

*Vital
Exposure*



Executive Summary Report



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**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



Image: VX Labs Consultees at Ego Arts, Coventry

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Foreword

Coming to post at Vital Xposure (VX), it is my pleasure to begin sharing with you the valuable, crucial insights Vital Xposure have gathered in the past year through talking with disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent artists across the country.

The pressing issues of inequality, lack of opportunity and lack of ambition were unsurprising to hear but moving in their volume. What heartens me is the ambition of craft, skill and artistic practice that stood alongside it. Disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent artists deserve to tell whatever story is their story and speak to the messy complexity of humanity we each embody.

Across our work we will aim to meet some of the needs outlined by Dr Mandy Precious in this report. In particular, our VX Labs programme will be committed to creating experimental spaces by disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent people for disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent people where we can be ambitious about access, start to unpick the complexities of identity and elevate some of the multitude of unfairly overlooked disabled artists across the nation.



**Stephen Bailey, Artistic Lead,
Vital Xposure**

Introduction

The Vital Xposure (VX) Labs' consultation aimed to gather the thoughts and interests of disabled d/Deaf and neurodivergent artists regarding VX's proposed Lab programme¹.



The consultation, conducted between September and December 2023, involved face-to-face sessions in various locations across the UK (see acknowledgements), with supplementary online sessions, interviews, and an online survey, reaching a total of 94 participants. The demographic data of this group reveals a diverse group of people with multiple intersections across sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity. This level of complexity is also revealed in participants' arts practice with many individuals enjoying a multi-disciplinary practice. Very few individuals describe themselves under one label with the exception of actors (largely accounted for by visiting Ego Theatre's actor training programme.)

The consultation was set in the context of the arts and culture sector's challenges focusing on the struggles individuals and organisations face due to raised costs, post-Brexit challenges,

global events, and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the issues faced by the artists in the consultation are known issues in the sector including the lack of infrastructure to support artists at various career stages, job competition and the lack of clear career pathways, particularly for those who are mid-career. This is compounded by limited knowledge of disabled artists and their work, a perceived tick box culture and the often-expressed view that there's no room for failure for disabled artists. This is supported by the Creative Access Disability Survey Results, emphasising the worrying difference in career confidence and optimism among disabled, d/Deaf, and neurodivergent respondents.

**By Dr Mandy Precious, VX Labs
Consultation Project Manager**

¹ The Lab programme is a proposed series of 'residencies' or workshops to delve deeply and better understand and push forward a range of practice relevant to Disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent artists.

Scope of the consultation

The scope of the consultation was to open the conversation and not close it down. This led to a very open structure that self-consciously avoided the specifics of people's individual projects by using a series of broad provocations.

Nonetheless, the structure of the final section of the consultation very much tested the Labs original content as initially conceived by VX. Inevitably the conversation deviated.

People came to the consultation for a variety of reasons, but everyone was glad to be asked before the Lab programme was delivered. A particular

thread across most consultations was that many existing programmes were a version of the same thing which was felt to be reductive and limiting for development. A strong contingent of artists feels that the structure and custom and practice of theatre is just not accessible. Everyone was paid a fee to participate which was considered unusual but widely appreciated.



Who took part in the consultation

People intersect across multiple protected characteristics, as do the stories they want to tell:

Key equality and diversity data

90% of consultees filled out an Equality and Diversity Monitoring form. Below is a summary of key statistics respondents identified as:



I don't want to make work for the same old audience. That's not just the 'disability market', that's really about intersectionality.

London consultation

Disability

34%

Disabled

27%

Neurodivergent

1%

d/Deaf

26%

identified under more than one category (two or three at a time)

