been questioned?** Many neurodivergent people experience 'time blindness', which means we can misjudge the length of time something takes and

need extra measures in place to help us manage our time and workload (eg. making deadlines and tasks really clear, offering reminders, using timers/alarms): if these measures and other access support weren't in place in a previous role, we might have struggled with time management. This doesn't mean we're unreliable or unmotivated: it's a significant barrier for many neurodivergent folk, which can easily be removed through relatively light-touch access adjustments and a little bit of understanding.

- **Do they seem rude or disengaged?** Many neurodivergent traits can make people come across as rude or disengaged to neurotypical people, but that's a misreading based on ignorance.
 - Autistic people often find eye contact very uncomfortable: for some this means they don't do it much, whereas others try to do it when possible. Just know that they are listening and may focus better when not maintaining eye contact (because staring into the distance, doodling or fidgeting makes it much easier for them to process information). This doesn't mean they aren't engaging in the conversation or listening: instead, this is the process they use to be able to focus, process information and actively listen.
 - Perhaps they struggled to match your sense of personal space, or to use appropriate turn-taking in conversations in this social context? These are common autistic experiences too. The autistic person who irritates you by interrupting you once may have spent the entire conversation focussing hard on when it's their turn to speak according to NT social rules, and done well to get it right all the other times!
 - ADHDers can find maintaining focus challenging, but they know what helps them: they might need you to add regular movement breaks (when you briefly do something physical) or just make this a space where you tell people they never have to stay still if they don't feel comfortable doing so.

- Autists are often very literal and straight to the point, which can seem blunt or rude to NTs, especially in the UK's "stiff upper lip" culture: but this honesty can actually be really helpful and refreshing in a collaborative creative context, making it possible to move past uncertainty quicker – and the apparent bluntness doesn't mean the autistic person doesn't value other people's contrasting perspectives. In fact, they'll often be grateful if people are equally blunt, clear and unequivocal, because that means they don't have to expend lots of energy trying – possibly unsuccessfully – to unpick layers of implied meaning. NT folk can learn a lot from this factual and honest communication style, which can enhance relationships and revolutionise processes!
 - Tourettic people sometimes shout unexpectedly, or use offensive words or gestures: these generally don't reflect their actual thoughts, and they can't help saying them, so please don't take them personally!
 - Autistic people can have a different sense of personal and aural space: they might prefer to stand closer or further away from other people than most NTs do, and they might speak louder or more quietly than most people, too: they're not shouting or being off with you, they're just different!
- **Be VERY wary of listening to one-sided criticism** about an ND artist from someone who's worked with them in the past (and remember, even if you don't know they're ND, they might be...). You have no way of knowing whether their access needs were met in that process.

For example, in the quote below, Esme's feedback may be painting a picture of an excluding process which disabled Ben, damaging his health and making it impossible for him to function in that role: with simple access adjustments, he could be pleasant, productive and reliable. And yet Esme may be unaware of this, and only share her biases and lack of understanding:

"But Ben worked with Esme and she told me herself, he WAS unreliable!

He arrived late, left early, only composed half the score in the time, and stormed out twice. She also said he was really edgy: he never looked anyone in the eye and didn't pay attention to what we were saying. She said he was totally unprofessional!

Thank goodness she told me, we were going to give him the job... "

Instead of judging someone and making a decision about their suitability for a role based on the feedback of one or more people, it would be more inclusive to have a conversation with Ben, using curiosity over judgement: you could ask him some open questions about how the work with Esme went, what support he would need in future and how this can be provided.

Applications

- Application forms are full of varying format barriers for ND applicants: avoid them if at all possible, allowing artists to answer questions in a format of their own choosing instead
- Offer applicants the chance to apply with writing or speaking, e.g. audio/video application
- Make sure both options apply to every element of the application, inc. cover letter *and* CV
- If you can offer people the option to share web links / files rather than a CV, do so
- Try to describe what you want very precisely: for instance, asking specific questions is less vague than asking for a cover letter. Many ND people struggle with ambiguous requests.
- Make it clear that a person does NOT have to have experience of every point of the job description to apply, as ND artists may interpret the person specification literally, as a list of 'must-have' attributes

- Phrase questions clearly and precisely: avoid using metaphors and idioms, and non-literal questions like "What makes a good team", all of which ND people can find harder to interpret
- Give clear guidance about length (e.g. one page, one paragraph of about 10 lines) BUT
- Avoid specific word counts: an approximate guideline is more ND-friendly than a hard max
- Be careful to make the workload for audio/video options match that for written versions: for example, if you ask for a 300 word answer, time yourself reading that out at a comfortable pace to calculate the amount of time you ask for in an audio or video application.
- Make the workload of the application match the fee for the role, and then half it. It can feel near impossible for ND artists to manage the admin load of sustaining a career in the arts: throw us a bone! A good ballpark might be a paragraph per £500 of fee (plus CV or links).

Equitable Selection

What is Equity?

- ❖ **Equality** is just treating everybody the same.
- ❖ **Equity** is giving each person the specific resources and support they need to reach an equal outcome.
- ❖ **Equality** provides the same resources to all.
- ❖ **Equity** provides different resources to each, based on their need, to achieve a fair result.

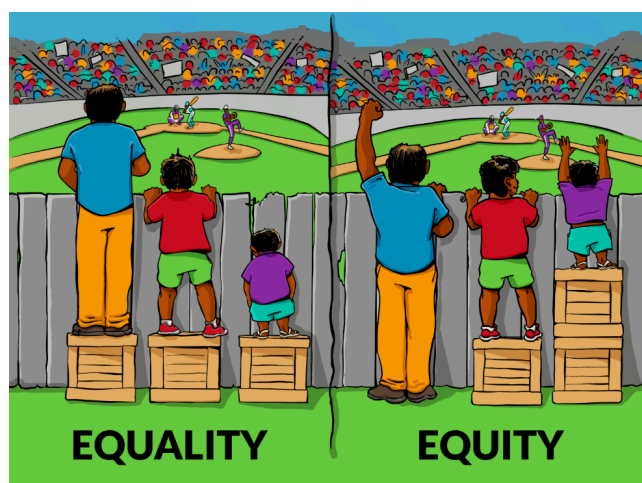


Image Credit: Interaction Institute for Social Change interactioninstitute.org | Artist: Angus Maguire madewithangus.com

Alt Text: On the left hand side the illustration shows 3 people: one is tall, one is medium sized and one is short. All 3 stand on the same size box. Only the tall and medium sized person can look over the fence to see a

baseball game. On the right hand side the tall person has no box, the medium sized person has one box and the small person has two boxes. Now all three can see over the fence and they are clearly cheering on the athletes.

