

EQUITY CASTING GUIDE FOR DEAF, DISABLED & NEURODIVERSE DANCERS



EQUITY

INTRODUCTION

The UK has an extremely rich community of talented and experienced dance artists who identify as Deaf, disabled, and/or neurodivergent. You will find them working across all areas of the sector: as dancers, choreographers, teachers, company directors, and beyond.

Many of these artists face significant barriers to working as fully as they would like to in the industry. These attitudinal, infrastructural and environmental barriers are dealt with on a daily basis, and take a disabled artist extra time, energy, and organisation which their non-disabled colleagues do not need to expend.

Most of these artists will have experienced discrimination in their workplace, within their educational institutions and training, and throughout the process of finding work, being hired, and fulfilling contracts.

This guide was created to help you think about and address what you can do to remove barriers across your entire creative process from beginning to end.

A commitment to finding Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse talent and supporting how they work best is at the heart of an inclusive workplace. This does not need to be complicated, expensive or time-consuming. By embedding accessible practices within your working process from the start, it can become second nature, allowing you to engage with a wider circle of artists and to expand your audience.

Deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse artists are highly skilled and experienced. Welcoming a range of perspectives and discovering different work processes enriches your work and long-term artistry, allowing you to discover new movement vocabulary and widen the range of stories your work can tell. Beyond disability alone, representation of many perspectives and lived experiences enrich the art form of dance and reflect our society more accurately, keeping your work current and progressing the art form.

Equality Act

In the United Kingdom (UK) the primary piece of legislation that protects workers from discrimination, including on the basis of disability, is the Equality Act (2010). In broad terms the Act states that it is unlawful to discriminate against someone on the basis of their disability when you are offering work, or during work.

To discriminate in essence means to treat someone less favourably due to their disability than you would someone without a disability. Typically this is denying someone the opportunity to gain work.

This guide actively encourages producers and companies across the UK dance sector to avoid discrimination by working through this guide, and seeking further advice from Equity, and working strategically to ensure that any discriminatory barriers to gaining work are removed.

Guidance on the Act for producers and employers is here:

[**https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/disability-discrimination**](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/disability-discrimination)

[**https://www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work**](https://www.acas.org.uk/disability-at-work)

It is important to underline that, where a dance company or producer has historically not worked sufficiently

with dancers who are Deaf, disabled or neurodiverse, you can lawfully undertake positive action measures to address this. This includes: i) stating a commitment to work with deaf, disabled and neurodiverse dancers in casting breakdowns; ii) developing a specific initiative to work with deaf, disabled and neurodiverse dancers to help support their opportunities to gain work. Equity is keen to support and advise on positive action measures.

There is more detail about positive action measures within the Equality Act here:

[**https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/employers-what-positive-action-workplace**](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/advice-and-guidance/employers-what-positive-action-workplace)

Access

Access is removing barriers to make a fairer workplace. Access is supporting everyone to do their best work, which in turn creates an excellent artistic product.

How we create access is an active and ongoing conversation, not a checklist which is finished, or solved once an artist is hired. It is not universal, it's about the individual. One key to providing the best access support is open communication, from the beginning to the end of your process.

Many artists are confident in communicating about their access

needs, while others may find disclosing their access needs sensitive, but the responsibility lies with you, the employer, to initiate and sustain this conversation.

Unlimited have some good resources here:

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk>

Access needs across a creative team may be conflicting — what is accessible for one person may cause barriers for another. Do as much as you can to support in every instance. If it feels tricky to meet everyone's needs fully, don't give up, look for solutions with your team, be realistic about when access needs can't be met and try to flex to support the entire team as much as possible.

There is no ceiling to accessible practice, there are always new processes, technologies, and tools to learn about. No one person holds all expertise, it is an ongoing learning process which everyone needs to be part of. Access is not only the territory of disabled people: every person has access needs and some differ considerably to others.

Accessible Work Methods

The following suggestions are not exhaustive but starting points. They come directly from a range of disabled artists who contributed to this guide.

