

How to Put On an Accessible Exhibition

We have created this short guide for curators, programmers and exhibition organisers to give an overview of how to ensure that the exhibition you're putting on is accessible and inclusive of disabled people.

This guide forms part of our [series of free resources](#) on art, disability and access. It should be seen as an overview to support an approach that considers access and inclusion from the very beginning and at all stages of an organisation or individual's work. Almost 20% of the UK population identify as disabled; Shape's resources are designed to provide arts organisations and professionals with the knowledge and tools required to help build a more diverse, equal and inclusive cultural sector for disabled people as artists, audiences and workers.

Planning at the Beginning

- We encourage everyone working in the arts with a desire to be more inclusive of disabled people to commence by familiarising themselves with the [Social Model of Disability](#). The Social Model frames disability as a social construct created by access barriers, rather than a medical 'problem', and provides a dynamic and positive model which identifies causes of exclusion and proposes constructive changes to remove barriers and increase access
- Build in time and have a budget for providing access. Find out in advance exactly how long it will take to secure access – many people are surprised to find that Sign Language Interpreters need to be booked weeks, if not months, in advance
- If you have a choice of locations for the exhibition, go for street level or ground floor – think step-free every time and, if not, ensure there is a lift or a regulation-standard ramp to any areas accessed by steps
- Any areas that will be accessed by visitors should be fully wheelchair accessible, including toilets! Accessible toilets are more than meets the eye – they need to accommodate the wheelchair user, a portable hoist and a PA, with a red alarm cord working, reaching the floor, and next to the toilet
- Remember that spaces that have an intercom for entry are inaccessible to deaf people
- If you're having a call-out for artists, ensure this information is presented in an accessible way and specify that the exhibition will be accessible so that disabled artists feel welcome to apply

- Convey the theme or brief accessibly, remembering that disabled people are far less likely to have an institutional art education background owing to its inaccessibility
- Give artists the option of being able to get in touch with you via email or phone should they have questions about the theme or brief, or should they want the information in an alternate format
- Try not to be too rigid about how artists can make submissions – some may wish to do it by video/audio, over the phone or by post for access reasons
- Consider booking [Disability Equality Training](#) for yourself and your co-organisers / team / staff / colleagues

Working with Disabled Artists

- Be open about access requirements – at the initial stages of opening up a dialogue with artists, ask them or give them the opportunity to let you know if they have any access requirements that they would like you to be aware of
- Don't make assumptions about what access requirements artists have or what their preferred methods of working are – if they request that you do or present something in certain way, have an accommodating rather than unyielding attitude
- Ask artists how they prefer to communicate – email, phone, Skype, another way?
- When meeting with an artist, ensure the place you're meeting them in meets any access requirements they have
- Ask artists how they'd like to be presented or written about – some artists don't want to be referred to as 'disabled', some artists are keen to identify publicly as such, and it all depends on the context and situation
- [Pay disabled artists fairly](#). It's common for disabled artists to incur more costs than non-disabled artists in many aspects of their work and lives, yet disabled artists are less likely than non-disabled artists to be paid fairly for their labour. Remember too that disabled people are also far more likely than non-disabled people to experience unemployment, low income and poverty

Presenting Work Accessibly

- Subtitle any film work that includes speech, or make a transcript available if that's not possible
- We recommend a hang height of 135cm (centre of work) to be accessible
- Consider plinth height too – around 80cm is normally best, unless the work itself is very tall in which case you'll need a shorter plinth

- You may want to stick tactile strips on the floor around a plinth or floor-based work to illustrate its location non-visually
- It's important to provide Audio Description – a vocal summary of the visual information a sighted viewer would receive from the work – for all the work included. Upload each work's audio description as an individual sound file to Audioboom, which is a more accessible platform for visually impaired users than Soundcloud, and point visually impaired visitors to this. For more information, see our [resource on art and audio description](#)
- Allow at least 1.3 metres between furniture, plinths and other objects for people who may be using mobility equipment to move around easily and safely
- If you're also showcasing the work included online, make sure you alt text any images of work, or provide a description of them – this would be roughly the same as Audio Description

