

# Curating for Change

Disabled People  
Leading in  
Museums

Esther Fox and  
Jane Sparkes



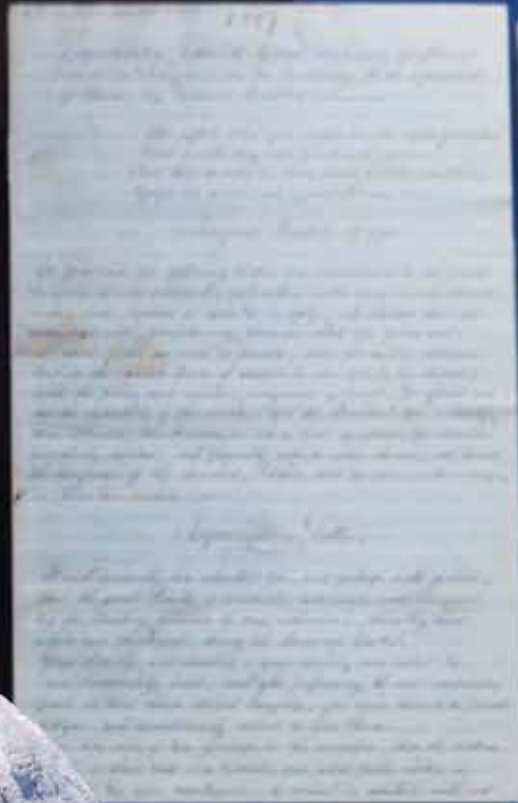
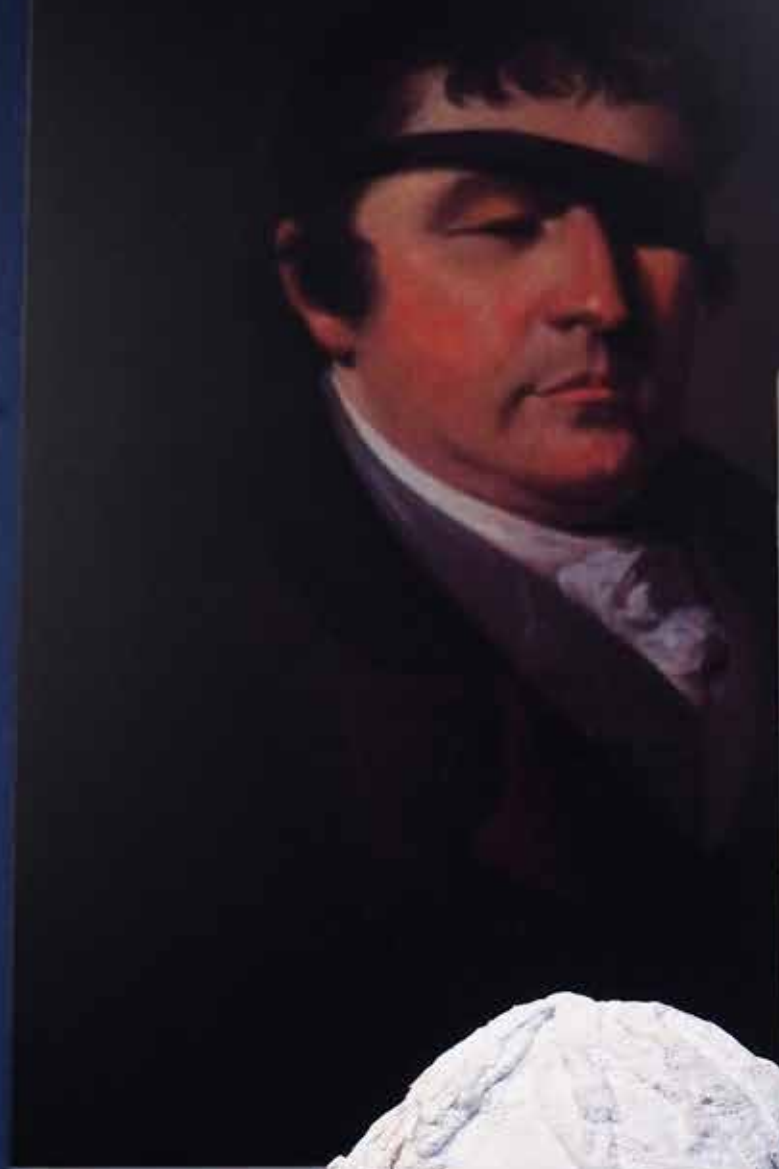
Art Fund\_



attention of the blind from their unhelpful  
less a burden to themselves.

And, Lastly, that they be supplied with  
of religious knowledge, as may recon-  
situation, and teach them to be easy

Founder of the School, 1797



## Edward (1756-18

Rushton went to  
ship. While aboard  
Queen's, an African  
when the ship ran  
out against the tide  
on board. Rushton  
voyage, leaving his

Returning to Liverpool  
awareness of the  
He believed that  
correcting mistakes  
of the ignorant  
to persons.

Image by the artist  
Edward Rushton (1756-18

Image by the artist  
Edward Rushton (1756-18

### Letter from Rushton to George Washington, 20 February 1797

'Shame! That man should be deemed  
the property of man or that the name of  
Washington should be found among the list of  
such proprietors.' Rushton's letter criticised  
President Washington for being a leader of  
a country that proclaimed liberty but also a  
slave owner. The impact of the letter is hard  
to know, as Washington never replied, but  
it shows Rushton was passionately interested  
in the rights of humanity.

Courtesy of British Library, Manuscript Society.



Tactile bust of Edward Rushton with his portrait behind. Exhibited as part of Accentuate's exhibition in partnership with **The Blind School: Pioneering People and Places, Museum of Liverpool.**

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Art Fund\_



HERITAGE  
FUND

# About

Accentuate challenges perceptions of disability and provides life changing opportunities for D/deaf and disabled people to participate and lead within the cultural sector. Accentuate originally launched in December 2009 as the 2012 Legacy Programme for the South East. We have since gone on to expand the reach of our work and now, in partnership with others, deliver programmes that bring about lasting positive change for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people right across England.

The three key priority areas for Accentuate are heritage, the arts and research. We seek to improve the understanding of disability, particularly from a lived experience perspective.

Accentuate is a specialist programme operating within the organisation Screen South, a not-for-profit Cultural Development Agency with digital creativity at its heart.

This report was written after a consultation period with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, museums, and wider museum and disability sector organisations.