Do

- Check your intention: why do

you want to work with a disabled artist? Is it only about visual representation/performance inclusivity/"optics"? Treat each artist with respect, and do not employ people as a tokenistic gesture.

- Ask what access support you can offer throughout the working period: in an audition call-out, during an audition, in the contracting stage, during the rehearsal process and during performances.
- Approach each artist as the expert of their own body and needs. Give them a platform/opportunity to show themselves at their best and be curious to find out what they can offer as unique individuals.
- Use open language: e.g. speak about movement qualities, ideas, images, not only body-part specific.
- Open your choreography: create movement tasks which give space for the dancer's interpretation and movement, vocabulary rather than copying and executing given movement. If using set material, offer options and be open to each artist's translation, for example, the material could be done at different speeds, levels, etc.
- Tip: simple communication such as, "You can adapt the phrase/material to suit your own body/pace of learning" opens possibilities and helps level the playing field.
- Encourage artists to do what they need to retain movement material: draw, make notes, take video, make

voice recordings.

- Be aware of the difference between being curious and exploring an artist's capabilities, and being fascinated by their impairment or use of adaptive technology. For example, you are working with an artist who uses a wheelchair, not a wheelchairs.
- Focus on the person.
- Talk to artists. Dancers want to be challenged, within their capabilities. Don't be afraid to ask for more, give specific notes on what you're looking for, and listen when artists say they are at their maximum capacity. Be as rigorous as you would be with a non-disabled dancer, while respecting the dancer's needs.
- Remember: when you've met one disabled dancer, you've met...one disabled dancer! Different artists with the same impairment will all have different ways of moving, experiences, skill sets, personalities, and will each offer you something unique.

Don't

- Ask about a disabled artist's medical history (unless they disclose it to you in order to work safely). Don't ask dancers to explain the history of their impairment to you or to anyone on the team. Many disabled artists experience invasive questions, medicalisation, and fascination with their impairment through their daily life. Be a powerful ally!
- You should not ask questions about any matter related to a protected

characteristic (age, pregnancy, sexual orientation etc.) at audition stage. Any question related to a protected characteristic post-casting must be wholly relevant and you should provide information on why that question is being asked.

- Use outdated or offensive language.

Finding Talent

Follow these established companies and organisations to help find talent and to network on good practice in casting and working with Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent talent:

- Stopgap Dance Company
- Candoco Dance Company
- Disability Arts Online
- Attitude is Everything
- Unlimited
- Graeae
- Corali
- Deaf Men Dancing
- Deafinitely Theatre

Before the Audition

Level up

- Strive for representative voices throughout your organisation at every level: audition panel, board members, employees, freelance creative team, etc.
 - Are there Deaf, disabled, neurodiverse, LGBTQ+, and a range of ethnic backgrounds represented in your organisation at all levels?

Create your access budget

The Access to Work (AtW) fund exists to cover the costs of support for a worker

who is Deaf or disabled to find work and stay in work. Equity's specialist Tax and Welfare advice service provides specialist support to members on accessing AtW funding.

See: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

Call out

- Actively encourage applications from dancers who identify as Deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent. Be clear with the role you are casting for. Is your project related to working with dancers with a specific impairment? Or is this role open to the range of people who identify as disabled?

- Think about your project. Could a disabled artist join your project, even if you didn't imagine this initially? What qualities are you actually looking for? Describe the role in terms of movement qualities, dance style, characteristics of a performer you are looking for (e.g. fluidity, musicality, lightness, athleticism, strong presence).

Specifying physical attributes dissuades many disabled artists from applying.

- Include key dates in your call out: when will dancers be notified they have been invited to audition? When and how will you communicate if they've got the job?

- Make your call out available in different accessible formats: Video with British Sign Language (BSL) and captioning, Audio Description, Large Print, Easy Read.

- Ensure your marketing is accessible.
- Offer a variety or combination of

options for applicants to send you their information: CV, written material, video, voice recording.

