Welcoming people with a learning disability to your venue

MENCAP
Understanding learning disability
The idea for this report came from an event held at North Wales Theatre in November 2003.

The event brought together people who work at theatres and people with a learning disability.

It was a chance for people to look at and talk about things that prevent people with a learning disability going to and enjoying theatre, concerts and the arts in general.

It was a chance to suggest ways of overcoming those barriers.

There was also a chance to see a live performance of *Never Again*, a play about a woman with a learning disability going to the theatre, and to see a presentation of the CD-ROM *Never Again*. Both of these were made by the special effects group from *Mind the...Gap Theatre Company* (Bradford), to help venues think about welcoming people with a learning disability.

**The event was organised by:**
- Sarah Ecob, General Manager of North Wales Theatre
- Gus Garside, Mencap’s National Arts Co-ordinator.

**The event was facilitated by:**
- Jo Verrent, ADA Inc
- Karen Flood, First Step
- Sarah Ecob
- Gus Garside.

Jo Verrent, Karen Flood and Gus Garside wrote this report.
We would like to thank the management and staff of North Wales Theatre and everyone who contributed to the event.

In the year 2001, Mencap carried out a major consultation with its membership in order to create a national arts strategy. We also consulted far and wide with many arts organisations and funders such as the Arts Councils of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. At the heart of the consultation were the voices of people with a learning disability.

In that consultation, people with a learning disability told us what the major barriers were that prevented them from getting to see what they wanted. They were:

- money
- information
- transport
- not feeling welcome
- shows being at the wrong time
- no-one to help them get there.

There are 1.5 million people with a learning disability living in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It makes clear sense to include them in the life of your venue. It is now a legal requirement under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (see page 12).

But venues have said they have problems too. They do not always know how to reach people with a learning disability or how best to communicate with them. They often need more money and time, and want to do more things than they can afford to.
The event in North Wales raised all of these and many other issues.

We will now look at the things that prevent people with a learning disability going to and enjoying theatre, concerts and the arts in general. We will suggest ways of overcoming those barriers.

We were pleased that there were more solutions than problems. And many of the solutions deal with more than one problem.
Gatekeepers

Gatekeepers might include parents and carers. They are the people who help, but sometimes stop, people with a learning disability:
- knowing what is available to see
- deciding what they would like to see
- getting to see what they want to.

Venues need to work closely with these people to provide the information and support in ways that are useful.

Information

Venues need to provide information in a variety of ways and formats. There are obvious ones like:
- large print
- Braille
- tapes
- and a range of languages.

As well as these, information should be provided in simple words and pictures (sometimes referred to as ‘easy read’) for people with a learning disability.

A really creative approach would combine as many of these as possible to avoid a situation of, on the one hand, glamorous well-designed mainstream publicity and dull unimaginative but accessible alternatives.
There are a number of organisations that provide help or advice on creating information that is accessible to people with a learning disability (see resource section).

For people making enquiries in person or by phone, it is important that all staff know the right information about access issues (including venue facilities, concessions and parking arrangements). A Mencap survey (Arts for all) showed that people were being given conflicting information from venues.

**Getting to the venue**

Transport is always a big issue for people with a learning disability. Some venues provide free or concessionary transport (transport at a reduced cost) for some of their customers.

Where this is not possible, the venue (including front-line staff) should be aware of the local transport system and concessions. It may be able to make joint travel and show concessions in partnership with travel companies.

Venues should provide disabled parking facilities where possible.

For some people with a learning disability the problem is having no one to accompany them to the venue. It has long been the custom for adult education institutes to set up “buddy systems”.
This may be something that venues could explore further. Perhaps the "Friends of the Theatre" could be encouraged to take this on, with some assistance and disability equality training.

*Shows being at the wrong time*

Many people with a learning disability said that events did not occur at the best time for them. Further market research into this is required. It may be that existing show times simply do not suit existing support arrangements, or it may be that venues need to consider varied show times.

*At the box office*

The issue of concessions is complex. Many people with a disability do not feel that it is right to give someone a concession just because they are disabled, but that concessions should be related to income capacity or benefits.

Everyone agreed that there should be a “carers go free’ policy since this is an access issue (like ramps for wheelchair users).

It is worth noting that:

- “personal assistant” is the preferred term for many people
- some people (not many) may require more than one personal assistant
- not everyone with a learning disability will come with a personal assistant.
Some front-line staff (including box office staff) have been reluctant to give concessionary prices unless the audience member has an obvious impairment (e.g. a wheelchair user). This is now illegal under the Disability Discrimination Act, which states that all people with a disability must be treated equally.

