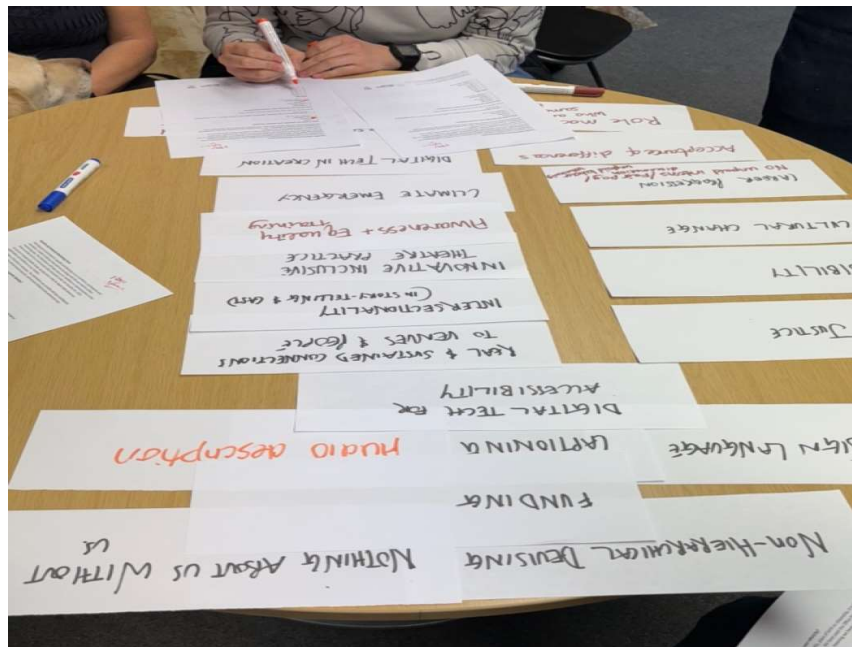




VX LABS CONSULTATION 2023 REPORT



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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 AND CONTEXT

No consultation takes place in isolation, and the context of the wider arts and culture sector is relevant to this report. Many individuals, organisations and building based companies are struggling in the current climate either through raised costs, or other challenges inherent in post-Brexit or global events and conflicts. Additionally, the aftermath of the COVID pandemic is still being felt on top of the UK flirting with recession.

There are consequences for this particularly if organisations cut staff, and production budgets meaning that freelance opportunities can become scarcer, and as one contributor said eloquently in the *Big Freelancers' Report 2023*, freelance life is “artistically fulfilling but financially precarious.” This is a situation that is further complicated by an industry that is perceived as, “discriminatory, difficult, elitist, restrictive and exclusionary.” (pg. 40, *Big Freelance Report 2023*). As opportunities become scarcer, people tend to take fewer risks and whilst theatre likes to think of itself as inclusive, “it is uncomfortable with neurodiversity and disability.” (pg. 43 *Big Freelance Report 2023*). These sentiments are echoed by many of those who took part in the VX consultation with a feeling that many opportunities are tick-boxed. One person talked about the pressure “of having to hold the future of all disabled people in one opportunity.” (Newcastle consultee). The lack of infrastructure to support all artists at all stages of their career is eloquently summarised by an individual in the national consultation:

“The mid-career stage doesn’t seem to exist. There is so, so much input earlier, a little bit for very established artists and nothing or next to nothing in between.”

Added to this is the issue of limited knowledge of work by disabled artists in the industry more broadly. In a timely and relevant report, *Time to Act*, commissioned by the British Council and published in 2021, heard predominantly from venues, festivals, and artists across Europe to understand the barriers to gaining this knowledge of disabled-led work. More than half of their “survey respondents described their knowledge of disabled artists as poor or very poor” and whilst ACE, and UK public bodies are seen to do be doing better than their European counterparts, knowledge is partial and not widely disseminated.

In the Vital Xposure (VX) Labs' consultation it was clear that whilst the opportunity to participate was widely distributed across multiple platforms somehow many people did not pick up on it or see it and there is no single go to place for information and opportunities to be shared. One person reached the consultation via her NHS physiotherapist who saw it on Facebook!