- Keep language simple and clear, keep the materials you ask for streamlined.

- Leave plenty of lead-up time for applications. Short notice can be a disabling barrier.

- Where possible, offer reading material in various fonts, font sizing and colours for those with visual impairment or/and learning disabilities.

Experience:

- be aware that many disabled artists enter the profession through non-traditional routes. Many artists have faced barriers and been denied access to studying dance in many settings, including higher education institutions, and have therefore developed their own bespoke movement techniques and learned on the job. How can you articulate what sort of experience and qualities you are looking for, besides completion of a dance degree or the frequent "three years' professional experience?"

- Collect data and analyse it. Who are you employing? A lack of representation of disabled artists within your previous work, your company members, and your promotional materials, can dissuade disabled artists from applying. If you have worked inclusively in the past, how can you share this? If you have not, be transparent about this fact and that you are learning as you enter new territory.
- If you are auditioning large numbers

of people, could early rounds be done digitally? This can be a tool which saves time and energy for many artists and can help level the playing field.

For many disabled artists, the energy required to continuously apply for different opportunities, to travel to and attend an audition, can be especially draining. Invite people you are really interested in meeting, who have a real chance at getting the job.

See Unlimited's accessible recruitment best practice:

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/ten-top-tips-for-accessible-recruitment/>

Audition Planning

- Actively ask invited artists about their access needs when you invite them to audition. Some artists use a personal access rider, and some don't. You can ask for these or any other access needs you can support. Be prepared to follow through and carry accessible practices all the way to the project's completion.

- Hold the audition in an accessible space.

- Work with the venue to make the environment as accessible and comfortable as possible. Consider, for example, waiting areas, changing areas, studios, accessible toilets, and break areas.

- If warm-up or technique class will be lead, make sure it is accessible. If in doubt, hire a teacher with experience of inclusive teaching practices to lead the warm-up.

- When inviting artists to audition, send a detailed plan of what to expect from the audition. For example, how long will individuals be asked to move in each session? How long are break times? What kind of creative material will they be asked to explore?

- It's also important to consider practical needs such as access to the venue and facilities available on site, where to find food, water, accessible toilets, parking, public transport, and taxi options.

- Be transparent about what access needs you can support and any you are unable to meet. Look for solutions to meet as many needs as possible. For example, if an artist needs a taxi from the nearest station, you could cover the cost.

- Plan the timing of your audition in a supportive way. E.g. allow for enough time for toilet breaks, filling water, and rest. Some disabled artists may need more time for this. Be aware that long days or multiday auditions can be a barrier for dancers with fatigue and chronic pain conditions.

At the audition

- Brief your entire audition team/panel on access support requirements before the dancers arrive. Make sure this is taken care of in advance so artists don't need to explain themselves when they arrive and can focus on doing their best dancing.

- Lay out the plan of the day clearly and simply. Check if your planning meets everyone's needs.
- Create an open environment and have check-ins throughout the day so people can share their needs. Access needs can change throughout a work day. Dancers do not always disclose their needs for fear of being denied a job. It's important that you listen and adjust activities accordingly.

Engagement

- As you hire a dancer and move towards the rehearsal process, have a more in-depth conversation about access. Ask if an artist uses a personal access rider. This is a document detailing their access support which can be shared with the team as needed.
- Update your project planning according to your team's access needs.
- Hire access workers to support your project, for example BSL interpreters, mental health support, touring assistants. Remember that the Access to Work fund exists to cover some of or all of the costs of providing access to work.

In the Rehearsal Studio

- Hold rehearsals in an accessible space.
- Remember that access is an ongoing conversation, not a checklist which is finished. People's needs can change through the day

and work process, and may be different on different days. Make a habit of checking in frequently.

- Lay clear guidelines for respectful and supportive engagement across the team. Do not tolerate any level of bullying or abusive behaviour in the workplace.

