

# TRANSFORMING LEADERSHIP

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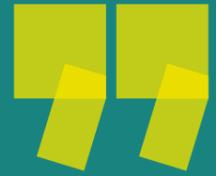
## About Access All Areas

Access All Areas (AAA) make disruptive theatre and performance by learning disabled and autistic artists.

We are pioneers in accessible creative practice, and train theatre, TV, and film companies to be more accessible and inclusive to learning disabled and autistic people. Through our Transforming Leadership programme, in partnership with Disability Arts Online, we seek to revolutionise ideas of who can lead and how in our culture.

## About Disability Arts Online

Disability Arts Online is a content producer that occupies a unique global position with its UK-based website, social media network, and vibrant community of disabled creatives. From a disability-led position, we work with individual creatives and organisations to champion under-represented voices, striving to make arts and culture more accessible.



*It's important for learning disabled and autistic leaders to make our voices heard. For years we've been left out – we need to show that we are strong, confident leaders.*

*We don't see learning disabled and autistic people represented. We don't see role models when we're younger. It's time to change that. This process made me wiser as a person – I think more clearly now. As a strong Black woman, I want to inspire other people who don't see themselves as leaders.*

**Charlene Salter, Co-Chairperson, AAA**



*It is very important to have learning disabled and autistic people in leadership roles because of the lived experience we have in our lives. Our lived experiences are so valuable to society and it can help make the world a better place.*

**Adam Smith, Co-Director of Take Part, AAA**

## What is Transforming Leadership

Transforming leadership is a placement and coaching programme for new learning disabled and autistic leaders in the arts. We created this programme because learning disabled and autistic people are still, consistently, left out of leadership conversations.

Our learning disabled and autistic peers are massively underrepresented in the stories we tell, and in our characters onscreen and onstage. We don't think this will change until we value the role of different lived experiences in shaping these stories, and in shaping our cultural sector.

### With this programme, we set out to

- Transform the leadership potential of learning disabled and autistic arts leaders.
- Develop an accessible infrastructure that supports learning disabled and autistic people to join leadership conversations and take up leadership roles.
- Support organisations to be more accessible by training existing executive leadership in our methods.



*To be a great leader, you must learn from others, and let others learn from you.*

**Cian Binchy, Digital Influencer, AAA**

## What is this pack for?

Over the two years of this programme, we've learned some valuable lessons. We've got things right, we've got things wrong, and we've found things we didn't expect. We want to share some of our learning with you.

In the next sections you will find steps, tips, and resources for diversifying the leadership of your organisation and creating accessible ways to run things. We know that every organisation is different, and you will face your own unique barriers. We hope some of what we've learned will help you to open up your practice to learning disabled and autistic leaders.



## What we did

Making an organisation truly learning disabled-led doesn't happen overnight. Many of the ways organisations operate are inaccessible and many learning disabled and autistic people haven't had access to the training they might need to take on leadership roles. We knew that we needed to commit to some big things in order to make meaningful change.

Over two years, we worked with nine learning disabled and autistic leaders to:

- Change organisational structures to make them more accessible.
- Develop new models of co-leadership.
- Upskill learning disabled and autistic leaders and provide accessible training.

## The elements of our programme included:

### Co-leadership

Trainees worked alongside non-learning disabled leaders to develop new ways of co-directing.

### Training

Trainees received training in leadership styles, and worked with existing leaders to develop their own practice.

### Coaching

Trainees underwent individual and group coaching to reflect on the process and work through questions and issues.

### Placements

As well as taking on roles in our own organisations, trainees carried out placements elsewhere. Through this, trainees developed their own skills and partner organisations were able to look at their own accessibility.

### Support Mentoring

We pioneered a new form of access support: support mentoring. Trainees were supported by a support mentor who gave access support as well as mentoring in their particular area of leadership and future plans.

These elements together provided a holistic training programme for our learning disabled and autistic leaders.

# People and roles

Including learning disabled and autistic leaders will look different for different organisations, and it's really important that you look at what will work for you. Here's how we structured our leadership roles.