[www.accentuateuk.org](http://www.accentuateuk.org)

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# Introduction

In March 2020, through its pioneering Accentuate Programme, Screen South was awarded development funds by National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) to plan Curating for Change, an England-wide initiative which seeks to create a sea change in the way D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are represented within our museums. Subsequently, we were successful in achieving an Art Fund award in order to establish our Museums Strategic Disability Network to help drive change across the sector.

Currently there are 14.1 million disabled people living in the UK. 19% of working age adults are disabled (Family Resources Survey, 2018-19). More than 4.1 million disabled people are in work. However, disabled people are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as non-disabled people (ONS Labour Force Survey, April to June 2020). The inequalities are further accentuated within the museum sector workforce, with only 4% defining as D/deaf or disabled. To largely ignore D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in relation to how heritage is managed and accessed is a missed and significant opportunity.

The rich and diverse history of D/deaf and disabled people is rarely exhibited in museums, with few objects in collections reflecting the history of disabled people. The result of this absence is that museum visitors remain in ignorance of a vital part of common heritage that features D/deaf and disabled people. Further investigation, and extensive conversations with our museum partners, highlighted the lack of D/deaf and disabled people working in museums, especially in the area of curating.

Without D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in curatorial roles, the challenges are significant in terms of telling authentic narratives that relate to disability history. In addition, there are barriers in the ways in which disabled people experience museums. Exhibitions and displays are predominantly designed for 'normal' bodies, with minimal consideration given to how D/deaf,



disabled and neurodivergent people will navigate and/or experience them.

Museums are keen to diversify both their workforce and audiences, yet they want and need additional specialist support to do so. This was evidenced by over 30 museums responding to Accentuate's call to host four of the Curating for Change (CfC) curatorial placements. This has encouraged us to extend the opportunity, in that we now have an England-wide programme with over 20 confirmed Partner Museums for Fellows and Trainees.

Subject to successful funding applications, we will deliver eight paid Fellowships and eight paid Traineeships for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people wanting to pursue a career in curating, in partnership with our museum hosts. These placements will begin to embed change within museums, generating learning to be shared more widely across the sector. It will also provide a much-needed platform for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent curators to demonstrate their skills and unique insights, encouraging a new lens through which to consider heritage narratives and ways to engage audiences.

During the consultation and planning process for Curating for Change, we spoke to a wide range of museums, sector organisations, disabled people's organisations, D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people working in museums or wanting to pursue a career in museums. This report is a summary of this consultation, highlighting the barriers disabled people are facing if wishing to pursue a career in museums.

**Left:** Visitor exploring tactile map as part of *The Blind School: Pioneering People and Places, Museum of Liverpool*.

## Key findings include:

- ▶ Almost all of the D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people who took part in our consultation workshops expressed the positive opportunity Covid-19 has presented in terms of flexible remote working, interview practices and digital engagement for audiences.
- ▶ The most cited reasons for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people not making progress in terms of pursuing a career in museums were: inaccessible recruitment practices; lack of flexibility as to working patterns; and unnecessary requirements (e.g. driving licence, ability to lift objects), that could be met through other provision such as Access to Work.
- ▶ The main reason our Partner Museums wanted to take part in Curating for Change was to increase their skills and expertise. More specifically, they hoped to: increase understanding of how to recruit D/deaf and/or disabled staff (94.1%); gain new skills regarding how to create fully accessible exhibitions and experiences (88.2%); and understand how to engage more D/deaf and/or disabled audience members (88.2%).
- ▶ Many of those disabled people's groups and disabled individuals surveyed stated they would like to see more of their heritage reflected in museum collections, exhibitions and events. In addition, they wanted to work more closely with museums to co-produce these outputs.

We are at a pivotal point, with possibilities for change across the museum sector which have not been seen before. Covid-19 has meant museums have needed to re-invent the ways in which they engage with audiences and, to a certain extent, their working practices. In parallel, the Black Lives Matter campaign has seen protesting in the streets over contested histories, demonstrating how critical heritage is in terms of identity, belonging and understanding each other.

This report begins to explore where we are now in terms of engaging D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people with museums and urges the sector to proactively consider ways to increase this engagement, capitalising on the momentous shifts that have occurred during the past year, and preventing regression towards the long-held status quo.

**Below:** Visitors looking into a display case of objects as part of *The Blind School: Pioneering People and Places, Museum of Liverpool*.



## SECTION 1

# The Consultation Process

## Who was involved

Between July 2020 and May 2021, Accentuate undertook extensive consultation, gathering baseline data around the representation of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in the museum sector. This consultation process explored museum workforces and the barriers disabled people face in starting or progressing their careers, as well as how disabled people engage with museums as audiences, or co-producers.

## Our Partner Museums:

- 1 National Railway Museum (part of the Science Museum Group)
- 2 Thackray Museum of Medicine
- 3 Museum of Liverpool
- 4 Black Country Living Museum
- 5 Pitt Rivers and Ashmolean Museums (joint placement)
- 6 Bristol Culture
- 7 Hastings Museum and Art Gallery
- 8 The Historic Dockyard Chatham
- 9 Cumbria Museum Consortium
- 10 Kettle's Yard and Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences (joint placement)
- 11 North Hertfordshire Museum
- 12 Nottingham Museums (Wollaton Hall)
- 13 Imperial War Museum
- 14 The Horniman Museum & Gardens
- 15 Colchester + Ipswich Museums
- 16 The Museum of English Rural Life



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## Wider Stakeholder Groups

We held conversations and meetings with 13 disabled peoples' and community organisations and a wide range of interested stakeholders, keen to support, or already leading interesting work in this area, including:

- ▶ The Museums Association
- ▶ Association of Independent Museums (AIM)
- ▶ VocalEyes
- ▶ DASH Arts
- ▶ Shape
- ▶ Museums Disability Collaborative Network (DCN)
- ▶ Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance
- ▶ Arts&Heritage
- ▶ British Museum
- ▶ Museum of London
- ▶ People's History Museum
- ▶ Norfolk Museums Service
- ▶ Leeds Museums and Galleries
- ▶ Museums Galleries Scotland
- ▶ Wellcome Trust
- ▶ The University of Leicester, Research Centre for Museums and Galleries.

## External consultants

We worked with several experienced external consultants to support the delivery of this consultation:

**Susan Potter**, who created our Evaluation Strategy;

**Scott Sullivan** who developed the Logic Model; and **Kate Smith** who produced our Digital Strategy.

We also worked closely with **Jessica Starns**, who has a background in working with museums and identifies as neurodivergent, providing valuable insights throughout the process of developing Curating for Change.