For many people, once in the venue, the box office or reception is the first place that they are welcomed to the venue...

**Not feeling welcomed**

Many people with a learning disability have told us that a big barrier for them is not feeling welcomed. It may be that venue managers feel they welcome everyone, but the real issue is that people with a learning disability say they do not feel welcomed. This may be because of a history of negative experiences.

Ways of addressing this might include:

- **welcomers** (employing a welcomer who has a learning disability would be great). These people would be stewards who are specifically trained and available to show people around the venue (not just to their seats), and to come and check everyone is OK at the interval.

- **staff training** (including all front-line staff and volunteers). This is fundamental. Senior management requires training to develop the policies and procedures that are required by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Front-line staff and volunteers (box office, stewards, bar and catering staff) need training because they are the main people that people coming to your venue have contact with.
• thinking about using trainers with a learning disability. At the North Wales Theatre event people really liked the performance by actors with a learning disability. They learnt a lot from it. It showed people with a learning disability as professional and skilled.

• recruiting the right people. All staff have to believe in all of your venues policies.

Getting in and around the venue

It goes almost without saying that all venues should look at all policies, procedures and facilities in relation to customers with a disability (including ramps, signage, induction loops and toilets). This is a requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The act covers all impairment groups, but is most specific in its detail with regards to sensory and physical impairments.

There are a number of ways you can improve physical access for people with a learning disability:

• use signs with words and pictures to make them accessible to people with a learning disability

• use colour coded tickets so people know where they will be sitting and what door they have to go through

• think about integrating seating areas for wheelchair users throughout the auditorium
• remember that some people with a learning disability have a fear of heights and others may have visual impairments too. Make sure you tell people about where they will be sitting to see if it is suitable

• check the language you use to describe different places in your venue. Some theatre language like ‘stalls’, ‘gods’, ‘box office’ and ‘mezzanine level’ may not mean much to some people.

Disruptive behaviour

This is an issue that causes much anxiety at venues and can prevent them from welcoming people with a learning disability.

People blocking views and making distracting sounds and movements are real issues.

People with a learning disability, like all members of the audience, do need to know when they need to change their behaviour.

Staff need to be trained and confident enough to make decisions. The venue has to decide how it wants people to be treated in these circumstances. It should not be left to individual members of staff to respond without knowing how. This might mean that people with a disability get treated differently by different staff members.

For people with a learning disability, it is often about knowing how they should behave.
Suggestions on how venues could deal with disruptive behaviour made at the North Wales Theatre event included:

- **make a simple and public statement about equal opportunities and inclusion.** This would make it clear to everyone that it is important to the venue. This would help convince other theatre goers and change public awareness.

- **adopt an accessible disruption policy.** They could work with all stakeholders including people with a learning disability to create this policy. It should be made simple and public. This would help staff to be more relaxed and confident in dealing with difficult situations.

- **mark each show in the programme with the approximate level of noise that would be appropriate** (i.e. let people know in advance if it is a quiet show, a scary show and so on).

- **run workshops on theatre going** (this could help with booking tickets too). Show people who may not have been to the theatre before, how you would like them to behave. Involve your staff in this.

- **run arts workshops for people with a learning disability at your venue** (possibly alongside workshops on theatre going). This could be a good, fun and creative introduction to your venue.
• **set up an ‘access club’** (this was felt to be the best suggestion). If someone has specific access needs and/or comes with a carer they can:
  - ‘register’
  - come and see the venue
  - have a tour
  - talk through their needs and what the venue can provide
  - work out the best place/s for them to sit
  - make contact with real people at the venue
  - have their needs logged onto a database.

The next time they book, all that information is already there. They would just give their access club number and staff would know, for example, they have two carers or personal assistants and need to sit at the end of a row.

It is sometimes hard for people with a learning disability to book over the phone. People who join the access club could have the way they like to pay recorded on their file.

The process could include going through the ‘role’ of a carer at the theatre (what is expected of a carer or personal assistant in the venue, like fire evacuation support etc).
The DDA was passed in 1995, and it has been against the law to discriminate against disabled people since 1996.

Under the DDA, venues must make sure that people with a learning disability have access to information about their services (shows and events they run). This information must be presented in a way they can understand.