## Governance



Charlene Salter  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Chairperson*



Paul Christian  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Deputy*  
*Chairperson*



Sarah Pickthall  
*Co-Chairperson*



Frederick Way  
*Co-Deputy*  
*Chairperson*

## Co-Direction



Adam Smith  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Director,*  
*Take Part*



Katy Cracknell  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Director,*  
*Performance*  
*Making Diploma*



Emma Selwyn  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Director,*  
*Performance*  
*Company*



Nick Llewellyn  
*Artistic Director*



Helen Bryer  
*Co-Director*  
*Take Part*  
*and Train*

## Digital Voices



Cian Binchy  
*Trainee Digital*  
*Influencer,*  
AAA



Terry Huggett  
*Trainee Digital*  
*Influencer,*  
AAA



Deen Hallissey  
*Trainee Digital*  
*Influencer,*  
DAO



Sian-Estelle  
Petty  
*Digital and*  
*Communications*  
*Manager, AAA*



Hannah Dingle  
*Digital Content*  
*Producer, AAA*



Colin Hambrook  
*Editor, DAO*

## Evaluation



Lee Phillips  
*Trainee*  
*Co-Evaluator*



Dr Lucy Burke  
*Co-Evaluator*

## Who else was involved?

### Support mentors:

Katie Wheeler  
Heather Johnson  
Jazmin Qunta  
Lowri Jenkins

### Coaches:

Sarah Pickthall  
Deborah Williams  
Jo Paul

### Programme Management:

Patrick Collier  
*Executive Director, AAA*  
Gemma Williams  
*Programme Manager, AAA*  
Trish Wheatley  
*Chief Executive, DAO*  
Conor Heron  
*Assistant Producer, AAA*



# 10 steps to more inclusive leadership

This is our 10 step guide, for arts leaders who want to diversify their organisation and their leadership. These tips are just the start and will work differently in each organisation – what else do you think would be helpful?



## 1. Look at yourselves

Where are the access obstacles in your organisation?

If you think some part of your work is not accessible, why is that? Get advice and training from disabled people who are trained consultants.

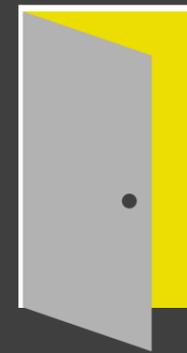
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## 2. Get uncomfortable



It can be very uncomfortable to start understanding your own unconscious ableism.

Be brave! Conversations with people about their access needs might feel uncomfortable at first, and it can be difficult to have conversations with yourself about changing your behaviour. But to make a change, you need to understand what change is needed.



## 3. Open your practice to co-leadership

Having someone leading beside you with lived experience can bring lots of new ideas.

You might think you know best as a director. Perhaps you do know best in a lot of things. But if you don't have the lived experience of every community you're seeking to reach, then you probably don't know best about everything.

A co-leadership model can make room for learning disabled people to bring their lived experience to leadership conversations, while still being backed up by more traditional expertise. This also helps other learning disabled people to see themselves reflected in your organisation, which can make them feel more welcome as audience, artists, and participants.



## 4. Pay people

Lived experience is valuable.

No thank you, I would not like to be paid with tea and sandwiches. If you need my lived experience as a disabled person to help diversify your organisation, your participant groups, your board, or your audiences, then that means my lived experience is valuable to you.

Recognise that. Pay for it. Give it an appropriate job title. If you do this properly, you will be able to find funding to help cover the costs.



## 5. Take things off the page

Many people don't learn through talking and reading. They learn through doing.

If you want viewpoints on your strategic direction from people who aren't used to strategy meetings, then think about using accessible workshops to unpick and simplify complex ideas.



## 6. Put the right support in place

If we want equitable access to work, then there must be a system in place to meet individual access needs, always.

If a learning disabled colleague needs support, remember that it might not be your job to be a support worker. I would not like to get stuck with my manager as my support worker.

Use creative support workers, support mentors, personal assistants, job coaches, or digital access tools to help make the workplace more accessible, whenever it's needed.

Access to Work (and Arts Council England project grants) can help pay for this.