Gender



53% female



31% male



8% non-binary

Sexual orientation



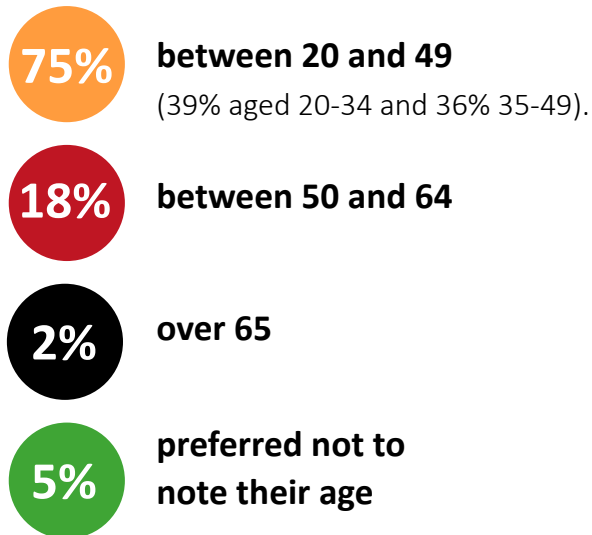
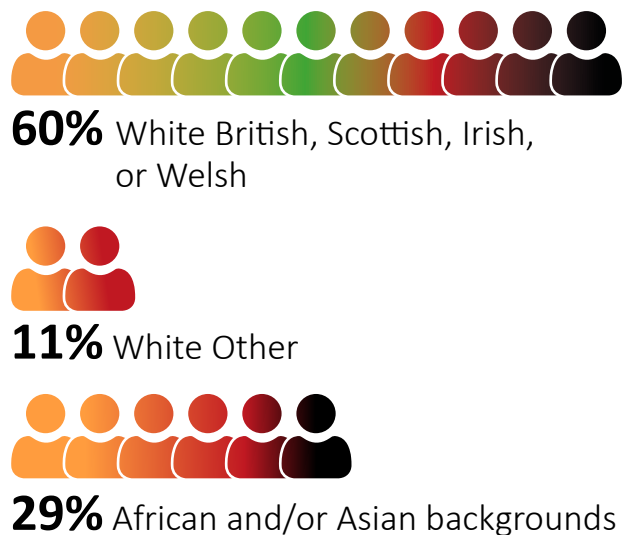
42% heterosexual



18% queer

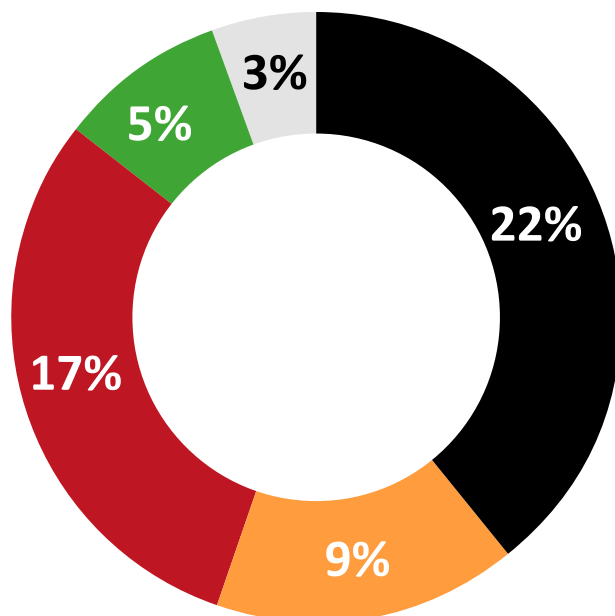


18% bisexual

Age**Ethnicity****Artistic Practice**

There were a wide range of consultees across a number of art forms.
The majority of artists were:

- **Writers** (22%)
- **Theatre makers** (9%)
- **Actors** (17%)
- **Directors** (5%)
- **Producers** (3%)



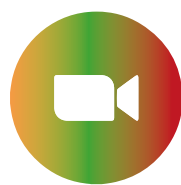
A large number of people had a multi-disciplinary practice which means that the consultation also reached musicians, dancers, crafters, visual artists, spoken words artists and filmmakers.

Where?



In person:

Oxford,
Peterborough,
Coventry,
Leicester,
Newcastle,
London



On Zoom:

National and
for the South
West region



Online survey:

national

Venue / Partner	Region	Date	No of Consultees
Arts at the Old Fire Station	Oxford	12/10/2023	7
Landmark Theatres	Peterborough	16/10/2023	4
South West region	zoom	24/10/2023	12
Ego Arts	Coventry	31/10/2023	12
Attenborough Arts Centre	Leicester	1/11/2023	3
Interplay Theatre	Leeds	13/11/2023	3
Live Theatre	Newcastle	13/11/2023	7
BOLD Elephant	London	20/11/2023	11
Direct interviews online	online	various	4
National Consultation (Session)	zoom	28/11/2023	12
National Consultation (Survey)	online	various	19
TOTAL			94

Responses

What's needed for you to do your best work?

- **Practical considerations to be seen and heard**
 - **Funding:** reality for all those in the cultural sector is that there is not enough money to go round. Funding that covers the need for access (level the playfield) simplify application and time to deliver, develop and grow.
 - **Flexibility** – such as relaxed schedules, and remote working.



Time to contribute, to sit down and having time to make work and being set up to succeed. You need baggy time.

- **Artistic considerations to be seen and heard** – mentoring, buddy schemes, collaborations, skills exchange or development, space for research. A pivot from organisations to share more openly, to recognise personalisation and co-creation for success.

Many artists felt that expectations were often limited to their disability, which failed to recognise that 'you can make disabled-led work that isn't specifically about disability':

“If I say I've got a play about autism, they say we've already got Greta Thunberg the musical... but I want to talk about all sorts of other things (about autism) and that it's complex stuff not just autistic people who rock.”