**Above:** Painting by disabled artist John Vine, Colchester + Ipswich Museums.



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## SECTION 1: The consultation process





## The process

The consultation process included:

- 5** online surveys delivered to:
- **Partner Museums in relation to workforce and audiences** (17 respondents);
  - **Partner Museums in response to their digital offer** (15 respondents);
  - **disabled people wanting to pursue a career in museums** (32 responses);
  - **disabled people already working in museums** (39 responses);
  - **disability/community groups already working with museums or who would like to** (40 responses).

**13** more detailed phone conversations with **disability-focussed groups and individuals**.

**3** consultation workshops with **D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people who already work in museums, or are interested in pursuing a career in museums** (total of 14 participants).

**170** **disability-focussed groups and individuals consulted in total.**

**Left:** Rachel Gadsden (in red top) with workshop participants at Stoke Mandeville – previous Accentuate project.

## SECTION 2

# Where we are now

*“In the context of a climate emergency, Black Lives Matter, and a global pandemic, the shifting habits of museum audiences provide a catalyst for change in the sector not seen since World War Two.” (UKRI)*

When we first conceived of Curating for Change in 2018, the presence of disabled people as part of the museum workforce – and the kinds of stories they might draw from collections – were the only ‘change agent’ element in our proposal.

However, since Covid-19 and the Black Lives Matter Movement, anything could be possible. The role of the curator, the format of exhibitions and events – alongside assumptions about where and how people should work – are shifting by the moment.



**Above:** Delegates at *Rethinking Disability Symposium, The Museum of Liverpool*.

## 2.1 The Digital Shift (excerpts taken from Kate Smith’s report)

Covid-19 has injected a level of uncertainty into the ways the sector will operate over the next two years, calling for us all to adapt. But we believe these changes, particularly in terms of digital engagement, could have the capacity to be positive for disabled people, both as museum staff and as visitors. A strong intervention now, to hold onto positive elements of change, and work in synergy with other forces (e.g. changing audience footfall and a concern for the environment), will help disabled people pursue a career path in the sector. However, if we do not hold to account museums and other cultural organisations to continue what has worked well, we will risk taking a considerable step backwards.

### Working from home

*“In terms of overworking and burn out, I think that there is this huge lack of flexibility in museum roles. Obviously, some of the roles, you have to be there in the museum dealing with objects. But, for example, days on end I have been stuck next to a computer looking at the database.”*

**workshop participant**

*“I have really enjoyed working from home, as I have still been able to work with colleagues, as we have meetings via Microsoft Teams. I think the experience of staff has varied, some of us really like it, others miss being in the actual same space as colleagues. I think for all we think retaining working from home at least part of the time in the long term is beneficial, so if someone had to work from home I think it is workable.”*

**Partner Museum survey**



**Left:** Delegate asking a question at *Rethinking Disability Symposium, The Museum of Liverpool*.

One of the most notable changes in working practices since the global pandemic is the necessary shift in people working from home. Repeatedly during our focus groups with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, they expressed feeling liberated in knowing that requests for more flexible working, or using tools such as Zoom, would have to be taken more seriously and seen as a viable option for at least part of the working week, when in the past these requests had been denied.

*“It has annoyed me quite a lot that now all the (job) interviews have been done over the phone with Covid, on Zoom, or Skype. Before that, there was that ‘ableism’ as some people call it, in that interviews over the phone are not good enough. Just a month or two later after that happened, everything was done over the phone and I lost an opportunity just because that employer didn’t understand that I didn’t want to be in bed for three days because of the sensory and motor issues of doing a six hour train ride!”*

**workshop participant**

*“I do hope that it has changed the way that people think about flexible working and what can be done at home. What can be done in different ways that were never allowed before. I am hopeful that will be a change.”*

**workshop participant**

## Professional development and remote learning

Previous barriers to learning and professional development for museum staff have arguably only been clarified following Covid-19 and the near universal move to online working. Issues have included:

- ▶ **Costs of training itself** – typically far higher as a live event. High-value, well-regarded courses from organisations such as MuseumNext and Culture24 have become less expensive, with higher attendance in their online forms.
- ▶ **The cost of travel** – partly because of the concentration of many events in London, but also the expense of travelling even between regional cities.
- ▶ **International conferences** – where staff status as well as costs are an issue in who is able to attend. It is only this year that some staff have been effortlessly able to attend global events for the first time. (The International Institute for Conservation is just one organisation that quadrupled conference attendance and attracted people from 80 countries in 2020 through moving online).

These may be issues for whole museums, where anecdotally even people in relatively high status roles have struggled to find the resources to attend professional meetings. Yet all of the barriers previously listed are compounded for disabled people who are more likely to be economically disadvantaged, and impacted by poor access provision on public transport, the uncertainty of what the reality will be at venues, and tiredness from long journeys.

Undoubtedly, those who previously attended live conferences have lost something in terms of networking opportunities and being able to pay full attention in a dedicated space – factors to be rightly valued and which should return. Simultaneously, there has been a large, invisible

## SECTION 2: **Where we are now**



**Above:** Delegates clapping at *Rethinking Disability Symposium, The Museum of Liverpool*.

group who attended with difficulty, rarely or never, who suddenly find the world of professional learning at their fingertips. Zoom – the central technology of the pandemic – has presented certain difficulties for lip-readers, yet has generally worked for D/deaf and disabled people, with adequate live captioning and British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation. On balance then, we believe there has been more benefit than loss in professional learning for many disabled people.

### **The future? Blended live/digital events**

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, museum professionals have been deluged with free learning opportunities, more especially around digital upskilling. Nevertheless, recent reports strike a note of caution:

- ▶ NLHF's Digital Attitudes and Skills for Heritage report ([summarised here](#)) points to the fact that cultural sector workers prefer to learn face to face, or from sharing with peers.
- ▶ Culture24's recent digital transformation report for Europeana ([summarised here](#)) also emphasises that instilling human confidence is vital – and that by implication, putting an already digitally nervous person alone in front of an online learning programme may be a recipe for disaster.
- ▶ However, Nesta's [Digital Acceleration report](#) – which particularly looks at skilling up the over 50s – points to a promising way forwards now being rolled out in Nordic countries. Here new learners are connected as a cohort, with human support through Zoom and Slack as well as interaction with AI chatbots, so that learning is a source of camaraderie, rather than isolation.
- ▶ In addition to this, museums and sector support organisations that have just discovered hundreds of new takers for their events have some inducement not to ditch their online channels.
- ▶ Emerging organisations such as [More Human](#) are also looking to make existing online events, classes and meetings easier to access – reducing the number of clicks it takes to sign up, and giving confidence to community groups, including those who are not digital natives.