## 7. Train people

Many training programmes are not accessible to learning disabled and autistic people. Consider offering mentorship or training to learning disabled or autistic colleagues, to make up for the lack of this in the rest of the industry.



## 8. Give things the time they need

Taking the time to bring people along with you is better for everyone, and leads to better work.

Prepare in advance. Give extra time, and maybe extra meetings, to learning disabled colleagues so they can prepare with support workers. Share notes or materials in advance of meetings. Start each meeting by giving an overview of what you'll be talking about, why, and how you expect people could engage.



## 9. Create a peer space

People with similar lived experience should have a space to share their leadership journey, in private.



## 10. Communicate accessibly

Words can stop people from joining a conversation.

Be ready to change the way you speak and write. Use an Easy Read format when it's helpful. Avoid big words. Avoid jargon or acronyms. Avoid metaphors. Use bullet points or shorter sentences. But only do this when it's useful – not everyone will need Easy Read, for example.



## Co-leadership

### Why co-lead?

- It increases collaboration across the organisation, and removes the idea of one person being in charge.
- It recognises that everybody has different skills, and allows you to play to people's strengths.
- It makes space for the expertise of lived experience in leadership conversations.
- It provides a new model of working for non-learning disabled leaders, opening up new ways of doing things.

### How to co-lead

Co-leadership will look different based on the job being done, the people doing it, and the organisation.

Co-leaders might work together on a specific project. Working with one person consistently allows leaders to find their groove as a partnership over time.

Learning disabled and autistic leaders might partner with a range of collaborators, so they can spread their knowledge and experience further across an organisation. It's important that you find the best structure for you and your work.



*Working with Sarah as co-leaders gave me confidence. We were both new to the board and we were learning from each other. We bounce off each other, and we have fun together on our leadership journey.*

**Charlene Salter, Co-Chairperson, AAA**

# Our 3 strands of Co-leadership

## Co-directing



Co-directing isn't a new thing in arts and culture, but learning disabled and autistic co-directors are rare, and accessible training in directing is hard to find. As a theatre company, we worked with our trainee co-directors across all our creative work.

This made us challenge our ideas about what a director is, and consider ways of breaking down old systems for a more egalitarian way of making work.

In our participatory work, trainees' presence had a profound impact. Participants became more aspirational about what they could achieve, and felt seen and heard by a leader with similar lived experience. Workshop facilitating works well as a team effort, and having two equal leaders can allow for different approaches.

In our professional productions, learning disabled and autistic co-directors were able to provide a more embodied approach to directing practice, using physicality where a neurotypical director might choose words. Partnering of different thinking and processing styles in a directing team made our creative work richer.



## Top tips for co-directing

1. Play to each other's strengths and follow your individual passions. You don't both have to do everything.
2. Set clear boundaries about who will do what. It can be empowering to hear- and say- "that's not my job".
3. Be prepared to change the way you work. You might find yourself taking more time over things like planning or communication.
4. Take time to find out how you each communicate best. You need to be able to turn down each others' ideas or say when something isn't working, but you need to know how to do this in a kind and positive way.
5. It can be scary stepping back or letting someone else into your work. You are not losing anything by sharing your practice - there is so much to gain!



*Lived experience is imperative. Fairer and more varied representation improves fairness, variety, and accessibility for all.*

**Emma Selwyn, Co-Director of the Performance Company, AAA**



*Transforming Leadership has made me a better person in so many different ways. I haven't just become a more confident director - I have learnt new ways of communicating, and become more comfortable meeting new people.*

**Adam Smith, Co-Director of Take Part, AAA**

# Inclusive Governance

We think good governance is about steering the direction of a charity. If our charities are always steered by the same type of person, then we're missing out on a lot of good ideas.

It's not enough just to place learning disabled people on a board. You need to think about what change they will make. If we want to make sure that learning disabled communities are properly included in our arts, then learning disabled and autistic trustees need to be empowered to help shape the work of the charity.

Don't expect learning disabled or autistic people to fit in with the way your board works. If you want new voices in governance, then change the way you structure your meetings so that they're more accessible.