- Consider access when designing costumes, set, lighting, the backstage and performance environment. Work collaboratively with the entire team —this can be an exciting opportunity to innovate.

- Keep questions practical, connected to movement and working practice, don't assume what a dancer is or is not capable of, e.g. "could you do that movement with more energy?" "Can I put more/less of my weight onto your shoulder at this moment?"

- Be mindful of the artist's role — they are not your representative for the disabled experience. Their impairment isn't a source of information or expertise. Allow them to do their role without the added pressure of being a consultant if they are not paid for that as well.

The Social Model of Disability

As Graeae put it, "Under the Social Model of disability, people are disabled by barriers within society, rather than being 'victims' of their impairments or conditions."

The Social Model considers disability as the result of oppressive and

discriminatory barriers of attitude, infrastructure and environment in society. This is in contrast to the Medical Model of Disability which views disability through a medical lens and considers the disabled person as the ("suffering") patient or recipient of treatment.

The Social Model puts the onus on organisers and providers to consider the ways in which structures and ableist systems create barriers that might disable people, and to examine ways in which these barriers can be removed.

Examples of barriers include:

Environmental: lack of ramps, easy-to-read information or lifts.

Attitudes: prejudices, assumptions, stereotypes, bullying and hate crimes.

Organisational: inflexible practices, policies or procedures.

This guide works from the Social Model of disability.

For a more in-depth explanation, visit:

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

Terminology

Deaf, Disabled, and neurodiverse are considered by many people experiencing disabling barriers as identity labels that artists may or may not claim. Not all artists with impairments identify as disabled. If in doubt, it is best to ask artists which terms they prefer to use, and to listen for

which words they use when referring to themselves.

Language

Language is constantly evolving, and some terminology used in the past is no longer considered acceptable.

The dance sector doesn't uniformly agree on the usage of language.

Familiarise yourself with current linguistic changes and be aware of ableist slurs (such as 'lame') which you may use without realising. Many disabled artists will have experienced abusive language throughout their lives and even accidental usage can trigger past trauma. When in doubt, ask the artist how they like to be referred.

Make sure your language is:

- Person centred
- Situation specific

Further information (CW: offensive language):

<https://graeae.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Graeae-Media-Language-Guide.pdf>

The Artistry of Access

Many companies and artists have developed innovative and beautiful ways of embedding accessible practices within their performances. This can be an exciting creative avenue to explore.

Some of the most commonly used tools are:

- BSL interpretation
- Captioning

- Audio Description
- Touch and familiarisation
- Construction and level access (for stage design and audience space)
- Relaxed atmosphere

More information:

Access and Aesthetics:

British Council:

<https://youtu.be/Az3RtN0ExMY>

Relaxed performances:

Battersea Arts Centre:

<https://bac.org.uk/relaxed-venue/>

Touretteshero:

<https://www.touretteshero.com/2016/03/16/relaxed-performances-the-faqs/>

Links and Resources

Equity:

Please note Equity has the following guides and best practice that you can find on our website:

- *Guide to Good Practice with BSL in the Arts*
- *Access to Work Briefing Sheet*
- *Accessible Auditions and Self-Tapes for Deaf and Disabled Talent*
- *An Adapter-Plug Guide to Autistic Artists*
- *Discrimination at Work*

Other Guides and Advice:

Please note Unlimited has a wide range of guides and advice you can access on their website.

<https://weareunlimited.org.uk/>

Access to Work Guide (for Artists and orgs)

<https://disabilityarts.online/projects/access-to-work-guide/>

Templates and Example Documents:

Access Rider Template from

Alexandrina Hemsley

<http://alexandrinahemsley.com/resources/access-rider-open-template/>

From Greenwich Dance:

<https://www.withoutwalls.uk.com/resources/without-walls-outdoor-arts-festivals-and-events-access-guide-2020/>

From The Big Hack:

<https://bighack.org/subtitles-closed-captions-transcripts-and-accessibility/>

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Scope

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