By law (Equality Act 2010), an employer needs to ensure they are not discriminating against applicants, employees or freelancers on the basis of their identity. It is best practice to strive for equity rather than just equality – because equity ensures people are supported to meet the same standards. This is particularly relevant for ND applicants.

All the changes we propose you make in your recruitment systems are ways of making them more equitable. You don't have to give a sighted person a screen reader-friendly version of the

application pack, because they don't need it – but this extra resource is essential for a blind applicant to have a fair chance of applying.

There are lots of reasons why the application process might make it much less likely for the ND applicant to be selected. For instance, lots of ND people are "time-blind", and as a freelance artist without access support in between projects, they might end up completing the application way too quickly in the middle of the night. So it might look weak on paper. Or they might have had long career gaps before they were diagnosed, unable to function but with no way of getting any support or adaptations to make their work more accessible. So their credits might look more patchy than their NT competitor's. Or they might have simply misunderstood something really basic, and answered the wrong question.

The Rooney Rule: applying equity in recruitment selection

The Rooney Rule was developed in the American National Football league to combat under-recruitment of Black coaches, because lots of Black applicants were being unfairly excluded at the selection stage (because of biases or other inequalities rather than not being qualified). The rule means you have to offer an interview to every Black applicant who applies.

It is now often used in recruitment in the UK, and applied more widely to global majority applicants. We strongly support the use of this rule for global majority applicants.

We also propose you use it for neurodivergent and learning disabled applicants, to combat the many barriers they may face to creating a strong application.

You might be concerned that if you apply this rule to all global majority, ND and LD applicants, you won't have time to interview the best white, NT applicants. The answer is to make time to interview more people if you need to: again, you might need to spend more time and money to make sure you're working inclusively.

Representation

If you're not using The Rooney Rule, you need to make your selection panel representative: make sure the group of people looking at the applications includes both global majority and

neurodivergent people. They are less likely to make decisions based on those specific biases, and they're more likely to notice if someone's application is weaker due to exclusion or inequality. If your organisation is not representative of disabled lived experience currently, you can invite an external critical friend to support you (but they should be paid for their time).

Intersectionality

An intersectional approach takes into account that each protected characteristic of a person (Global Majority, disability, gender identity, working class amongst others) add another barrier to them being successful in any situation, including recruitment.

To support staff to identify their biases it is important to offer a range of relevant training, as well as ensuring there is a diverse recruitment panel and the Rooney Rule is used.

Interviews

Traditional job interviews are often a less effective way of assessing ND applicants than NT ones. You can reduce this imbalance by taking steps to make the interview process more accessible – so that you actually get to see what every applicant is capable of.

- Ask people about their own specific access needs specifically for interviews, offering them the option to let you know by email, text-based message, voice note or phone call – don't assume people will tell you, they might be scared you'll rule them out if they seem 'demanding'.
- Build extra time into the recruitment process for finding out people's access needs for interview, and making the changes needed to your planned process (at least an extra week between final application deadline and interviews)
- There are several changes you can plan in advance, which will make the interviews more accessible to a lot of neurodivergent applicants:
 - a. **Provide the interview questions in advance:** lots of ND people take a little bit longer to process certain kinds of information. In interviews, there is pressure to

process each question and formulate its reply fast, which can result in ND applicants starting to answer the question before they've actually understood it. It's important to remember that the aim in an interview is to find out what the answers to the questions are, not to find out how good someone is at processing questions and formulating replies quickly.

Aim to provide questions a week in advance: never less than 3 days if at all possible.

Of course, interviews are conversations, and an interviewer might think of a new question in response to something the applicant says: this is ok, as they will already be performing much better because the process is accessible – but make sure you check their understanding ("do you understand what I mean by that question?") and tell them to take as long as they need before answering.

- b. **Avoid "relaxed" informal chats:** sometimes NT people think a casual conversation feels relaxed to them, so it must be easier for ND applicants too. However, this is a different meaning of relaxed from the one used for 'relaxed performances'. In fact, many ND people thrive on structure: casual, unstructured social interactions often present far more barriers than formal contexts, where people's behaviour is more predictable and the "rules" tend to be clear rather than unspoken. A 'relaxed' informal chat can be the least accessible format for interviews for neurodivergent applicants.
- c. **Sociable group activities like workshop auditions can also create lots of extra barriers** for ND applicants, adding a wide range of challenges to do with social interactions with strangers, and sensorily busy spaces, which wouldn't affect them within a rehearsal process itself, as they'd know the people involved and their access needs would be supported. If you need to run a group assessment like this, it's essential to do a thorough access audit of everyone you're inviting and budget time, money and resources to support their needs.
- d. **Send a clear agenda**, including the structure, timing, and names/roles of interviewers.

- e. **Offer alternative interview formats:** If possible, allow candidates to choose between in-person, video, or phone interviews. If in-person, offer a pre-interview visit to the site where the interview will take place to help the artist feel more comfortable on the day.
- f. Inform candidates of **potential sensory triggers**, such as bright lighting or noise, and ask whether they need any **sensory adjustments** (like a quiet, dimly lit room).
- g. Tell candidates **they're welcome to bring notes, scripts, or their portfolio** to refer to during the interview, and that **it's fine for them to take notes or doodle** during the interview.
- h. **Provide questions, and any written materials, in the accessible formats above**
- i. **Provide coloured reading overlay documents if they need to read anything**
- j. **Provide extra reading time for anyone who needs it**
- k. **Provide a quiet sensory space where people can wait and acclimatise to the building** (don't make them wait in a busy stage door area or green room, or noisy bar)
- l. **Plan longer interview slots:** ND people can need longer to answer a question, for lots of reasons: they might need longer to process the question and formulate the answer, they might take a bit of time after they start speaking to 'code switch' to answering this question, they might lose their thread or wander off down an interesting conversational detour and need a gentle reminder of what the question was, they might be talking about something that's an autistic 'special interest', so be likely to 'info dump' when asked about it, ie. struggle to edit what they say to a bite-size summary.
- m. **Avoid common sensory challenges**, e.g. fluorescent lights, noise pollution

- n. **Make it clear that tics and stims are welcome in the interviews, as are access aids like fidget toys, tinted glasses and weighted blankets**
- o. **Write/plan questions and instructions in clear, unambiguous language, and try to use this approach in conversation, too:** autistic people often use clearer, more literal language, so NT turns of speech, jargon or idiomatic phrases might be taken at their literal face value – or something that's written plainly but with an implied emotional subtext might be read in its literal sense, too. Such communication barriers can be especially excluding in recruitment contexts, where autistics can really struggle to interpret questions written in 'management speak', like "what makes a good team?": checking your questions use literal language makes them more inclusive (these issues can also cause conflicts in email communications, where misinterpretations might not be picked up immediately, allowing misunderstanding to fester and multiply).
- p. **Avoid multi-part questions:** ask one thing at a time, and wait until it's been answered to ask the next question, even if it's related.
- q. **Allow processing time:** be patient and allow the candidate to think and gather their thoughts before speaking. Avoid interrupting them or filling silences immediately! It's really helpful to let candidates know at the beginning of the interview that you're happy for them to take their time to process the question, as they may well assume they have to begin speaking as soon as the question ends.
- r. **Have an ND person on the panel!** There is no substitute for representation when making a process accessible.