Nonetheless, according to *The Arts in the UK, Seeing the Bigger Picture*, published in November 2023, the arts and creative sector is thriving where 91% of UK adults engage with the arts at least once per year, with 10,000,000 regularly involved. The arts sector has some 139,000 enterprises and 970,000 workers, of which 350,000 are self-employed, placing it as third in the league table of the UK's successful industries. But beneath this lies competition for jobs, and the lack of clear pathways for those who are hoping for an enduring career. As a consultee on the National consultation says, "...you're having to constantly take steps backwards, you're not given the opportunity to step up." Whilst the arts and creative industries on paper can be seen to be thriving, those at the pinnacle of success are not necessarily sharing their success with those at the sharp end.

From the *Creative Access Disability Survey Results 2022*, it is clear that there is a "worrying difference in career confidence and optimism by disabled, d/Deaf and neurodivergent respondents." (page 3). This came up repeatedly in the consultation (see **What's needed to be seen and heard** section): reasonable adjustments, disclosure, short-term contracts, fast pace, a lack of wider awareness amongst colleagues, lack of flexibility were all discussed. In the *Creative Access Disability Survey*, only 1 in 4 disabled creatives felt they had the contacts and networks to progress their career, whilst only 27% felt optimistic about their career prospects.

Intersectionality is a pressing matter – thematically in the VX Labs' consultation broadly – but also across the wider creative sector between disabled creatives and the mainstream, as well as within the disability sector. We are more than the sum of our parts, but people intersect across multiple protected characteristics, and, as one interviewee said:

"I've noticed ...barriers within the industry, for people that are like myself, and whether it's you're able bodied, or from a diverse background... race I

include religion, gender identity, disability, IQ, sexuality, as well...there are barriers.”

Females (by far the biggest group in the Labs’ survey) typically earn 33.6% less than men within the creative industries (*Big Freelance Report, 2023*), working class first generation higher educated people lack the finance and network to progress (*Creative Access Disability Survey Results, 2022*) and those who are from the Global Majority continue to experience significant challenges. In the *Big Freelance Report, 2023* there are still concerns about widespread racism in the sector: “I would like to share that there are still incredibly exploitative practices going on in this industry, particularly in theatre, with little exploration into genuine conflict resolution or accountability processes. With incredibly exploitative people using their power to control, dominate and hurt others.”

So, the picture of the industry is far from rosy. Nonetheless setting up the VX Labs’ consultation as a paid opportunity was very much appreciated, as was the fact that VX had even chosen to consult at all. As one person in the Oxford consultation said, “people don’t normally bother to ask us what we want.”

1. THE CONSULTATION

The purpose of the consultation was to ascertain the interest in and the thoughts of disabled artists in regard to VX's proposed Lab programme – a series of potential experimental labs/residencies.

The consultation took place between September and December 2023, with preparation work taking place at the end of August 2023. Pre-consultation included research into university research, suitable venues, and partners, and speaking to potential supporters.

See [Appendix 1](#) for a full list of partners. See [Appendix 5](#) for a selection of current academic work and projects

The consultation was wide-reaching in scope in a relatively short time.

1.1 Reach

Face-to-face sessions took place in Newcastle, Leeds, Coventry, Leicester, Peterborough, Oxford, and London, with two supplementary online zoom sessions, one targeted at the South West region, and the other a platform for people nationally. An additional four people were interviewed on zoom. An online survey was also developed. Overall, the consultation reached **94 people**.

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

1.2 Equalities monitoring data

In terms of who took part, 90% of consultees filled in an Equality and Diversity monitoring form giving some interesting data which demonstrate intersectionality in relation to the consultees: people intersect across multiple protected characteristics, as do the stories they want to tell.

“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

The d/Deaf, disabled, and Neurodivergent monitoring figures are complex inasmuch as many people wanted to identify under more than one category and did. There are therefore 48 (34%) people identifying as disabled plus 23 (27%) as Neurodivergent. Additionally, there were 6 d/Deaf consultees, with 4 people either preferring not to say or not knowing. A total of 22 respondents (26%) identified under more than one category. There are 7 people who recorded a ‘no’ answer i.e. not disabled.

Gender

53% of all respondents were female, with only 31% male. 8% described themselves as non-binary.

Sexual orientation

42% of consultees identified as heterosexual. 18% identified as queer, 18% as bisexual with an additional 2% describing themselves as lesbian, with 5% gay men, giving an over ‘queer’ figure of 43%. 13% of consultees preferred not to say.

Age

75% of those who took part in the consultation were aged between 20 and 49 (39% aged 20-34 and 36% 35-49). 18% were aged between 50 and 64, with 2% over 65. 5% of consultees preferred not to note their age.

