

Co-Creation with Disabled People: strategies for involving disabled individuals in the design and delivery of cultural and leisure programmes

Intro and background

Liberty is the Mayor of London's flagship festival for deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists.

Launched in 2003, Liberty has played a key role in raising the profile of the disability arts sector. Since 2019, it has been presented as part of London Borough of Culture, a competition where every 2 years a London borough takes the title and celebrates the culture and creativity of its people and places. – inspired by the European and UK Cities of Culture idea,

Liberty is a partnership model between the GLA, the host borough and a creative delivery partner. For 2025, it has been Wandsworth Council and CRIPTic Arts.

We also have a Liberty Advisory Group which provides strategic advice to us all.

To get to where we are, with a well-attended and well-regarded advisory group, we had to overcome a number of challenges including the accessibility of our recruitment and on-boarding processes.

Any of the following guidance is good practice for any advisory group, whether the members are disabled or not. Selwyn Goldsmith, an architect and disability rights campaigner (himself a wheelchair user) invented the dropped kerb in the sixties, and which is now widely used across the world. This idea benefitted others like parents with pushchairs for example – so his ideas of designing for disabled people shifted to this idea of universal design – ideas that actually help lots of people.

Recruitment

The Group is made up of eleven expert representatives from the D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent creative sector, who guide the vision for the festival which is:

We spotlight and celebrate the very best of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists in London as part of a joyful, radically inclusive festival where everyone is welcome.

Members understand we want Liberty to

- model best practice
- embed long term positive local change in the host boroughs
- make sure disabled and neurodivergent artists have the opportunity for development and growth

Key things to consider when recruiting:

- Think about what professional and lived experience you need represented on your board and group, and consider how you'll articulate that in a clear and inclusive way.
- Spend some good time developing a comms plan for the recruitment. How will you find the good people you need? Talk to your disabled and neurodivergent partners and identify which networks they could share the opportunity with. Secure some budget to advertise in relevant disability arts publications.

- Create a recruitment pack with comprehensive info about the role, including a terms of appointment and a terms of reference (that would include things like remuneration, frequency and format of meetings, time commitment, responsibilities of the group). Make these available as a BSL video and an Easy Read document.
- Hold live webinars, with a BSL interpreter and Live Captioner, to present more information about the role, talk about how to apply and answer any questions from prospective candidates. One of these webinars could be recorded and added to your website.
- Create a simple application process - we asked candidates to answer five questions, which could be presented in a number of ways – as a written document, as a recorded video or a recorded audio.
- Allow plenty of time for applications – our opportunity was 7-8 weeks in the field. Have a named contact for questions.
- Five people separately read and assessed the applications, including people with lived experience of disability and neurodiversity.

On-boarding

The Liberty Advisory Group is a non-statutory group but we still needed to go through quite a rigorous on-boarding process. This meant we asked for a lot of information from candidates.

We created an on-boarding road-map, which set out what information we'd require and why we needed it.

This was shared as part of the recruitment pack, so people knew what was coming. This is important – it helps people make informed decisions about whether or not they want to apply.

For example, one element of our on-boarding was that candidates needed to go through an adverse media check. We do these as we want people who work with us to be aware that things they might have posted publicly before, in a non-political environment, may be picked up by the media and used against them. And obviously we don't want them to have that negative experience.

The roadmap also set out what the process would be for collecting the information we needed and how we would use it. The key thing is not to assume that people know what you are talking about – we are often nervous about stating the obvious – but it's super important to communicate things well.

Remuneration

In order to attract and retain a diverse mix of people who best represent London, we were keen to offer a voluntary stipend and cover for travel and access costs to our Members.

Many of our group are freelance, some are students, many have caring responsibilities. We wanted to recognise and value their time and contribution.

In line with other boards, and having done some wider sector research, we secured budget to allow for £50 per hour (for each meeting of the Group, of which there are 4 a year – we allow 2 hours preparation, 2 hours for the meeting, and then up to £150 for access/ travel – so a maximum of £350 per meeting per Member).

Two meetings a year are online and two in person – but always with a hybrid option.

It proved too complicated to try and manage this via our public sector finance system and our external provider that looks after temporary and agency workers. We are working to address this.

Instead, for now, we work with a third-party organisation who manage the payments on our behalf for a small fee. We make it clear that we can't advise on how payments might affect individual Members' benefits and tax liabilities.

Ongoing engagement

We set meeting dates a year in advance.

We send out agenda and papers 4 weeks in advance of each meeting.

In each 2-hour meeting we build in a comfort break; we don't require people to have their cameras on, unless speaking.

We share notes and actions – rather than full minutes – back with Members within a week of the meeting. This is super important – this feedback loop.

All members were asked to share an access rider with us at the start – so we understood their needs.

Some of our Members were very familiar with these, others not so much. You could create a simple template to help people; there are lots available online. Not everyone likes them – they can be different for different work situations. But broadly, they have worked for us. They are confidential documents and we treat them as such.

We plan to check in about these riders regularly – as things change for people. We'll offer to do this over email or over the phone, or in person, depending on what people need. These check-ins form part of an ongoing assessment of how things are working, as this is a journey of improvement for us.