Auditions, workshops and presentations

Most of what we've said about interviews is also important for auditions, workshops and presentations, but there are some extra considerations for these more creative contexts:

- Make sure any **movement sequences** are taught using both mirrored and non-mirrored demonstration throughout: it's common for ND people to find mirroring much more challenging, and find it much more difficult to pick up moves this way
- Check that **directions for all the activities** are clear and use literal, plain language
- Make sure you **provide a list of what's going to happen**, with timings: if this might change on the day, still send it but explain that it might change, and how
- **Tell people who they will be meeting**, and what their roles are, in advance
- Make sure you **provide scripts / pages** for reading at least 3 days before, and for learning at least a week before.
- **If you ask people to prepare something** for an audition, it might take ND people much longer to prepare it: for example, a dyspraxic person might have to spend ages perfecting some blocking, a dyslexic person might need much longer to learn lines, and autistic or ADHD people might need to code switch into it and then hyperfocus on it. Please don't waste disabled labour: make sure you look at what they've prepared! Autistic people are likely to follow the instructions VERY precisely: double check what precisely the instructions, followed literally, will tell them to do. If you ask them to provide a 10 minute presentation, state clearly what style it should be in – are you looking for a TED talk, a power point, a chat, a pitch, a dramatic representation? And please, please don't say "we don't want to hear a speech, can we just have a chat?".
- **Workshop auditions** can be sensorily overwhelming for ND applicants: the social and sensory demands of being in a noisy networking space all day, even during breaks, can be disabling for some ND people, making it impossible for them to show you their skills. Make sure you have sensory resources in the room, as well as a quiet breakout space, and lots of break time to decompress. Be wary of using loud music for warm-ups and activities: just tweak it down a notch. Avoid really loud, sensorily overwhelming activities: if you really want to include your favourite warm-up game, warn people it will be noisy and sensorily overwhelming, and offer an alternative activity in a different room for people who might find that difficult. Avoid using background music during verbal activities like group devising, as many ND people find it harder to pick out speech when

there's background music, even if the music's quiet. If possible, offer one or two accessible auditions which have a much smaller group in the room (e.g. 4 auditionees instead of 24), and provide a budget for an access support worker, a bigger access budget and more detailed access auditing for these.

Self-tapes and zoom interviews

Online work is more accessible for some disabled / ND people, but it's less accessible for others. It's a good idea to offer both online and in-person options if possible.

Ways to make online interviews and auditions more accessible:

- **For group sessions**, plan longer breaks with shorter periods of work in between (this might mean a longer session overall, e.g. 3 x 30 minute sessions with 2 x 20 minute breaks instead of a 90 minute session including a 5 minute break)
- **For solo sessions**, plan longer slots so applicants can take breaks during the session if their access needs get in the way of performing well
- **Provide a detailed plan** of what applicants will be asked to do and when in advance
- Make sure applicants know **who will be in the zoom room** in advance, and their roles
- **Provide live captioning, and the facility to switch them off**
- The **chat, screen-sharing and audio-sharing functions** create a wide range of extra barriers for ND people: if possible, make sure using these isn't essential to take part, and always make your access auditing/listening process equally detailed for online activities (offering a test session / "recce" in advance, as you might for an-person activity)
- Provide a **quiet breakout zoom room** where people can go to chat to a support worker
- Provide 10-15 minute **"soft entry" and "soft exit" periods** which people can access before and after the session to chat to the facilitators and support worker and acclimatise to the virtual space
- Offer **extra technical support** with getting in and out of the virtual space
- Check whether applicants have **reliable internet** and offer support if they're web-poor

Informing people of decisions

Ask each person how they'd prefer to find out a decision and get feedback. NT people sometimes assume it's better to phone every applicant, but lots of ND people find phone calls very challenging: they might prefer a voice note chat or just a typed message.

Try to provide feedback for unsuccessful applicants: ND people are really good at learning from feedback, and will often fill in the blanks with much more negative reasons if you don't explain.

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CHAPTER 5 – PROJECT PLANNING

Budget for access

It's easy to aim to make your organisation/venue accessible – but if you haven't budgeted both time and money for it, that's not going to happen. If your funding doesn't have a separate access budget (e.g. Arts Council Project Grants) then it's good practice to budget 10% of your total project budget to access costs.

ND access can cost money in lots of different ways:

Time:

- Salaried staff members facilitating it, e.g. liaising with ND artists and planning support
- Any extra freelance staff fees (e.g. access support workers, BSL interpreters)
- Inclusive processes may mean shorter sessions/days/weeks with longer breaks in between

Space:

- Quiet or sensory breakout spaces
- Accessible space for ongoing support check-ins
- Accessible work spaces for both making and sharing work

Resources:

- Source some common sensory resources e.g. weighted blankets, sensory toys, sensory lighting

Overheads:

- Lunch for artists whose executive function means bringing packed lunches is a challenge

Inclusive processes

Many ND people often have less 'spoons' than their NT colleagues, or shorter attention spans, so can only work for shorter sessions, days or weeks. Making inclusive processes can mean totally rethinking the way you plan production schedules and timelines. As an example: you might need to plan 5 hour days starting at 12 noon, in 3 day weeks with no more than 2 days in a row, and alternate rehearsal weeks with weeks off. Inclusive processes are often less intensive and last longer (which allows more time for great ideas to percolate and brew!).

Unfortunately, the arts have relied for so long on processes that are actively exclusive, that this kind of inclusive process can present big challenges for organisations (for instance, many union agreements make individual days more expensive than "full" weeks). But if you think creatively and make positive changes so everybody can work more healthily, you'll benefit from improved wellbeing for both ND and NT artists, and across your whole regular staff, too. Our experience has been that both ND and NT people see an increase in the productivity, creativity and quality of their work in inclusive processes.