However, we need to be alive to the possibility that an increasing move towards digital engagement may allow museums to believe they might provide a purely digital offer for disabled audiences, rather than address those physical barriers that inhibit a more equitable experience.

## 2.2 Barriers to participation

### Sector-wide barriers:

Our consultation highlighted that currently there are few people openly identifying as D/deaf, disabled or neurodivergent working at management or leadership level.

*“No [I don’t know of any D/deaf, disabled or neurodivergent managers or leaders in my organisation], and if there is they don’t speak openly about their condition which isn’t good for any organisation it makes people think there isn’t a place for them.”*

**workshop participant**

*“I am the only disabled person in my museum and I feel that.”*

**workshop participant**

The current lack of knowledge in the sector as to how best to support and nurture D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in the workforce is compounding under-representation and a lack of opportunities to progress and develop leadership skills. Without better understanding of the barriers disabled people face – and how to address those barriers – the sector will find it extremely difficult to tackle issues such as inaccessible recruitment processes, or creating supportive and accessible working environments. It is also important to acknowledge that if the sector is fearful due to lack of knowledge, it is unlikely to feel confident to proactively open up opportunities for disabled people to join their workforces.

Our Partner Museums gave the following responses to our survey, in terms of what they hoped to gain from taking part in Curating for Change:

- ▶ To be part of a network of organisations who are supportive of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent staff and audiences **100%**
- ▶ Increased understanding of how to recruit D/deaf and/or disabled staff **94.1%**
- ▶ To develop more supportive and inclusive working environments and practices **94.1%**
- ▶ To promote and increase the diversity of staff and audiences across the sector **94.1%**
- ▶ New skills regarding how to create fully accessible exhibitions and experiences **88.2%**
- ▶ New skills regarding how to engage more D/deaf and/or disabled audience members **88.2%**
- ▶ Increased understanding of how to nurture D/deaf and/or disabled people’s leadership potential **70.6%**

Building understanding and knowledge needs to happen at all levels of the organisation, with training not solely available to front-facing visitor services, yet working towards changing the whole culture of an organisation, right from the top.

As well as organisations understanding the necessity for equal treatment, it is crucial that D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent colleagues are empowered to stand up to malpractice, having the confidence, knowledge and skills to raise grievances.

## SECTION 2: Where we are now

*“One of my flatmates was on a traineeship for under-represented people at the museums... I think that some of them really struggled with going into an institution which just did not really know how to make them feel welcome. Structurally, they were not ready to have diverse people within those institutions. That can be really damaging I think. To be the only person of a certain identity experience to be working in a culture that does not know how to navigate that in a sensitive way.”*

**workshop participant**

### Barriers for individuals: Workforce

Our consultation confirmed that D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are facing numerous and wide-ranging barriers in starting or developing their careers. In addition to the broad challenges relating to representation of disability at leadership levels, a lack of knowledge and resulting discriminatory attitudes, those consulted highlighted the following:

- ▶ Fear of disclosure of impairments
- ▶ People unsure of how to start their career
- ▶ A lack of true entry level roles
- ▶ Lack of roles available, or progression after volunteering and work placements
- ▶ Location and travel requirements
- ▶ Lack of roles that allow for flexible working
- ▶ Exclusionary application and interview processes
- ▶ A culture of overwork across the sector
- ▶ Roles, particularly at entry level, excluding those unable to do particular tasks

- ▶ Low wages, impacts of payments and work on benefit entitlement, and an expectation that people will work for free
- ▶ Inaccessible workspaces
- ▶ Barriers relating to intersectionality and age
- ▶ Low levels of confidence and self-esteem
- ▶ Lack of community and network
- ▶ People not able to try different areas of work
- ▶ Impacts of Covid-19
- ▶ People not aware of museum careers

Included below are a selection of responses received in relation to the barriers faced by D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people wanting to pursue a career in museums:

*“Because I started telling employers in applications that I have got a disability, I’m suddenly not getting anything. I’ve been rejected from 41 jobs already! Only had three interviews. Whereas, before I started saying I have got a disability, I used to get the first job I applied to... It’s really very frustrating because nothing for me has changed, except the fact that now I want to have that safeguard by saying I have a disability.”*

**workshop participant**

*“There is a lack of any entry level roles. If they are entry level, they are not actually entry level. I have done an internship but it was only six/ seven months. That is not enough. I now am too experienced to go for any internships. But I am not experienced enough for any jobs in the sector.”*

**workshop participant**



*“If you want to be a gallery assistant or something like that, pretty much all of those jobs that I have looked at in the description says that you have to be able to stand for eight hours straight. Even if you want to start at that level, it is very difficult for people with mobility issues or chronic illnesses to even get in at that level. Because your stamina is prized as one of your skills or abilities when going for those kinds of jobs.”*

**workshop participant**

*“I applied for [a museum training scheme] and that was when I was very ill. I emailed them and said “You said that you wanted disabled people on this scheme, this is my disability, I would need these hours of flexibility to do it.” The reply I got was “No, you cannot do that, it is a full time position.”*

**workshop participant**

*“The work that was being done for that research project was in an office on the third floor of the building. There were no access options. I couldn’t get into that office and based on that alone, I couldn’t work on that project. I was instead put on a side project of entering postcodes into a database, in a café, with no assistance, no company, nothing. There was no discussion about any other options for me to be involved in any other projects within the museum... It was really sad because obviously it meant it was really demoralising for me and it meant that it didn’t go anywhere else. When it could have been the beginning of a really exciting period of my life and the beginning of new things for them as well!”*

**workshop participant**

*“Being somebody who cannot drive because of my disability. Something that I would really like to see change is organisations understanding of access to work. Access to work can fund your mobility...Organisations do not really seem to understand that. One thing that really bothers me is because I enjoy a lot of co-production and community engagement when you are specifically saying that you need a driver. You are cutting out a large part of the disabled community sometimes.”*

**workshop participant**

*“You don’t stop being able to change museums just because you turn 26. Life often isn’t “sorted” by the time you’re 26 either. And disabled people can also change Museums, in fact they’re likely to produce an even greater change as they offer representation for all ages for a population that’s entirely forgotten in recruitment.”*

**workshop participant**



**Above:** The controversial Wendy Collection Box of a girl asking for charity, soon to be recontextualised by **Black Country Living Museum**.