Sometimes there is an overwhelming feeling on the weight of all disabled people (on the artists):

“I've felt a few times, when I know I've got an opportunity because of my disability and then feeling like if I mess it up, they'll see that as a reason to never work with disabled people again. I don't know if that's necessarily true, but it's definitely how it feels.”

Who else could be included in the room?

This was an exercise in possibility and experimentation, and as such it prompted people to think broadly.

1. Access and safeguarding. Having an 'access co-ordinator' can help people say it once, and not repeatedly.
2. Variety of creatives: stage managers, gamers, coders, film artists and individuals who could develop integrated captions, BSL and audio descriptions. Integrated tech is seen as innovative to many, however:
3. Non-creative experts: medical professional, scientists, social workers, sports people, engineers, architects. Help to look at the world differently in the hope of creating a different stage world.

“

I think in inclusive theatre practice, it shouldn't be seen as innovative. But if you are doing something innovative in the theatre practice that happens to be inclusive, then great.

”



Thematically what's on your mind?

Provocations to start the conversation:

Climate Emergency, Cultural Change, Digital Tech for accessibility, Digital Tech for creativity, Funding, Innovative inclusive theatre practice, Integrated British Sign Language, Integrated Creative Captioning, Intersectionality, Leadership, Nonhierarchical devising practises, Nothing about us without us, Real connections to venues, Social Justice, and Visibility.

Themes people were most passionate about:

1. Intersection between queerness and disability
2. Complex stories about lives that are more than the usual tropes

There was also a lot of discussion about the competing needs around access for the disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent community, and a recognition that creating access for one person can create issues for another. In that sense, the prioritisation exercise highlighted individual needs and perspectives. Everyone is effectively a 'minority of one' and the best work delivers with people, whoever they are and whatever their needs directly rather than trying to invent a solution in isolation.

“For me, if I'm going into a creative space, I want everyone to be heard. I really want to hear what people have to say, I want to hear about their experiences. I want to hear their stories. It should be a free-flowing space.”

Oxford Consultation

“I worry that some part of visibility is about saying it's disabled theatre, whereas what we want is it to just be theatre.”

Leeds Consultation



For me, intersectionality doesn't mean the absence of prejudice – intersectionality isn't about someone who accommodates one protected characteristic, but not another. That's prejudice. For me intersectionality is about how individual people intersect different barriers to doing stuff.”

Leeds consultation

Conclusion

People need space and access to deliver the stories they want to tell.

The Labs should create spaces where ideas are tested and where there's a commitment to learning that can be embraced by all including artists, VX and the partnership venues. There should be some work that is targeted at mid-career artists that bridges the gap between 'emerging' and 'established' and that should push the boundaries for both. Opportunities should always be paid, and ultimately provide for making, change, development, and support, whatever that looks like. It is also noteworthy that representation, flexibility, and a lack of appropriate access play such a strong hand in the consultation indicating that what should be standard practice is far from being any of these things. People cannot tell complex and compelling stories in innovative ways if they are navigating exclusive practices, nor should they be expected to provide the emotional support or the practical fixes that are needed.



Recommendations

The recommendations below will inform VX's programme of laboratories, but could apply in any arts and creative development context:

- 1** Disability should be a lens and not a subject matter.
- 2** Baggy time.
- 3** Consider a flexibility model that could work over weeks, dripping feeding tasks or building new tools.
- 4** Clear and personalised development opportunities embedded within the process.
- 5** Explore innovation and inclusivity in the varied ways to tell a story (through gaming, interactive media etc) as long as this serves the story.
- 6** Bring an 'outsider' in, to 'see the world differently.'
- 7** Work around the intersections.
- 8** Make captioning, BSL and audio description integral to the creative and development process.
- 9** Focus the Labs on the development and growth of new ways of working, rather than finished work.
- 10** Make each Lab distinctive.
- 11** Involve artists at different stages of their career.
- 12** Build on partnerships, to bring together like-minded companies, who are ambitious for new work.

About Vital Xposure

A leading disabled-led theatre company founded in 2011 with access and social justice at its heart.

Our vision is a fairer world for marginalised artists to become creative leaders, with their work celebrated in the heart of our culture.

We produce and tour innovative, accessible new work, profiling hidden voices with extraordinary stories to tell, bringing new and diverse audiences to venues.

Led by award-winning neurodivergent director and producer, Stephen Bailey, the company centres narrative which you will not find on other stages, looking to people's stories which are not otherwise given air and space.

Dr Mandy Precious

Dr Mandy Precious works as a freelance consultant.

Her experience is in strategic support, engagement, fundraising and evaluation in the arts sector. Before going freelance she worked as a senior manager at Theatre Royal Plymouth, a large regional theatre, and the CEO/Artistic Director of young people's theatre organisation.

She has also worked as a producer, project manager and facilitator across the North West. Her research interests are in intersectionality and social class.

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