## Top tips for inclusive governance

1. Add in prep meetings before board meetings, so that learning disabled trustees can go through the director's report, and flag questions or discussion points outside of the pressure of a board meeting.
2. Use support mentors to advocate for learning disabled trustees in meetings, and to help trustees to prepare, if needed.
3. Identify areas where learning disabled trustees can focus and help steer work. Not every trustee needs to be an expert at everything.
4. Use an Easy Read agenda and stick to it. It will help keep discussions on track, and lead to better flowing meetings.
5. For finances:
  - a. Use visuals, like graphs.
  - b. Tell a story. Where's the financial risk? Where do you need to make a decision on what you spend your money on?
  - c. Not every trustee needs to understand excel if the story of your money is clear.
6. More accessible meetings help everyone to understand what's happening in the charity, and to contribute better ideas. This is not just helpful for learning disabled or autistic trustees.



Learning disabled people should have a chance to be in governance, so that they can help to steer an organisation.

**Charlene Salter, Co-Chairperson, AAA**

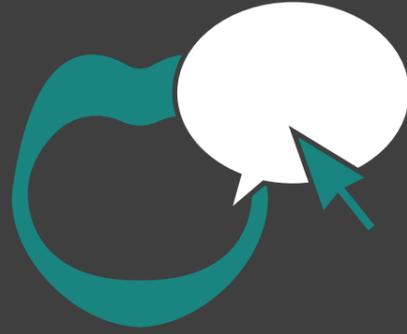


A board that reflects and has learning disabled and autistic voices and experiences is better positioned to reach and reflect a wider range of participants and audiences on their terms.

**Sarah Pickthall, Co-Chairperson, AAA**

## Digital Voices

Learning disabled and autistic communities are active on social media, but few arts companies are led by learning disabled or autistic voices online. AAA and DAO worked with 3 digital influencers – Cian Binchy, Terry Huggett, and Deen Hallissey, to create learning disabled-led content that shared the work of our companies, shared individual experiences as disabled artists, and connected with new audiences.



As a result, the accessibility of our online content quickly improved, and we started reaching new people. We used less text, used more images, and thought more about how people were engaging online. We also used more video and audio based content to share what we were doing, and tried to make sure that people were not blocked from engaging with our online work by text.

### Top tips for creating learning disabled-led digital content

1. Representation is important. Make sure learning disabled and autistic communities can see themselves reflected in your social media posts.
2. Don't speak for people. If you're a neurotypical social media manager, find ways to incorporate learning disabled voices directly into your content.
3. Including different voices will open you up to different audiences. Expect to change your idea of what "works" online if you're speaking to new communities.
4. Give time for content-planning meetings with learning disabled or autistic colleagues, where ideas can be discussed in an accessible way.
5. Use video and images to complement text.



I didn't see myself represented online very much when I was younger. I had to look for it. If 14 year old me could have seen 33 year old me online, I would have been comfortable being myself at a younger age.

**Terry Huggett, Digital Influencer, AAA**

### Deen's role with DAO:

Deen joined Disability Arts Online as a content creator for their YouTube channel, to broaden their audience with content that would be accessible and appealing for learning disabled and autistic audiences. A unique apprenticeship-like training programme was developed with Deen at the centre. He learnt new skills, developed his 'brand' and voice as a leader, delivering a whole collection of video works including interviews and creative pieces. This culminated in a takeover during February-March 2022.

For Disability Arts Online, having Deen join the team was a really positive experience. Access improvements were made across much of the organisation's everyday working practices. The team developed essential knowledge around Access to Work, which is now being shared with the sector. Deen being embedded in the alternative scene connected Disability Arts Online with new audiences and disabled artists, which was a fantastic outcome. Beyond the Transforming Leadership programme, Deen continues to work for Disability Arts Online as a content creator as well as pursuing his own creative work.

### Top tips from DAO

- A great programme is always built around individual strengths and development needs.
- Establishing the work is more complicated when the benefits system and Access to Work are involved, but trust us, it is so worth persevering to get the support in place!
- Don't be afraid to try doing things differently.
- Build in extra time and space to really commit to making it work – it's good for access too.