## SECTION 2: **Where we are now**

### **Barriers to participation: Audiences**

D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audience members are likely to face the following barriers in engaging with museums:

- ▶ Lack of representation of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people in exhibitions and displays
- ▶ Access on site
- ▶ Travel
- ▶ Costs
- ▶ Lack of access information

D/deaf and disability history stories and collections are rarely shared in museums, while those included are often interpreted by non-disabled staff, leading to exhibitions that do not reflect the authentic, lived experience of disabled people. This is compounded by a lack of collection policies and practices related to disability history, with objects remaining undiscovered due to poor cataloguing or the use of outdated terminology. D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people rarely see themselves represented positively in museum exhibitions and displays, resulting in the perception that museums are not about nor *for* themselves.

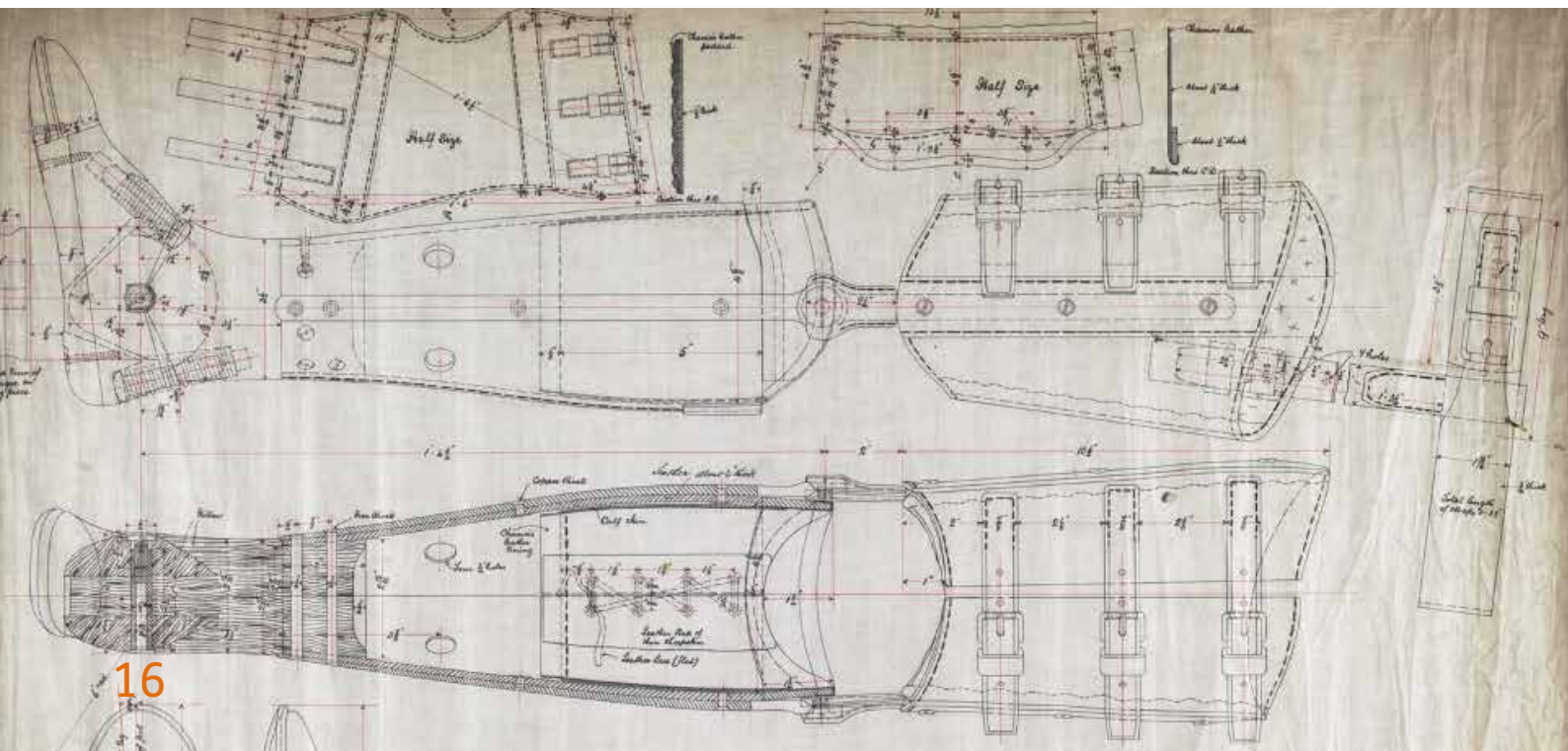
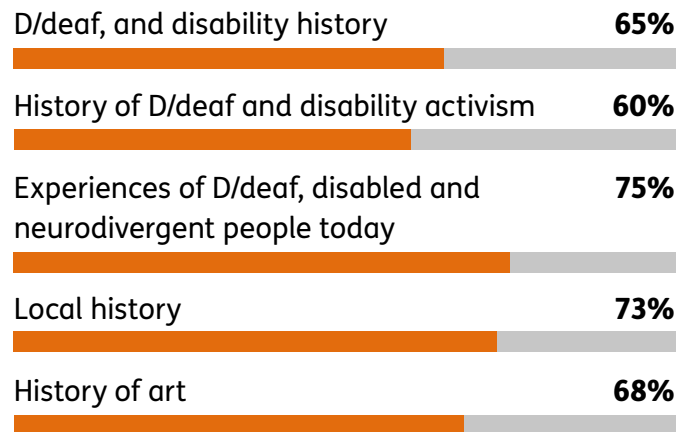
*“I would like to work in a genuine partnership as a freelance curator – or even as a volunteer – to develop projects relating to disabled people’s lives.”*

**survey respondent**

*“I’m specifically very interested in learning more about museum curation, and how museum collections display the biases of the people who create them.”*

**survey respondent**

In our survey of disabled people, when asked what areas of history were of interest to them, three of the five most popular responses related specifically to disability, demonstrating a clear appetite for better representation of these subjects:



*“All we hear about (due to the nature of history) are the mainstream... Show me myself, tell me about the underdogs, tell me that people with ADHD may have been the first explorers and the community’s shamen, or that amidst the exploitation of the freak show, that some disabled people found agency and were able to then build independent lives for themselves. Show me myself and the times that we DID survive and sometimes even thrive... Not only activists. And while you’re at it, let’s reclaim some of the disabled figures in history for ourselves. Lord Byron was physically disabled. Leonardo da Vinci likely had ADHD, Dorothy Miles, a Deaf woman we believe had bipolar. Show me where we thrived, not as inspiration, but as evidence that we have always been here, and that we have made vital contributions to the world that non-disabled people live in today.”*

**survey respondent**

*“Museums and galleries often feel like an extension of ‘state’ – from their signage to their covert behavioural codes. Whatever the subject, they frequently hold up the culture of a tiny minority (e.g. just Kings, landed gentry etc.) as representing the ‘whole’ of our country. They have a fetishism of ‘objects’ above ways of commemorating ‘experience’ or ‘community’ – which is not forward thinking. Experience and community are often relegated to a side room or children’s activity.”*



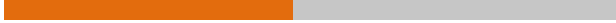


**survey respondent**

Given the opportunity to flag any other subjects of interest, three respondents told us that they were particularly interested in intersectional histories.