Code-switching, hyperfocus and working *with* ND brains

Lots of ND people work best when they can focus very intensely on one thing, but find it more difficult than their NT colleagues to switch their focus to something different. For example, 'Janine' found it very difficult to work on this guide alongside her other part-time work: eventually, after several months, she took 10 days off her other work to focus just on this project, and finally managed to successfully code-switch into it half-way through that period. Then she focussed on it very deeply: so when she finished her work on it, she found it really difficult to stop and switch back to her other work. At the end of this process, she realised she should have taken 10 days off in the first place!

It's really helpful to think about leaning into the differences in your ND artists' brains when planning a schedule, so you can create a process which takes full advantage of the working and creative patterns which suit them best.

Start listening early

If you know who will be working with you, ask them *before* planning the budget and timeline what their needs are, and how you can structure a process to enable their best work. If you're doing funding bids, this means asking *before* starting to write the bid. They probably know what works for them, but are often told it's impossible because the project was planned months ago.

If you don't know who will be involved, pay some neurodivergent consultants to offer guidance on how to plan the budget and timeline to make the process more accessible for most ND artists.

You should expect to pay well for this work in both cases (c. £200 per half day in 2026).

Questions to ask artists before planning the process:

- How do you work best?
- How many days a week can you work and stay healthy, mentally and physically?
- What does that look like for you? If you work 4 days a week, what do you do on the other days? (This question helps to check whether they've considered it fully: for instance, the artist might give you clues that it's still actually an inaccessible structure for them, such as saying "I spend the rest of the week in bed to recover" or "That gives me my 3 days to look after Mum, I do get burnt out with no days off but I can keep it up for a bit")
- What kind of working day works best for you?
- Are there any times of day that are inaccessible to you?
- Do you prefer to have bigger breaks or lots of short breaks or a mix of both?
- How many hours can you work in a row before you lose focus or need a break?

- How long a working day (inc. breaks) can you do before you lose focus?
- If we make a schedule that suits **all** of these needs, how many weeks will you be able to do it for without a week off?
- If we make a schedule that suits **some** of these needs, how many weeks will you be able to do it for without a week off?
- Are there any seasons or times of year that present more challenges for you?
- Do you find it easier to work sitting down or standing up?
- Do you need movement breaks, sensory breaks, rest breaks or all three?
- Do you tend to hyperfocus or have difficulty code-switching?
- How could you benefit from having a support worker with you? (This can be more helpful than just asking "do you need a support worker", because many ND people feel awkward about asking for one)
- Do you find body-doubling helpful? (Body doubling is a technique which helps ADHDers, and some people with other profiles including autism, to complete tasks: basically, having another person alongside them helps them stay focussed and motivated on the task. This can be helpfully done by a Support Worker, but can also be achieved through clever planning, for example by getting artists to work in pairs, or by bringing another employee in to accompany them on a specific thing they're struggling with).

Questions to ask artists before planning the budget:

All of them! Find out as much as you can about their access needs before planning the budget, so you can find out how much it will cost to support their needs and make sure you've budgeted enough for them to be able to do their best work.

This could include:

- Asking them to give you their Access Rider (a list of their access support needs)
- Providing an Access Requirements form – many professional artists don't have an access rider, because they can be very hard to create, so you should offer the option of either sending their own access rider or answering some questions (we'd suggest having a google form, standard word and large-print pdf versions as well as an audio file with someone reading the questions)
- Invite them to chat over their access needs in whatever way they find most useful (in person, zoom, phonecall, whatsapp messages, voicenotes or email). Make sure the person who speaks to them has a good understanding of access and inclusion.

Access Friction

One disabled or ND person's support needs might be the opposite of another disabled or ND person's: if those two people are working together, it's called "access friction" or "access conflict".

For instance, what if all these are true... ?

- Actor-musician Adam is non-verbal in the mornings
- Actor-composer Ibrahim has to sleep for 45 minutes in the afternoon
- Actor-musician Freema can do up to 6 hours per day and likes getting started quickly
- Director Coco has to have physiotherapy and hydrotherapy 5 miles away at 5pm
- Writer Darla needs a 30 minute "soft-entry" period to get used to the space before starting work
- Stage Manager Ben needs 10 minutes' sensory break every hour

Talking things through is very important: it looks really difficult to plan a project with this mix of access needs, but if you talk it through with everyone, you might find out that Adam loves

doing movement work in the mornings, Ibrahim is fine if he takes a 45 minute nap between 2 and 4pm and Coco can push her physio back an hour.

So you plan days that look like this:

10.10 – 10.40am: Optional soft entry time

10.40 – 11am: Wellbeing check-in (Adam uses text to voice tech or support worker)

11 – 11.10am: Actors stretch / solo warm-ups (Ben sensory break)

11.10am – 12pm: Movement rehearsal

12 – 12.10pm: Sensory / tea break

12.10 – 1pm: Movement rehearsal continues

1 – 2.10pm: Lunch break

2.10 – 3pm: Verbal improv / text generation (Darla takes notes) [Ibrahim sleep]

3 – 3.10pm: Musical instrument tuning / warm-up (Ben sensory break)

3.10 – 4pm: Music creation and improv

4 – 4.10pm: Sensory / tea break

4.10pm – 4.30pm: Creative reflection / script development discussion

4.30 – 4.40pm: Wellbeing check-out

It took more thinking, but this schedule looks great! You might want another chat with Adam to check whether he will really be able to share how he's doing and what he needs using text to voice tech – and if not, adjust the schedule again.

Ibrahim's sleep isn't during the lunch break: it would be easy to try and increase rehearsal time by doing this, but Ibrahim would then miss out on all the break benefits the others get (time to eat, drink, chat, go outside, etc), so this would be discriminatory.

It can be helpful, if everybody agrees, to share access friction challenges with the individuals involved, as they can often work out between them how to support both people's needs, working together to find a 'compromise' which doesn't actually compromise anyone.

Be Innovative ("But I Only Have Four Weeks!")

It's easy for people who've worked in one creative sector for a long time to fall into the trap of believing standard, accepted practices are the only practical way to make work. But many of the practices which have been accepted for decades, or even centuries, are excluding precisely because they are of another era. We wouldn't send 8 year olds up chimneys, so why are any Victorian working practices for performers still entrenched? Just because everyone's used to doing a 3 to 6 week, full-time rehearsal process culminating in an intensive million-hour tech week with previews, doesn't mean it's the only practical, affordable way. It doesn't even mean it's the best way, creatively or commercially. It's just the easiest way because by sticking with it, you don't have to figure out a new way.