Ethnicity

60% of consultees were white British, Scottish, Irish, or Welsh, with a further 11% white other. This group were made up of Europeans including people from the Balkans, Holland, and Iceland. One individual identified as Jewish (which is both an ethnicity and a religion). The remaining 29% of people were made up of African and Asian diaspora, including 6% who had an Irish traveller or gypsy heritage.

Go to [Appendix 2](#) for tables for the data above.

2. SCOPE OF THE CONSULTATION

There were multiple conversations in advance of the consultation to focus on where the discussions might lead with key VX players including the Executive Director, General Manager, Chair of Trustees, trusted creatives in the shape of Isobel Hawson, On Tour Ltd/Consultant Producer, and Hassan Mahamdallie, Artistic Director Dervish Productions / Artistic Associate.

The starting point was around the Labs being an experimental space, with a desire to open up the conversation and not close it down. In many ways this led to the structure of the Lab consultation as a series of open propositions, to scope widely, rather than narrow down the conversation to what we already knew. Nonetheless, the structure of the final section of the consultation very much tested the Labs original content as initially conceived by VX.

The consultation workshops were limited to an hour and half. The basic workshop followed this structure:

- A pair introduction exercise: who you are, why you came today, and artistic practice.
- A small group exercise asking: what's needed for you to do your best work? What's needed for you to be seen and heard?
- A whole group post-it exercise to ask who else (outside of the arts) could be included
- A final small group exercise which was a prioritising exercise on themes taken directly from the original application (plus a couple of others)

The questions asked in the online survey are listed at [Appendix 3](#)

3. RESPONSES

3.1 Introduction Exercise

3.1.1 Who are you, why you came today and artistic practice.

There were a wide range of participants across a number of art forms.

22% of those in the room were writers, 9% theatre makers, and 17% actors (in large part accounted for by visiting Ego Theatre's actor training programme.) 5% of participants were also directors, and 3% producers. 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. (See [Appendix 4](#) for the spread of art form practice). But researchers, digital artists, stage managers as well as an ex-drag artists, comedians, and facilitators.

3.1.2 Why did you want to come today?

The reasons for taking part in the consultation varied with a key focus on wanting to share experiences and perspectives, and to improve practice broadly:

"I guess I think there's just a lot in the arts, specifically around disability, that's just not addressed or that's not always dealt with in the best ways. And I have a lot of different experiences with that. I'm always very, like, happy to give my perspective on it, because I do think more needs to be done." (consultee interview)

Another consultee said:

"I'm interested in talking about intersectionality and what that is about."

A Leeds consultee was very clear that she wanted her say:

"This was my nearest consultation, and I just wanted to make sure that I put my two/pennorth in."

An online consultee summarised her reasons which had a lot of synergy with a number of other people:

"I was interested in today because I keep seeing the same repeats of basically the same opportunity, or the same workshop coming up, and there are huge, huge, huge gaps that no-one is even attempting to touch. Everyone is repeating the same thing, which isn't particularly useful if you've an established career."

There was a very strong strand of neurodivergent artists who feel that theatre is often not accessible for a large number of reasons with one artist in the southwest consultation keen to re-imagine theatre completely.:

"The system that I'm working on with a couple of my friends who are also theatre makers, it's called Revolution. And it's about rebuilding theatre from the ground up (for neurodivergent people). And that really is about being mindful of the disability of an audience. They're just not safe spaces, they are noisy. They are. There's lots of people, there they are, you are very close in proximity to other people. If you have to stim you get pushed in the side...they are not safe places....So, we will be taking a risk both financially and socially, emotionally, to put ourselves in those positions, right? And I am not physically safe there. Because I am different. And people might get irritated with me for making certain movements or for stimming, or for doing whatever I need to do in order to keep myself quiet. And dealing with the performance, in fact, my body is in overdrive, because I'm around so many people. And in order to keep myself safe, I have to mentally check if all those people are going to be safe to be around. And if I'm not going to irritate or offend them by existing and if there's a way around, literally being overstimulated effectively.¹"

3.2 Group exercise

3.2.1 What's needed for you to do your best work? What's needed for you to be seen and heard?

The answer to this question fell into two very distinct categories. Practical things that need to happen largely though not exclusively to level the playing field, and

then what could be described as things that support artistic development or the artistic process.