Our online survey of Partner Museums sought to ascertain the barriers to them engaging more D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audience members.

Left: Technical drawing of prosthetic leg, **National Railway Museum** Science Museum Group.

The survey asked ‘What prevents you from engaging with more D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audience members?’:

- ▶ Ten respondent museums reported **58.8%** ‘a lack of specialist contacts’ was a barrier to engagement  

- ▶ Ten respondent museums reported **58.8%** ‘a lack of understanding and/or skills to provide support’ was a barrier to engagement  

- ▶ Eight respondent museums reported **47.1%** ‘a lack of confidence within our organisation’ was a barrier to engagement  

- ▶ Seven respondent museums reported **41.2%** ‘a lack of finances for supporting additional needs of D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audiences’ was a barrier to engagement  

- ▶ Five respondent museums reported **29.4%** ‘a lack of space and/or facilities within our organisation’ was a barrier to engagement.  


There are noticeable similarities in terms of barriers to engagement for both workforce and audiences, in that our Partner Museums highlighted a lack of skills or specialist support as a significant issue. However, financial restraints also feature more highly in terms of engaging with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audiences.

# Recruitment

Time and time again, recruitment practices were raised as one of the major barriers in preventing people from progressing or beginning their careers. Equally, our Partner Museums told us that they are keen to employ more D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, yet struggle to attract and appoint applicants.

Application packs often speak of employers wanting to increase diversity, or being a 'Disability Confident' employer. However, the D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people consulted see little evidence of this in recruitment processes, despite the fact that those changes having an impact are clear and, frequently, very simple.

## 3.1 Barriers to recruitment

Our consultation work identified a wide range of barriers facing D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people at every stage of the museum recruitment process. These include:

### The requirement for qualifications

Many museum roles list specific qualifications, from undergraduate degrees to PhDs, as essential or desirable. However, D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are less likely to hold these qualifications.



Though many job descriptions state that equivalent experience will be accepted as an alternative, this is hard to quantify and, as stated in the Fair Museum Jobs Manifesto [1], the regular listing of a qualification as the very first requirement suggests that these are still held as the ideal, discouraging candidates without qualifications from applying. Many recent and current vacancies list qualifications as a requirement, including one curator role for which a PhD is listed as essential. Though organisations may believe a degree is the best way to show skills in research, writing and communication, these skills could in fact easily be evidenced through previous experience.

[1] [New Manifesto Explained: Qualifications Update – Fair Museum Jobs](#)

“Due to chronic illness (as well as financial issues), I am not able to apply for and complete a postgraduate degree in Archives, Library Studies, or Museum Studies. Applying for such a program has been my plan for several years, but due to worsening chronic illness and the ensuing need to put my health first, I have had to put those plans aside.”

survey respondent

Left and below: Visual minutes from Consultation Workshops 1 & 2. Created by Holly Langley, More Than Minutes.



## SECTION 3: Recruitment

### The requirement for significant paid or voluntary experience

Museum roles often require extensive experience for even entry level roles. At one large organisation, for example, a role that pays the Real Living Wage asks for previous experience in a paid trainee role, a position which in itself is highly competitive. With competition for paid roles being so high, volunteering is often the only way such experience may be gained. This is particularly challenging for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, for whom access issues, travel and finances can be insurmountable barriers to volunteering.

**Below:** Visual minutes from Consultation Workshop 3. Created by Holly Langley, More Than Minutes.

### Physical requirements

Many entry level role specifications include requirements such as the ability to stand for hours at a time, lift objects, climb ladders or drive. Recent examples of role descriptions of entry level posts that are gateways to career development in large heritage organisations include the following requirements:

- ▶ Essential: Excellent manual dexterity skills with a patient but efficient approach to completing tasks
- ▶ Essential: Able to lift objects and work at height and in confined spaces
- ▶ Desirable: Driving license
- ▶ The role requires standing and/or working outdoors for long periods as is necessary.



This reflects a lack of flexibility and accommodation in opening up roles to D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, as well as a lack of understanding of the support available via Access to Work. This is further compounded by some disabled people themselves being unaware of the support they are entitled to. Though these physical specifications become less important further up the career ladder, they are a particular barrier to those just beginning and unable to progress beyond this point.

## Application format

Many employers ask applicants to complete time-consuming application forms, a format inaccessible to many D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, preventing them from best demonstrating their experience and potential. Completing these forms can also be incredibly tiring, particularly when applicants are making multiple applications.

**Below:** Visual minutes from Partner Museums Network event. Created by Holly Langley, More Than Minutes.



## SECTION 3: Recruitment

“When you do have limited energy, you do not necessarily want to be filling out the identical form every single time. Can we not just upload our CV and covering letter?”

**workshop participant**

### Disability Confident scheme

The Disability Confident scheme, which encourages employers to recruit and retain disabled colleagues, on first glance appears to be a positive. The reality, as perceived by D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people, is very different. The application to be recognised as a Disability Confident employer requires very little action to improve accessibility and has minimal external regulation or verification. Though certain employers undoubtedly use the scheme to show their real commitment to change, the experience of those taking part in our workshops suggests many others display their badge with very little positive action to back it up, in the belief that holding the badge fulfils their accessibility obligations.