If you're serious about making your venue or organisation accessible and inclusive, then you need to be open to figuring out new ways – not just once, but on an ongoing, responsive basis. This can be a joyous process which reaps benefits in terms of both quality and innovation. When you're calculating costs, it's important to factor in the potential improvement in the quality of work which results from everyone involved (NT and ND) being happy and well-rested: as well as the knock-on financial impacts of your finished product being really kick-ass!

Ask yourself really basic questions which challenge your assumptions about process, e.g.:

- **Why do we have to do all the weeks of this project in a row?**
- **Could I spend some time properly exploring ways to have weeks off in between?**
- **Have we considered the potential benefits of spreading an 8 week process over 3 months, or even 8?**

If you're still doing intensive tech weeks where the whole company works several long days followed by a long weekend of previews and pick-up rehearsals, you need to know that lots of actors have left the sector because those demands are physically and mentally inaccessible to them. Why not split this process across two half weeks? The same goes for schools touring and Theatre In Education: can you find a way to make the full day's work a bit shorter, or reduce the number of days a week?

The only answer is cost.

If you're happy to sacrifice equity for financial gain, then own it.

Don't say it's impossible: it's a choice. If you don't want to make it, why not invest some time in exploring creative solutions to funding this change? Can you ask a funder to support it as part of an organisation-wide push to work more inclusively? They often look positively at these kinds of organisational development projects designed to improve long-term access. Could you run a crowdfunder towards becoming more accessible? If you're not sure, can you employ a specialist consultant for a few days to propose some different options for moving forwards?

Be ambitious

Aim to find ways to make long-term changes to the intrinsic systems your organisation relies on, rather than focussing solely on what you can achieve within the existing systems – because those changes will make it much easier to include each individual ND artist who interacts with you, forever.

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CHAPTER 6 – EMPLOYING ND ARTISTS

Preparation

Once you know what/when your project/event will be, and who will be involved, you can begin preparing yourselves and the ND artists for working together. This might involve:

Educate your organisation's employees by making sure they've had detailed neurodivergent awareness training, which is appropriate to the needs of the ND artists involved. For instance, in Birmingham:

- Sense offers excellent group training focussed on sensory and hidden disabilities like sight loss, hearing loss, neurodivergence and mental health conditions:
<https://www.sense.org.uk/get-involved/support-us/partner-with-sense/disability-awareness-training/>
- Cloud Cuckoo Land Theatre provides ND-led group training on ND-inclusion in the arts, as well as ND Recruitment "MOTs" for organisations and ND artist mentoring:
<https://cloudcuckoolandtheatre.com/workshops/online-training/>
- Casba runs training specifically about employing learning disabled staff:
<https://www.casba.org.uk/our-services/training-for-professionals/>
- Share links with your team about specific ND experiences which could impact the process, e.g. autistic meltdowns and shutdowns. Here's a helpful description:
 - <https://cloudcuckoolandtheatre.com/2024/04/16/nd-unmasked-autism/#autism-eighteen>

Complete a full and detailed access audit: this means doing all the kinds of listening mentioned above (see page 29) so that you have a clear picture of what the artist needs to flourish in this role. It might involve access riders, access forms, messages, emails, phone calls and face to face discussions. The scope and scale of this work will vary a lot depending on the scope and scale of their role: for instance, it would be less detailed for one show than

for a three-month project. But either way, its aim must be to find out every way that you can support the artist to do their best work: be thorough and keep listening!

Offer ND artists a paid orientation session to allow them to acclimatise to the organisation and the space, and discover any onsite access issues in good time for them to be fixed

Make sure even one-off employees are offered an access meeting in advance, which they can choose to do as a phone or online chat, or as an in-person chat with site tour

Check-in carefully with each ND artist about which of their support needs they'd like you to share with their workmates or venue staff, and which format / wording they think is most helpful to do that

Give artists a welcome pack which includes everything they need to know (make sure it's in a format that's accessible to them). This might include:

- A simple breakdown of the agreed dates/times/locations
- Information about who they can ask if they have questions and who they can contact if they are facing access barriers (with more than one contact method for each)
- An access guide for the venue/s
- Clear directions to the venue/s
- Information about parking, public transport, taxis and local shops and cafes
- A 'visual 'story': Detailed photos and descriptions showing them what every part of the working environment is like, and the route to get there (e.g. the walk from the station)
- Information about other sources of support to help them with working, e.g. Scope's helplines for disabled workers:
<https://www.scope.org.uk/employment-services/support-to-work>
- A simple list of names, roles and contact details of the people they are working with (a traditional contact sheet can be inaccessible: we suggest a list in the form of a word document, with a sentence explaining what that person's role in case anyone doesn't know, with an audio alternative)

- Clear information about any expenses which will be paid or other benefits, anything people need to do to claim them (e.g. save receipts) and how to get access support for getting these paid
- A wellbeing policy, which describes the employer's commitment to each employee's mental, physical, and financial health through a framework of initiatives and procedures, and encourages them to ask for help if they need it
- For a longer project, arrange a paid team **access meeting a couple of weeks beforehand**, creating a safe space for collaborators to share and discuss their access needs if they wish to do so. Access support workers should be part of this.

On the day

One-off roles

Freelancers often work with an organisation for just a few hours: these roles involve the least listening, and can often be the least accessible as a result.

It's really important to make sure you offer all one-off artists an **access chat** and/or site visit, and **access support** if required.

For every show or workshop, there should be an onsite Access Support Worker [ASW] or ND-inclusion trained person who's not working on the event in any other capacity, who greets artists, gives them their contact number, and is around onsite all day if they have any access issues or other concerns. That way, if someone is struggling but the technician isn't sympathetic, they'll have a way to get access support when they need it.

Unfortunately, neurodivergent freelancers can often be subject to informal working practices and managers who aren't well-informed about access: for instance, if you're booking a band, the person who books the gigs might not know the drummer is neurodivergent. So if you ask about access needs, they might say "no". Ask for contact details for all band/company members several weeks in advance, and **send every individual who will be attending: your organisation's access contact details; an access form; and a welcome pack designed for people doing one-off roles like gigs or workshops.**

Daily briefing sheet

It can be helpful to provide a single page sheet before each session with essential info like timings, location details, themes and goals, access info – especially for autistic artists, who find it very useful to know what's going to happen in advance. This is especially true on multi-location projects, and those which are spread across a longer period. You can agree the most helpful formatting of this for everyone at the pre-project access meeting.

Avoid last-minute changes

Autistic people find the unexpected stressful, so try to stick to your agreed plan and be aware that they might need longer to adjust if there's a change. Generally, last minute changes can present unexpected access challenges for disabled artists too. So if you have a last minute change of venues/rooms or other change of plan, add in a break so they can explore the site or get used to the idea, followed by a wellbeing check-in so they can raise any questions or access concerns.