Neurodivergent, learning disabled & autistic leaders are memorable because they make an impact. They have a vision that is a lot different from people without their experience.

**Deen Hallissey, Digital Influencer, DAO**

# The right support

Access support comes in many different forms. In our work at Access All Areas, we focus on creative support for learning disabled and autistic artists.

**Creative support is:**

- Enabling learning disabled and autistic artists to do their best work
- Removing disabling barriers
- Carrying out practical tasks
- Levelling the playing field between disabled and non-disabled artists
- Being a supportive, energising presence
- Sometimes being passive, and taking a step back

**Creative support is not:**

- Aiming for 'independence'. Access needs might shift and change, but we are never aiming to remove the need for support.
- Teaching (although there may sometimes be a coaching element).
- Being the voice of the artist

For our leadership trainees we created a new role: the Support Mentor.



## What is a Support Mentor?

A Support Mentor provides access support with things like admin, travel and emotional support. They also provide mentoring to the trainee in regular 1:1 sessions, allowing the trainee to reflect on their experience and think about their professional development. The Support Mentor role is bespoke and completely depends on the trainee leader and their preferences and requirements.

## What did the support mentors do?

Here are a couple of examples of how it worked for us:



Katie worked with Adam. She attended planning meetings with him and made notes, and then worked with him to practice leading exercises. When Adam led workshops, she was in the room and available to step in if he needed support or reminders.



Heather worked with Charlene. Before each board meeting, Heather met with Charlene to go through board papers and prepare Charlene's questions in advance. They worked together to create an accessible agenda and rehearse. Heather joined board meetings to support Charlene in the room.



## Case study: Katie, support mentor

'Support mentoring is very similar to creative support however in our case support mentors are people who have the same passion or professional experience as our leaders. In my case I've been facilitating drama and dance for several years so there is already a professional foundation there. We can talk about the industry together in a way that other support workers couldn't if they haven't had that professional experience.

With our leaders, we work closely to create strategies and tools to manage any worries and anxieties around the work they do, but are also able to share our ideas and opinions as we have a lot in common. We like to take things off the page and get into the studio, meet together and try things out. It's very practical so often my leaders will come up with a new idea for an exercise or project and we can get down to the details and practice it in real time.

When the leaders are working, we are always there with them to bounce ideas off and we can solve problems together in the moment which can create a safe space, so the leader feels supported whilst doing their role. We have weekly meetings to plan and discuss any road bumps they may come across and we can change up access strategies when needed that are fully catered to them.'



## Top tips for Support Mentoring

1. Remember that support might look different for different people. Spend time getting to know what learning disabled and autistic leaders need in order to do their best work.
2. Trust is essential in the support mentoring relationship. It's worth taking the time to build this- a regular cuppa together can go a long way.
3. Being a support mentor can feel like trying to be very visible and very invisible at the same time. Embrace the moments of stepping back, and be sensitive in choosing the moments to step up and advocate.
4. Use Access To Work grants to fund the support that learning disabled and autistic leaders need.
5. Set some clear barriers and make sure everyone involved understands what everyone's role is.

# Coaching

Coaching is something that leaders all over the world undertake and take for granted as a proven way to learn how to make changes and solve the challenges in their professional lives.

Learning disabled and autistic people, particularly those who have the natural skill and ambition to lead are rarely given access to coaching. They are more likely to have placements or mentoring, even therapy. These things have their place but we wanted as part of the programme to see how coaching might shift individual perspectives and possibilities for our leaders moving forward.

Over the programme our leaders received 1:1 coaching sessions to help them reflect on Transforming Leadership and their traineeships. Coaching isn't for everyone but it really helped shift our leaders thinking, developing new individual approaches to tackle difficult things. They were also given leadership theory in accessible ways and 'how to coach' skills across 6 group coaching sessions so they could:

- work in groups, actively listening to each other, developing leadership skills and understanding together;
- consider their roles across different areas of the AAA programme and how they might be developed;
- find solutions about their place in culture and how to influence more, moving forward.