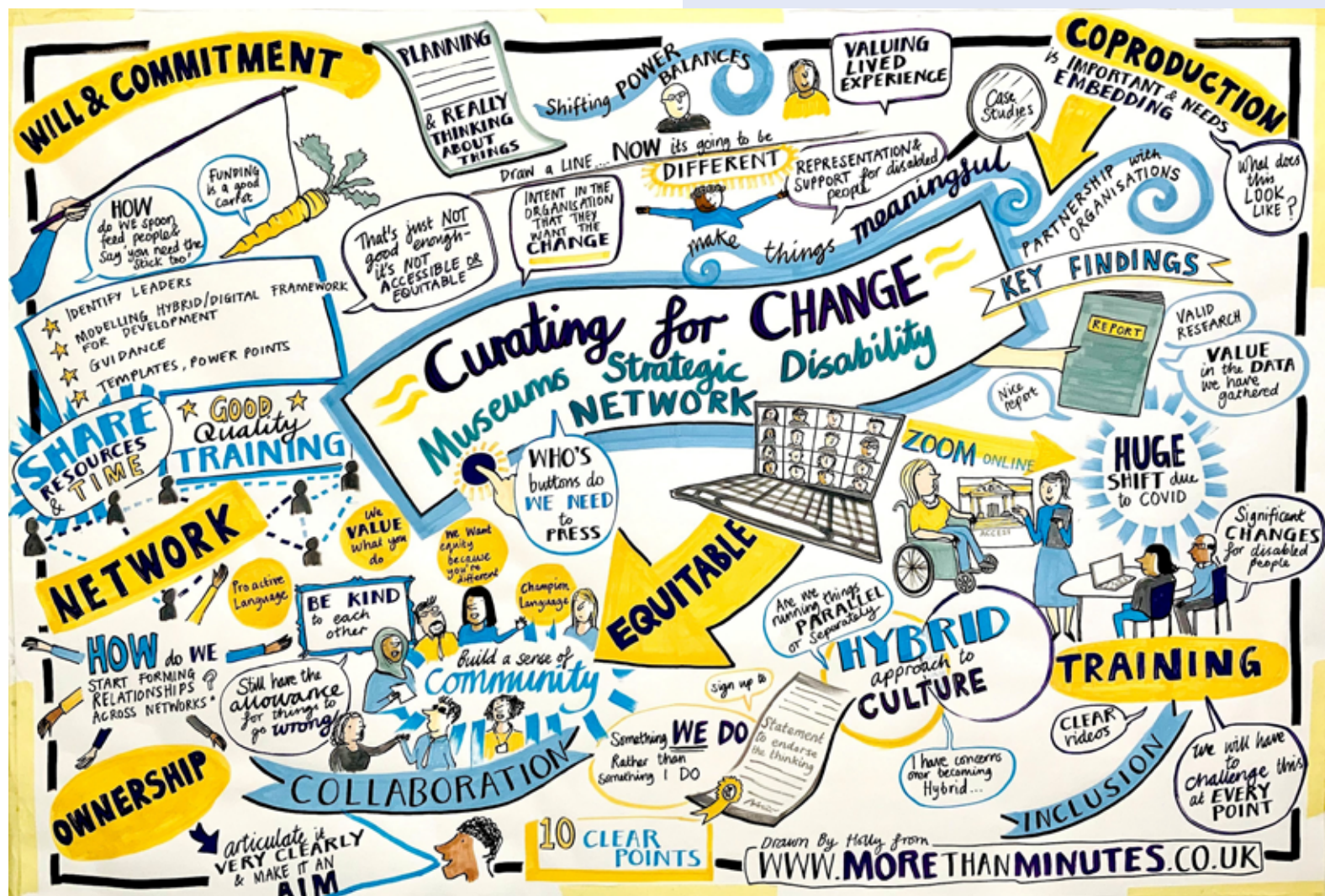
Disability Confident employers commit to interviewing disabled candidates who meet the role criteria. Those individuals we consulted who had been invited to interview under these circumstances felt they had been invited as part of a box-ticking exercise and were never seriously considered for the roles, wasting their time, energy and often travel expenses.

Our consultation suggested that D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people are very aware that the Disability Confident scheme is not always a sign of an inclusive employer. Several of those consulted suggested they actively avoid making applications to Disability Confident organisations at all.

## A lack of information on the role and organisation

Participants in our consultation workshops noted that they appreciate being given information about the practical elements of the role (e.g. working hours, workspace, etc.), the organisation and its working culture in the recruitment materials, allowing them to understand whether the position is a good fit for them before they go through the lengthy process of making an application.

**Left and below:** Visual minutes from Museums Strategic Disability Network Meetings in December 2020 and April 2021. Created by Holly Langley, More Than Minutes.



## SECTION 3: Recruitment

### Interviews

The vast majority of museum interviews follow a standard format, with interviewees asked to answer questions not provided in advance, and deliver a presentation prepared before or during the interview. This lack of flexibility in format does not accommodate for variety in communication styles, or allow for those who require additional thinking time to recall information and formulate responses to questions. Until the advent of Covid-19, many employers insisted on in-person interviews, adding an additional barrier; the degree to which remote interviewing is an entirely acceptable alternative has now been made evident.

*“In terms of the actual job interviews, definitely, I have struggled as an autistic person... I end up being treated as if I am stupid or I do not understand anything. They then assume that I am not going to be good at the work... We do not all communicate the same. We are not all going to communicate the same in the job. That doesn't mean that we are not doing the job well.”*

**workshop participant**

### Expectation to fit a certain mould

Our consultation suggests that many D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent interviewees feel they are expected to fit a certain museum worker ‘mould’, or that they don’t secure roles because they do not look, speak or act like other members of the team. Rather than welcome diversity and a range of voices, thereby contributing to a more resilient and creative organisation, many museums are inclined to appoint candidates in their own image. Fair Museum Jobs [2] have highlighted that this can be exacerbated when person specifications list personality traits (e.g. ‘outgoing’) rather than skills (‘experience working with a wide range of people’).

### Inappropriate questioning

Our consultation with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people highlighted the frequency with which unacceptable questions about a person’s impairments and the impact on their ability to do the job are asked, whether in the application or interview process.

Recent examples include an application form where applicants were asked to give details about any periods of sickness absence.

[2] [New Fair Museum Jobs Manifesto Explained – Fair Museum Jobs](#)

## 3.2 Recruitment review of our Partner Museums

Through their participation in Curating for Change, our Partner Museums have demonstrated that they are committed to recruiting more D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent staff.

When asked what they hoped to gain from taking part in Curating for Change, 94.1% stated that increasing their understanding of how to do this was one of the major reasons for taking part in the project.

Our survey of museum partners asked ‘What are the barriers to employing more D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent staff members?’