Before looking at these two aspects in more details the expectations on artists and what it feels like for them in general also came up often. The truth seems to be, unfortunately, that those surveyed don't necessarily get into creative rooms and certainly not as much as they would want and when they do the weight of all disabled people (on *them*) is sometimes perceived as overwhelming:

"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." (Newcastle consultation).

And there seems to be an elephant in the room about expectations or limitations or a list of unsaid assumptions either about what work should be made or could be made, or what's already been made and therefore should never be made again. Again, this is a perception but based on people's experiences. As one consultee from Newcastle says,

"They just see disabled people as two-dimensional. 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."

In Oxford, a consultee hit the point:

"Not all disability work needs to be worthy. We should be able to make all kinds of work...people have many different aspects to their personality. You can make disabled-led work that isn't explicitly about your disability."

The limitations, nonetheless, placed on people was expressed by the Artistic Director of Ego Arts, Coventry which works with a wide cohort of people, but focusses some of its output on training Learning Disabled actors. The Artistic Director explained that she often receives requests for actors who are Learning Disabled but only ever to play stereotypical versions of themselves or something very one dimensional, in storylines about their disability and not, for example the fact that they've been bereaved or fallen in love or whatever. Some progress

has been made on this on TV, in say *Call the Midwives*, but lots of work reinforces the challenges and not the everyday lives of this community.

The idea of disability as a lens rather than a focus of the work came up repeatedly and in every format of the consultation. The most eloquent explanation came from an ex-BBC producer who attended the Oxford consultation:

“I think it’s a common assumption that people make. If they’re trying to attract a certain audience into theatre, they think you must create a certain thing... When I worked in TV, we tried to work out what kids wanted to watch and when we asked them, they came out with Only Fools and Horses or Friends. None of them were child centred. It’s kind of a universal story, things everyone can relate to. Everyone’s been heartbroken, everyone’s been for a job they’ve really wanted. People want to watch things that gel with them, and that speak to them.”

And in Leicester, there needs to be, “...an audience for it. These stories would happen to have a writer who is disabled, and these stories will be of people who maybe disabled but not about that disability. It’s not about any battle.”

3.2.2 Practical considerations

There were many practical considerations: support, access (physical and attitudinal), effective communications, awareness raising, riders, leadership, commissions from those with lived experience, activism, space, and safety being particularly frequent. But two practical considerations came up more than any other: funding and flexibility.

Funding

Funding is critical to be seen and heard. Perhaps there is a comment to be made about the subsidised theatre sector, and the lack of available funds more broadly, but the reality is that without funding the work of most of the artists who responded to this consultation would not be made. And there isn’t enough money to go round. Curiously though, funding doesn’t mean the same thing to all people. For some people being paid is problematic because of allowances and benefits and in that case, there would need to be way of resourcing people to work effectively in whatever way could work.

Funding for access was also highlighted – including travel to and from any activity and for overcoming real (and perceived barriers). Funding should pay for all direct and indirect labour costs. Ultimately, funding was not just about money or the transaction that happens between the giver of funds and the receiver. It was about space (“the space you need to create” (online)) and time. This was described as:

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

Funding was not seen as a panacea though. Lots of people mentioned existing art commissions for disabled artists and were pleased that they were there but there was also a recognition that the size of the commission was too big a step for some people. Overall, there was a really strong theme about the lack of a career progression in any sensible or logical way, meaning that people were held in a perpetual state of emergence.

Additionally, the approach to most applications was seen as unfriendly. There was a general hope for a creative and thoughtful approach that was straight forward, inclusive and whose timescale allowed for a reasonable amount of thinking time, and where there was a clarity of expectations.

Flexibility

The other big issue to be seen and heard was flexibility. This was mostly discussed in terms of practical consideration, but not exclusively. It also referred to appealing to a broad and new demographic, and not having to do all the emotional work of commissioners and venues. This referred to either giving time and payment for individuals who had/have to flex their time to provide this often-unpaid support to non-disabled colleagues.

The key reference to flexibility seems to focus on hybrid working and scheduling to accommodate different people’s needs, “relaxed scheduling which can flex around people’s commitments or energy levels.” This would also accommodate people’s appointments of one kind or another:

“I need residencies to be remote. And I need organisations to understand that I need to work at home. That’s not being lazy, it’s you know, I cannot physically leave my home and there’s loads of artists in the same situation as me.”