Working with our Co-Chair Sarah Pickthall and a small team of professional disabled coaches the leaders were able to reflect on their leadership styles, purpose, passion, identity and drivers to great effect.



*Neurodivergent, learning disabled & autistic leaders are memorable because they make an impact. They have a vision that is a lot different from people without their experience.*

**Paul Christian, Co-Deputy-Chairperson, AAA**

# Evaluation

As we develop these new ways of working, it's important to gather and understand feedback on the impact of these changes. It will be especially important to understand these changes from a learning disabled or autistic perspective. Our evaluation journey is not finished yet, but we thought it would be useful to share the elements we are considering:

## 3 things to consider for accessible evaluation

### 1. Accessible process:

Learning disabled and autistic people are often blocked from engaging meaningfully in evaluation processes. We are working to develop more accessible ways of learning disabled participants and audiences to feedback on their experience, including stories of change and visual leadership metaphors.

### 2. Stories of change:

If you're bringing learning disabled or autistic people into the leadership of your organisation, it will be important to understand their stories from the beginning of the process. Develop ways for leaders to reflect and give feedback throughout the process, so that you, and they, can understand how this work is changing them. These might be captured through emojis or accessible feedback forms, informal discussions with mentors or colleagues, through video and film footage with transcription, or something artistic or creative that has meaning for that person or leader and their development process.

### 3. Learning disabled Co-Evaluators:

Having a learning disabled Co-Evaluator may force you to change your practice. Embedding lived experience in this process may help you to break down what a question is really asking you. It may give you a sensitivity to different communication styles. And it will help you to understand and express exclusion from traditional evaluation models from a first-person perspective.

# Advice and resources

Here are some extra things you might find helpful.

## Access To Work

Access to Work is a resource that helps to create a more accessible work environment. It provides grants, through the Department for Work and Pensions, to remove barriers that disabled people face in paid employment.

### Through Access to Work, a person can apply for:

- a grant to help pay for practical support with their work, such as a support worker or accessible travel costs
- advice about managing mental health at work
- support at job interviews (this can include auditions)

You cannot apply as an organisation, only as an individual. If you're hiring learning disabled or autistic staff, they will need to do the Access to Work application. However, as the process is inaccessible, you may want to support them to do this. Disability Arts Online have created guides for Access to Work. Go to [www.disabilityarts.online/atw](http://www.disabilityarts.online/atw) for more information.

## Paying people

Learning disabled or autistic people have often been asked to work or consult for free. Excuses for this vary from "it's good experience" to "it's a training opportunity" to "it might put Universal Credit at risk".

### People should be paid for their time.

The proportion of learning disabled or autistic people who receive Universal Credit or Employment Support Allowance is higher than average, so there may be some practical obstacles to consider. Here are some suggestions so you can properly pay staff:

- Ask if you can talk privately about what benefits someone is getting, and how any work might affect that.

- If someone needs to come off benefits to do a job, offer practical support to get them back on benefits afterwards. This could include navigating online portals, arranging calls with the job centre, or just explaining the process.
- Understand how much money a person can be paid before their benefits payments are affected. For example, someone on Employment Support Allowance can receive £143 per week if they have permitted work agreed with the job centre. This will be different for someone receiving Universal Credit. So, if you're offering occasional or freelance work, you might agree to work within these limits.

More information on Employment Support Allowance and Universal Credit is available on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)

## We can support you!

Access All Areas and Disability Arts Online provide a range of consultancy to help you in your journey to more inclusive leadership.

## Our consultancy packages include:

### Led by Access All Areas:

- Autism and learning disability awareness training
- Introduction to access training
- Accessible governance training
- Support Mentoring training
- Easy Read training
- Inclusive facilitation workshop

### Led by Disability Arts Online:

- Access to Work training and advice
- Support with Access to Work applications (limited availability)
- Creating accessible digital spaces
- Programme development
- Critical friend at any point during project development and delivery

For more information, go to [www.accessallareastheatre.org/consultancy](http://www.accessallareastheatre.org/consultancy)



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[accessallareastheatre.org](http://accessallareastheatre.org)