Some reported ‘a lack of space and/or facilities’ as a challenge. **35.3%**



Many more highlighted issues around knowledge and confidence, including:

‘a lack of specialist contacts’ **64.7%**



‘a lack of understanding and/or skills to provide support’ **64.7%**



‘a lack of confidence within our organisation’ **58.8%**



A lack of awareness of the issues facing D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people during the recruitment process was highlighted when findings of our consultation were shared with the museums themselves. Many expressed shock at the testimonies, redoubling their commitment to making changes, while beginning to think creatively about how things might be done differently.

*“This was from an arts organisation and it says ‘Do you consider yourself to have a disability or health condition?’ Then you tick ‘Yes, no, or prefer not to say.’ Then it said ‘What is the effect or impact of your disability or health condition on your ability to give your best at work?’ Basically, they are writing it within their form that if you are disabled you will not be able to do the same job as somebody else.”*

**workshop participant**

## SECTION 4

# Call to action: recruitment and audience

This report has been designed to share our findings from our consultation period and as a result of this consultation, we have identified some clear actions the sector can start to take now. These actions are intended to be a live and evolving action plan and during the delivery phase of Curating for Change (funding dependent) we will be reaching out to others to pool knowledge and join together to create further resources.

At this stage we would also like to highlight some great work that is happening. The We Shall Not Be Removed campaign has produced two useful documents: the **Seven Principles**: a new guide for the arts and entertainment sectors to support disability inclusion; and The UK Disability Arts Alliance is marking the first anniversary of its campaign by revealing **the findings of a new survey** that highlights significant threats to the continued participation of creative deaf, disabled and neurodiverse people in the cultural sector. VocalEyes also undertook **a survey in 2020** that shone a light on the barriers to heritage disabled people face.

Together change is possible, and we urge all to take action now.

## 4.1 Recruitment actions

Based on our consultation, Curating for Change makes the following recommendations to recruiting organisations:

### 1 **Advertise entry level roles beyond the usual museum sector websites.**

This will diversify the pool of applicants, and highlight opportunities to excellent candidates who may not otherwise have been aware of museum roles. This may include advertising on local jobs pages, but also through community and disability sector organisations.

### 2 **Don't ask for qualifications unless they are absolutely necessary to the role.**

Though academic qualifications may be evidence of a person's ability to carry out research or formulate an argument, these are skills that can be demonstrated in other ways. Qualifications should only be required if there is absolutely no other way for specific experience to be gained or evidenced.

### 3 **Ensure that person specifications ask for a level of experience commensurate with the role and salary.**

Person specifications should also be written in easy-to-understand language to avoid putting off potential candidates who are well-suited to the role, but not well-versed in museum language.

# engagement

- 4 Don't ask for abilities that are not absolutely necessary to the role, particularly if they can actually be met through Access to Work or other support.**

This includes the need for a driving licence and/or the ability to lift objects.

- 5 Provide recruitment materials in accessible formats.**

These might include Easy Read versions and ensuring that website accessibility settings can be changed.

- 6 Offer a number of different ways to apply, and avoid application forms.**

Think creatively about how people with a range of communication methods might best demonstrate their skills (e.g. video, collage, etc.), while ensuring the application process is simple and not overly time-consuming.

- 7 Don't reject otherwise strong applications on the basis of minor spelling or grammar issues.**

- 8 Don't close applications early.**

Allow D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people balancing existing commitments sufficient time to complete their application, whilst also maintaining their health and wellbeing.

- 9 Offer flexibility for the role.**

Where possible, offer working from home and/or flexible hours and ensure this is expressed in the job advert.

- 10 Pay an appropriate salary, and at least equal to the Real Living Wage for entry level roles.**

- 11 Provide information on the role and the organisation upfront.**

This helps D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people imagine themselves in the role, gain a feel for the organisational culture and decide whether this is a good fit for them. This may include details such as a description of the office space, information on working hours, and short films about the role and team.

- 12 Provide candidates with interview questions in advance.**

This provides candidates with additional processing and answer formulation time to best express their relevant skills and experience, ensuring both a fair interview for the candidate and the securing of the best potential candidate for the organisation.

- 13 If interviewing via Zoom or similar, post questions in the chat function.**

This will support information processing, and increased access for non-verbal candidates.

## SECTION 4: **Call to action for recruitment and audience engagement**

### **14 Offer flexibility during the interview process.**

Remove access barriers by offering remote interviews as an option where at all possible. If the interview has to take place in person, pay travel expenses. Also consider how best a candidate may be able to show their suitability for the specific role. A formal, seated panel interview may not be the best way to see an interviewee's skills and potential.

### **15 Ask candidates whether they have any access requirements in relation to the interview.**

Ensure any requirements are acted on quickly. This could include providing access to BSL interpreter(s), live captioning if online, or wheelchair access and parking provision if in person.

### **16 Arrange Disability Equality Training for the organisation.**

Ensure all staff involved in the recruitment process understand those barriers that might exist and how to remove them, as well as the risk of unconscious bias.

## **4.2 Working with D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people as audiences actions**

### **1 Reach out to local disabled people's groups.**


Don't expect that people who do not usually visit your museum will come to you. Take time to build connections and consider delivering events that may have more relevance to disabled audiences, then proactively invite local groups to these events.

### **2 Actively try to understand what access barriers might exist for your audiences.**

Talk to D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people themselves, rather than simply following generic guidelines; although these can provide a positive starting point, they won't reflect the nuances and range of lived experience.

### **3 Value D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people as experts.**

Do not expect them to provide their advice for free; either offer a thank you payment and cover expenses, or pay them appropriately if they are providing a consultancy role.



**4 When planning any new exhibition and/or event, consider how disability heritage narratives can be included.**

Ask D/deaf and disabled people about the kinds of stories they would like to see featured. Consider making new acquisitions if disabled people are not represented in museum collections.

**5 When planning D/deaf and disability heritage stories, work with disabled people to devise content for exhibitions and events.**

This will ensure an authentic narrative and that appropriate language is used throughout. These individuals and communities will bring new perspectives to objects and materials from a lived experience position, that might otherwise be overlooked or even unknown.



**Above:** Visitors exploring *Brave Poor Things: Reclaiming Bristol's Disability History*, in partnership with M Shed, Bristol.

**Below:** Braille typewriter, *Colchester + Ipswich Museums*.

**Opposite page:** 'Correction Frame' on display at *Thackray Museum of Medicine*. Made in Germany in the 1600s.



# Acknowledgements

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