Keeping the Space Itself Accessible

- Prop heavy doors open
- If a ramp is needed to access any areas, like raised platforms, hire one in rather than building or improvising one – it's more expensive but ensures it meets safety and usability regulations
- Remember that even small steps or raised areas, for example in doorways, will require a ramp.
- Provide chairs or benches where people can sit to engage with the work
- Have a comfortable quiet room or area where people can both sit and lay down (think sofa or floor cushions)
- Have water bowls available in the space or just outside for guide dogs to refresh themselves, and know where best to point those looking for a spot where guide dogs can relieve themselves
- Make sure invigilators, front of house staff, security and other staff members who'll be interacting with visitors have had Disability Equality Training if possible; if not make sure you brief them as best as you can
- Allow visitors to make noise if they wish to, and let invigilators and staff know too
- Brief staff on how to evacuate not just safely but accessibly in case of emergency

Graphics, Hand-outs and Interpretation

- Have large print versions (with size 18 font) of all print material available on request

- Providing [plain language](#) and [easy-read](#) versions of print material is also recommended – think multiple reading levels and methods
- Artwork interpretation labels should be placed at an accessible height (we recommend 1.1 metres) and should be at least size 14 font
- If there will be flash photography or flashing lights at the exhibition or an accompanying event, make this clear on a sign at the entrance to the space

Marketing and Comms

- Make it clear on your website and any Facebook events or other listings what the accessibility and access provisions will be, and be as specific as possible – don't just say "this event is accessible"
- Give both a phone number and an email address through which anyone with access-related questions can get in touch with you. Stuck for wording? Just say "If you have any access requirements you would like us to be aware of, please contact ... and let us know"
- If your exhibition's accessible, send it to us at marketing@shapearts.org.uk and we'll be happy to circulate it through our social media channels and e-newsletter
- If your Private View is ticketed or guest list only, make it clear that if someone needs to bring an access assistant or support worker they can do so
- Present print information like flyers accessibly – don't layer small text over busy images or patterns, for example
- Use language that is informed by the [Social Model of Disability](#)

Setting up for the Private View

- Have plenty of chairs available for those who would like to sit or rest
- High / 'poseur' tables and bar stools aren't accessible for many disabled people – use regular height tables and chairs instead
- The bar needs to be accessible too. Make sure it's not too high for wheelchair users or people of short stature (as many bars are) – no higher than 80cm
- Have multiple options available for glasses / drinking receptacles, and make sure you have straws available for anyone who requires one
- Book Sign Language Interpreters, not just if there will be a talk or speeches, but also just to be present in case they are needed, and book them well in advance. Try an organisation such as [Remark](#)
- Everyone wants their PV to be very busy, but it's important to manage capacity – if the room is completely jam-packed with people and noise this will render it inaccessible for a high number of reasons. There are solutions: consider moving some seating or even the bar outside if this is a possibility so that guests can

congregate there, or stagger entry so that you have a relaxed / quiet / accessible viewing which starts just before things kicks off fully

- Because PVs can get overwhelming and stressful, if you have access to a separate area with comfortable seating, consider using it as a ‘quiet area’

Additional Events

- Consider holding a BSL and/or lipspeaking tour (and remember that you’ll have to book Interpreters well in advance) – a guided tour of the exhibition led by a curator or organiser talking about each of the works, interpreted by a Sign Language Interpreter and/or Lipspeaker, specifically for hearing impaired audiences
- Consider holding a touch / Audio Description tour for visually impaired audiences – a guided tour of the exhibition led by a curator or organiser, incorporating touch of (some of) the works as well as live Audio Description of the works provided by an organisation such as [VocalEyes](#), specifically for visually impaired audiences
- If you’re organising any artist talks, discussions or ‘in conversation’ events, remember to provide access at these too – book BSL interpreters and a palantypist / live captioning (which also gives you the added bonus of being able to get a transcript of what was said afterwards). [Stagetext](#) provide a palantypist / live captioning service
- If you’re holding an event with a seated audience, leave plenty of space for wheelchair users
- If these events are paid, make it clear that disabled guests do not need to pay to bring a support worker or access assistant. Have an option available at the ticket booking stage for disabled guests to book a free place for a support worker or access assistant

Shape offers access audits, consultancy and Disability Equality Training to the arts sector to engender diversity and inclusion as all levels of an organisation’s structure – [click here](#) for information.

If you would like to give feedback on this resource or if you have any questions please [contact us](#).