Soft entry / exits

Getting used to a space can be really helpful for many ND artists, yet others find it easier to just turn up and start work, skipping any small talk: a good way to support both types of worker is to use soft entry and exit periods for any work day/session. This might be a 15 to 30 minute timeslot at the start and end of a working day when it's optional to be there: artists can arrive at the end if they prefer, but the room is open and support is available for those who'd rather settle in.

Access Support People

There are different types of Access Support Workers, including:

- British Sign Language interpreters for d/Deaf ND artists: budget at least £400 per half day. Be aware you might need 2 people so they can cover each other's breaks or small group work

- In-person support workers who pay close attention to an artist's needs and offer any practical support needed on the day, including advocating for their needs to be met
- Carers (often called a PA, meaning Personal Assistant): these are people who work closely with the artist in their daily lives, providing support with regular tasks like shopping, washing or dressing
- Admin-focussed support workers (also often called a PA, meaning Personal Assistant) who might work remotely or face-to-face, and offer support with things like invoicing, budgets, contracts, emails, schedules, funding and benefits forms
- If a freelancer has their own carer, PA or ASW, their time on this project might be paid for by the government via Access to Work, but it might not especially as the scheme's budgets are slashed. Make sure you find out exactly where the artist stands, and pay for their own carer or support worker if needed. If this person is their own regular support worker, they must focus only on this person
- Ideally, you should have an in-person Access Support Worker [ASW] for each disabled artist. But with rates around £50 per hour, plus travel and accommodation costs, this can be a challenge for organisations or projects without public funding. Some artists will say they don't need an access support worker: sometimes they're right, but sometimes they're unaware of how much this extra support will help them to function. Some artists need 1-2-1 support, while others might benefit more from the support of a shared ASW supporting 2-3 people. Talk through the artist's needs with them, giving them time and space to reflect on the different options, and listen well to make sure they're not minimising their needs to avoid seeming 'demanding'. Make it clear the budget is there if they need it.
- **Existing support:** Some artists will already have a Support Worker paid for through the government's Access To Work Scheme: make sure you clarify whether this is absolutely confirmed. Other artists already have a preferred support worker they work with often, but whose time is only funded on a project-to-project basis: you should pay their usual fee.

- **Access Contacts:** It's essential that artists know who they can talk to about access concerns throughout your relationship with them: during the actual work, and in the pre- / post-job periods. They should be given the names, roles and contact details of 2 people who've had access and inclusion training who they can contact full-time, with different options available for contacting them (e.g. whatsapp, email, phone call, in-person chat)

Wellbeing check-ins and check-outs

These are an essential part of an accessible process. We strongly recommend you build them into any project or one-off engagement, because they're central to the listening process we outlined above. A wellbeing check-in is a period of time when everyone has the chance to share how they're doing, what physical or emotional stuff they're bringing to work today, or anything that's affecting their wellbeing.

It usually takes the form of sitting or standing in a circle and going round the circle, taking it in turns to have time to share how you're doing. Make sure everyone knows there is no requirement to share anything – but everyone must be given a turn and a moment when they can do so if they choose to. Asking people to put their hands up instead of going round a circle can inhibit people – especially ND people, who can struggle with non-structured turn taking.

You can plan the check-in differently depending on the work that will come afterwards: for instance, you could do a standing up (for those who can) check in with a short time-limit per person (e.g. 30 seconds) if you want the group to be energised, or if you're working on emotionally challenging stuff that day you might do a sit-down check-in with several minutes per person followed by a group reflection. For a typical day's work, a 90-second maximum per person can be helpful (remember, some people will just say "I'm ok, nothing too much to say!"). Another approach is a 3-word check-in, which gives people a minute to pick 3 words that describe the energy they're bringing with them today and a gesture to match each: then you go round and each person shares their words/gestures, which the group repeats back at

them. This and other movement-based check-in procedures can be inclusive for non-speakers.

It's always helpful for the person leading the check-in to summarise what's been shared, e.g. "Thanks everyone: so there's a lot of tiredness in the room, but also some excitement and curiosity: so we'll take things very gently today, but with a positive spirit of creative adventure!"

It's a good idea to allow a 10-30 minute check-in for a full work day, then a shorter check-out of 5-20 minutes (to include reflections on the day's work and the energy they're taking home).

In a longer process, you might use different scales of check-in at different frequencies: e.g. a short check-in and check-out each day, plus a longer check-in at the start and end of each week, plus a half-day in-depth check-in and reflection session at the start and end of each rehearsal block.

For longer or more in-depth check-in sessions at key points within a project, or where a project has emotionally challenging content, you might need to book a wellbeing facilitator to support the group in their reflections: one good provider is <https://www.artistwellbeing.co.uk> (you could also ask artists for their own recommendations).

Crisis codes

The more an ND artist is struggling, the harder it might be for them to tell you. It's useful to create a system for alerting people to the fact someone needs support. A useful way is to use a specific image as a crisis code, e.g. They can send you a frog emoji if they need help. You can also give everyone a business card with a frog on, to hand over if they need help. Or they can draw a frog, or write or say the word "frog" or "ribbit" if they need help. Offering lots of options makes it more likely that an artist in distress will find a way to alert you.

Inclusive Scheduling

Many ND artists have less 'spoons' than NT artists, so can only work/focus for shorter periods without sensory, social or movement breaks. For longer projects, see the detailed 'Inclusive

Scheduling' section in the Planning section on page 50 above. For one-off days of work, you might consider changing your usual systems to make it work for a specific artist. For example, many venues stipulate that artists must do their get-in right before a show and their get-out straight afterwards: this can make small-scale touring totally inaccessible to lots of ND and disabled artists, because in a two-show day, that can easily mean a compulsory 10-hour working day! That's the Equity maximum, but it's not accessible for many disabled artists. It's often helpful to let an artist get-in the evening before (by booking them the day after the space is free), and / or get-out the next day (be aware that first thing might not be possible).

Plan for lateness

Time blindness is a common ND trait: it means your body clock isn't as predictable as that of many NT people, so one day an hour might feel like 5 minutes, but the next day 2 minutes might feel like 25! This makes it harder to be punctual: not because of rudeness, lack of dedication, or lack of respect, but because it's actually harder. There are lots of other things which might make it harder for an ND artist to be punctual. One day we might have fewer spoons, so the practicalities of getting washed and dressed might be much more challenging to achieve (basically, we're more disabled, and might feel silly admitting that to anyone). There are tactics you can use to help us be punctual: for example, one ND-inclusive manager told us they always message their timeblind colleague a question an hour before they need to leave the house: if they don't reply within 15 minutes, they ring them to check they're on track.