Disabled people who come into venues must be treated in the same ways as anyone else – welcomed and supported. Some venues have needed to train their staff in how to do this. For example, some staff have either felt uncomfortable around people with a learning disability or they have patronised them.

From October 2004, venues must have done their best to ‘remove physical features’ which stop disabled people from accessing their venues. This includes things like improving lighting and signage, as well as bigger things like having lifts and ramps.

The best way to find out more about the responsibilities of organisations under the DDA is to contact the Disability Rights Commission (see resources). They have many booklets, handouts, videos and information to support organisations.

They also support disabled people in challenging organisations about access issues. So if a person with a learning disability does not think a venue has treated them fairly, they should contact the DRC for help.
Let’s end by saying something about appropriate behaviour. In looking at this, it is worth thinking about what ‘appropriate’ behaviour is – who has created the rituals that surround Western concert and theatre practice… and why?

Going to Western theatre is quite different from going to the theatre in some other countries. We are told to keep quiet and still and just watch the show. We show that we have liked it by clapping at the end.

In some other countries people laugh and dance and cheer and shout – during the show.

Sometimes we do this too:

• at the pantomime

• during forum theatre (a type of theatre where the audience joins in and finds different ways to solve problems)

• even sometimes at the plays of William Shakespeare! At the Globe Theatre in London the audience is encouraged to ‘heckle’ – to shout out and join in. Perhaps this is one reason why they have been so successful at running Shakespearean workshops for people with profound and multiple disabilities there.
Other ideas

- Think about programming the work of artists and performers with a learning disability (there is no lack of high quality work out there).

- Think about which companies and artists might fit in to your programme. There is a huge range available, from professional touring companies to local drama groups, who show work once a year. Some of the work may be different from your current programming, but difference enriches us all. It is vital to art and to life itself.

- Think about employing people with a learning disability at your venue.

- Think about setting up user groups representing all your stakeholders to inform policies, procedures and, maybe even, programming.
Resources

- **Disability Discrimination Act (DDA)**
  - website  www.disability.gov.uk

- **Disability Rights Commission (DRC)**
  - address  Freepost MID02164
              Stratford upon Avon
              CV37 9BR
  - telephone  08457 622 633
  - textphone  08457 622 644
  - fax  08457 778 878
  - website  www.drc-gb.org

- **Mencap**
  - helpline  0808 808 1111 (England)
              08457 636227 (Northern Ireland)
              0808 8000 300 (Wales)
  - website  www.mencap.org.uk

- **Gus Garside**
  - National Arts Co-ordinator, Mencap
  - address  Burrell Road
              Haywards Heath
              RH16 1TW
  - telephone  01444 459460 extension 119
  - fax  01444 457051
  - mobile  07879 666887
  - email  gus.garside@mencap.org.uk
• Jo Verrent  
  ADA inc. (Disability Arts Consultants)  
  website  www.adainc.org

• First Step (Merseyside)  
  First Step are an organisation that challenges society’s attitudes towards people who have physical, mental and/or learning difficulties through training and advocacy.  
  address  First Step (Merseyside)  
  Breckfield Centre  
  Breckfield Road North  
  Liverpool  
  L5 0QW  
  telephone  0151 222 0575  
  email  first-step@freeuk.com

• Mind the...Gap  
  For Never Again (an excellent training resource in welcoming people with a learning disability to your venue – available as a CD-ROM or as a live piece of forum theatre)  
  email  arts@mind-the-gap.org.uk  
  website  www.mind-the-gap.org.uk

• Independent Theatre Council (ITC)  
  Produce excellent training and training materials.  
  website  www.itc-arts.org

• Voluntary Arts Network (VAN)  
  Produce a wide range of excellent briefing papers.  
  website  www.voluntaryarts.org
• **Arts Council of England**
  You can find the regional office closest to you on their website.
  
  website  www.artscouncil.org.uk

• **Arts Council of Wales**
  
  website  www.artswales.org

• **Arts Council of Northern Ireland**
  
  website  www.artscouncil-ni.org

• **Disability Arts Development Agencies**
  In England there are several – contact the National Disability Arts Forum for contact details of the one nearest to you.
  
  website  www.adf.ie

  In Wales there is **Arts and Disability Wales**
  
  website  www.artsdisabilitywales.com

  In Northern Ireland there is **Arts and Disability Forum**
  
  website  www.adf.ie

• **Resource**
  A disability portfolio produced by The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries
  
  website  www.resource.gov.uk