Really helpful things you can do include:

- Making sure accessible transport is in place, which might mean taxis
- Offering alarm calls and reminder calls/messages as access support
- Employing a long soft entry period for timeblind people to aim for the start of
- Programming a 15 minute "arrival" time which it's not disastrous if they miss
- Programming other 'compulsory' starting activities you can afford for them to miss

Reminders

ND people often find reminders really helpful, for anything which they can forget to do: on the day, this will include essential wellbeing tasks like eating, drinking, or taking a break, along with practical show tasks like getting in costume and attending the warm-up.

Making the space accessible

Your listening during the planning process should have allowed you to provide a very accessible, inclusive workspace. However, there will always be things people haven't thought of in advance, so it's important to stay open and flexible to adjust your space to make it possible for individuals to work there. In general there are some helpful changes you can make which will make a space more accessible for a lot of ND artists:

- **Reduce noise pollution:** for those with auditory processing issues, background noise can be very distracting, or even painful, and make focussing and conversation impossible.
- **Replace fluorescent lights:** loads of people get migraine headaches from fluorescent lights. They can also trigger people's tics – and even seizures. It's a good idea to replace them in all your spaces. If that's not immediately possible, you could provide lamps and fairy lights to light the space, and make sure overhead fluorescents aren't triggered automatically.
- **Open windows or ventilate:** Many ND people are very sensitive to unpleasant smells, but we can also find supposedly pleasant smells like Glade plug-ins or perfume unpleasant. So it's helpful to provide a fresh, unstinky space that won't make us distracted or nauseous! More ND people are clinically vulnerable too, so fresh air or good ventilation can help us stay well, and reduce the chance of us taking a long illness break during the project. We also might find a space that's too cold or too hot sensorily challenging, so check for any temperature issues.

- **Provide sensory resources:** you should provide fidget toys, weighted blankets, soft cushions and duvets, headphones, tinted sunglasses, colour overlay sheets, and small gently scented items in the workspace, as well as in a separate sensory breakout space
- **Educate your team that last-minute changes are problematic:** so the director won't suddenly decide to take the read-through to the bar, for instance!
- **Provide a sensory break-out space:** This must be separate from the green room / coffee area, as ND artists need to be able to access a quiet, non-social space, away from areas which are busy or noisy during break times. A sensory breakout space should have dim, cosy lighting, fidget toys, weighted blankets, soft cushions and duvets, textured/tactile items, headphones, tinted sunglasses, gently scented items and ideally some SEN-specific lighting such as fibre-optics or a slow-phasing colour changing sphere. Artists should be able to switch lights on/off, and move things around to suit their needs. Everyone should know this space is for quiet, and while quiet chat can be ok, anyone can ask others to be quiet if that's what they need.
- **Work outside!** There is increasing evidence that outdoor creative spaces can be much more widely accessible for ND people, acting as natural sensory breakout spaces – although they can also bring their own sensory challenges, such as adverse weather. It's really worth considering whether some or all of your process can be moved outdoors for access reasons.

Listening when it goes wrong

Unfortunately, it's common for ND artists to have bad experiences with organisations, either because of a lack of listening, awareness or access support – or because something goes wrong which could equally happen with NT freelancers, but the ND person isn't able to communicate the challenges they're facing with the organisation due to their disability.

It's really important you have clear systems in place for people to raise concerns, and they know what they are: a lot of the listening and check-in processes we've talked about will help, but you must also make sure there are two named people whose contact details are clearly

displayed around the working environment (and make sure there's more than one method of contacting them, so it's widely accessible).

Work to establish an organisational culture of being open to criticism as a way to grow: defensive organisational cultures are common in the arts, and they can lead to people closing ranks against someone who's struggling, instead of working together to help them feel more comfortable.

If there's a serious issue, bring in an unbiased person such as an outside pastoral lead who's experienced working with ND professionals, to offer mediation, and pay for an ASW to attend too.

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CHAPTER 7 – AN INCLUSIVE ORGANISATION

Ongoing Support

It's essential to make sure that you continue to offer day-to-day support and accommodations both between blocks of work, and after the work finishes. ND artists can often feel abandoned in these in between or afterwards periods – they might need minimal support, but it's really helpful to offer supportive measure, for example:

- Reassurances that they can still contact their access contacts if they need to
- Occasional light-touch check-ins, eg. a monthly whatsapp message checking they're ok / whether they have any questions about the work, can reduce isolation and aid focus.
- Reminders of things that need doing in between, e.g. invoices, research or line-learning

Aim to make sure your listening process isn't completely paused during these quiet-periods.

Artist development

Hamish Glen, brilliant former director of The Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, spoke eloquently about how too often support "falls off a cliff" at the end of a paid role or artist development scheme. As a freelance artist who finds many sector networking and training events inaccessible, it's easy to become isolated and disconnected from what's happening. You can support the ND artists you work with to continue working in the sector, by taking steps to keep them connected with people and opportunities, even after their contract with you finishes, e.g.:

- **Offer a paid end of contract individual reflection** at which you not only reflect together on what's worked well and what you could each do differently next time, but also create a written plan of your organisation's ongoing relationship with the artist, so they know exactly what's available and what they can ask of you (NT artists might well be aware of these)

- **If you work with someone sporadically** for short gigs, e.g. as an occasional workshop leader or performer, try to offer **occasional paid reflection sessions e.g. every 1-2 years**
- **Offers of places at conferences** where an organisation may have capacity to book/have complimentary artist tickets included; discretionary support for travel and accommodation.
- **Add the artist to any newsletters** you send out which could tell them about jobs, training, ticket offers or networking activities: add them yourself after you received consent (GDPR)
- **Start an artist newsletter** if you don't have one: Hippodrome Creatives is a great example!
- **Help the artist sign up to other helpful newsletters** so they stay more connected
- **If you work with a lot of artists**, consider occasional mailouts to all previous employees telling them what's happening in the organisation or the wider sector, or sharing information about relevant support services after societal events which could impact their wellbeing.
- **Make sure they know that you can provide references**, and how to ask for one
- **Let your previous ND artists know straight away about any new job roles, including those advertised internally**, offering access support to help them apply if possible
- If your organisation is unable to offer roles beyond volunteering, they can still **signpost to suitable paid roles** in the wider arts ecosphere - volunteering in one organisation should not become a glass ceiling!
- **Say clearly if it's ok for them to ask to arrange a chat with your team, and how often**

- **Set up free mentoring schemes for artists from marginalised communities:**
mentoring can make a huge difference to ND artists being able to continue working in the sector

What else can your organisation do for ND artists?

Outside of your direct work with artists who might be autistic, learning disabled or otherwise ND, your organisation can do more for those artists more widely. Freelancers often miss the personal support of 1-2-1s, conversations about career development, or paid-for training that regular employees can expect throughout their working life. Similarly, trainee and placement roles can let artists find alternative routes into their work outside of certain paths, such as maybe a professional or educational institution with entrance criteria that may have let them down or excluded them. Your attention can let learning disabled and ND freelancers, who've had their learning and talents neglected better navigate their career. If you can offer this extra attention to freelancers who need it (including outside of your organisation), the industry could become a more inclusive place.

Providing more training and development opportunities

Opportunities like paid trainee roles, work experience (for those in education or where paid work may be inappropriate), or CPD courses exist and can work - except learning disabled and neurodivergent artists with high support needs often end up shut out by organisations unwilling to offer these roles with a greater level of support than what they'd give to middle class, white, hearing, non-disabled artists with lower support needs.

Anecdotally, many organisations will deem artists with higher support needs too complex and not prioritise the extra staff time required to support placements, nor any training for employees to feel more confident in working despite any communication difficulties.

If your organisation plans staff time to offer placements, provide the support needed to your specific placement or trainee, and can find relevant training for your staff to be best equipped in their help - you will radically open up fields for ND artists with high support needs.

Artist Development Schemes

If you're offering artist development opportunities, make sure they're designed to actually help the artist develop their creative work and/or their career. They should include:

- Mentoring to help them formulate clear aims and a plan to achieve them
- Training in creative skills or career skills (e.g. CV writing)
- Creative development time, space and resources
- Chances to share their early-stage ideas with helpful feedback from professionals
- Chances to support more experienced artists or observe essential processes like tech
- An ongoing relationship with regular communication and chances to reconnect

These schemes are not chances for your organisation to enjoy free labour.

Artists should be respected, supported and celebrated, not given donkey work like photocopying or loading boxes.

Voluntary opportunities

You could:

- Work out which areas of your organisation could take work or volunteering opportunities
- Train staff on relevant useful skills - for example, communication training to help them be clear in their communication when mentoring learning disabled and ND artists
- Plan and budget for more paid trainee roles, with dedicated time for existing staff to support them.

Leadership

Artists, particularly working class, Black and/or artists with higher support needs, often get shut out of leadership roles over their career. While putting someone in a leadership role (whether lead artist, a trustee, or management role) without support is unfair and unhelpful, with the right support it is transformative.

- **Where representation doesn't exist in your team**, educate the team on a current lack of representation, or find a consultant or access auditor (for instance, see Birds of Paradise's access auditor) who can help you do so
- Too many leadership roles focus on the mechanics of organisations at the expense of the **artists being able to actually engage in creative work**. This may also cement certain elements of the current system as being "the way things are". A healthy balance and a welcomeness to being challenged is important!
- **Make sure there is representation at board level ASAP**, and make sure under-represented voices aren't alone: it can be traumatic to have to counter inaccurate or offensive perspectives when you're on your own in a room full of people who believe them.
- **Offer potential board members support to make a well-informed decision** about what level of accountability and labour they are comfortable taking on, to help make sure no-one is taken advantage and equitable board recruitment isn't simply a tick box exercise to perform diversity
- **Make sure you audit, budget for and provide appropriate access support for board members**: this can often be forgotten because Trustees are usually voluntary roles
- **Where you have the representation**, invest in mentoring, ongoing reflection and 1-2-1 support for under-represented people stepping up into board and paid leadership roles
- **Be ambitious for what artists can achieve**. Don't assume someone can't be on your board because they don't have board experience, or can't take on a senior leadership

role because they're disabled. Be alert to ND artists' distinctive talents and skills, and how they might be able to bring change and improvements to your organisation.

- **Pass the mantle** as soon as possible: don't delay in upskilling emerging ND leaders and handing over as much power as you can. For instance, if you have an inclusive board or steering group, don't waste years of monthly workshops on fun workshop activities, in-depth discussions of what they could eventually do, or practice activities like writing a pretend agenda or policies: move them to writing real agendas and policies at the earliest possible opportunity. Get stuck into the active training they need to do this swiftly, be ambitious for them and hand over responsibility in real ways.
- **Implement their influence across your organisation:** for example, you could ask an inclusive steering group to set aims for the organisation for 3 years, or to do this in collaboration with your Artistic Directors – making sure all suggestions are included if the majority agrees. Then refer to these disabled-led aims at every stage to inform decision-making, grading performance from 1 to 10 for each aim:
 - When an idea is suggested
 - While a project is being planned
 - When a programme is being finalised
 - When artists are reflecting on work during the process
 - When work is shared
 - When people attend workshops
 - During your post-project evaluation

You don't have to set strict rules like "everything must score 6 or more": but this kind of system can make sure all your employees keep listening to your inclusive steering group's perspective, instead of just being a meaningless box ticking exercise.

- **Stay informed** about examples of ND leadership in your sector and share them with your team: e.g. the brilliant Keith Saha and the company he founded, 20 Stories High

- Use the recruitment tips in Chapter 4 above for all senior leadership roles

What will ND artists do for your organisation?

Everyone will benefit from making creative work spaces and careers inclusive of neurodivergent artists. Your regular team will enjoy clearer communication, more flexible systems and space to express concerns.

- People you already work with will be more productive and creative
- People you've wanted to work with (and couldn't before) will also work with you in productive and creative ways
- The skills and lived experiences of your organisation will grow, making it a wiser organisation
- ND representation will make your company more approachable for ND young people and audiences, growing engagement and sales

Your journey with ND artists

Your journey with a neurodivergent artists starts when you imagine the role, continues throughout the recruitment and planning process, grows across the period of work, embeds after the work finishes – and eventually becomes a journey of development for your whole organisation, making it listen better, think more clearly, be more humane, creative and flexible, – ultimately allowing it to make better, more innovative and higher quality work.

Final Thoughts

Supporting neurodivergent artists is not a checklist you complete or a policy you finish writing – it is an ongoing practice of listening, adapting and being accountable. This guide cannot cover every experience or need, and it will never replace the expertise of the artists you work with. Use it as a starting point, not an answer sheet. Stay curious, stay flexible, and be willing to change your systems when they cause harm. When organisations commit to removing barriers, rather than asking artists to push through them, everyone benefits: the work is stronger, relationships are healthier, and the arts become a place where more people can genuinely belong and a more exciting place to work for us all.

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