3.2.3 Artistic Support

There was a recognition in most consultations that artists need support in ways that they are not currently getting from the theatre or arts sector as a whole. There is a lack of resource to provide access and openness to support effectively. This came out in a number of different ways, and largely speaking it wasn’t about the creation of ‘another scheme’ but practical solutions to enable people to succeed.

This included but was not limited to:

- Support for grassroots companies (because they do good work, with good practice and they could exchange this practice for proper support to develop),
- Mentoring to enable people to understand and learn from those who are already succeeding,
- Writing Buddy – working with a more experienced writer. This could also work across other specific theatre-based roles in a broader Buddy scheme,
- Collaborations to avoid tropes – I think there is something of the reverse mentoring to this,
- Skills exchange or support,
- Space for research and development with no strings attached.

The following quote was a lovely example of how this might work in practice:

“Energy is limited. A producer recently asked me if I wanted to pitch a project that I would lead, but I told them I can’t imagine leading anything anymore because it takes so much energy. Their answer was that there could be ways to support me to lead a process, such as pairing me with someone who could take a share of the practical tasks of leadership off me, including in social contexts like the rehearsal room.”

Online survey

“There’s not enough flexibility. Working in the arts is completely different from working in a hospital or whatever. I work as a freelance: it’s so hard to get PIP. You have to prove that you can’t do things and it’s like you can’t work this much. As far as working is concerned, it’s all very fragile and you work freelance too.”

Leicester consultation

“So much of disability access/in person barriers have involved needing to advocate for myself and I simply do not have the capacity to fight for this most days: as my access needs grow, my capacity to request them decreases. Both inventing solutions to my limitations and arguing for their implementation has burnt me out. This has led me to a “do it all myself” approach to projects that takes more time and dampens the outcome of the work because I am protecting myself from inoperable spaces and expectations. To overcome this, I would need clear expectations of the required input from me in a lab, the deadlines involved, the process and person hierarchy for requesting adjustments, and a lack of repercussion for having health limitations. Socially, having the attendees and organisers of such a space refuse to incite gossip over the attendance and reliability of others would be amazing.”

Online survey

It feels like a pivot is required for some organisations to think more thoughtfully about the way they work, and how this can be re-imagined to be more inclusive and less rigid.

3.3 Group post-it exercise:

Who else (outside of the arts) could be included?

This question was asked in relation to the idea of the labs being an experimental space, a space to invite non-theatre professionals into the room who might not normally be there to address how VX might support the development of innovative practice.

The word cloud below shows is a visual representation of the answers with the most popular ones shown in larger font:



There were conversations about this in the room to refine responses, but it's also true to say that people interpreted the question in many ways and the answers ranged from the sublime to the '*cor blimey!*' There were some that were somewhat predictable, if necessary 'access co-ordinator' or a person with lived experience, as well as some left-field thoughts e.g. prisoner, taxi-driver, explorer, alongside practical folk, for example, tax expert.

The idea of this theoretical space was sometimes problematic – and some consultees found it difficult to conceptualise. This might have been an issue with the exercise, but also was driven by exploring what experimentation might look like. And maybe experimentation is different for everyone.

This was a post-it exercise and there were multiple answers:

Co-ordinator was a particularly prominent answer and was attached on individual post-its to access and intimacy.

Lived experience, mental health worker or support are also very visible, which does exemplify a common thread throughout the consultation and across all venues. It acknowledges the need for all individuals to receive and enjoy the support they need and for this to be fit for purpose in any given room. These are also attached prominently to welfare and well-being which are obviously critical to success.

Access co-ordinators provide a single point of communication, and the co-ordinator liaises with everyone else as required:

“Someone who can advocate for you, someone who advocates for the people in the room.”

Leeds consultation

The second thing that jumps out of the word cloud is the number of professional people that one would normally expect to have in a rehearsal room (writers, actors, directors) alongside those who also are sometimes in the room to support the production e.g. lighting and sound design, stage-management, designers etc. which perhaps again speaks to the level of experience of those involved in the consultation. It does make sense to have designers etc. in the room too and for those things to be equal to and necessary to create the very best of accessible and interesting work but none of this feel particularly innovative.

There's a next level of creative who could provide a new way of looking at things e.g. gamers, coders, etc. which starts to imagine a space where there are multiple and integrated ways of telling a story. These also include film, audio,

words, and of course the idea of integrated captions, BSL and audio descriptions as standard and not an afterthought. In general, integrated tech was still seen as innovative to many.

One consultee said:

“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.” (London consultation).

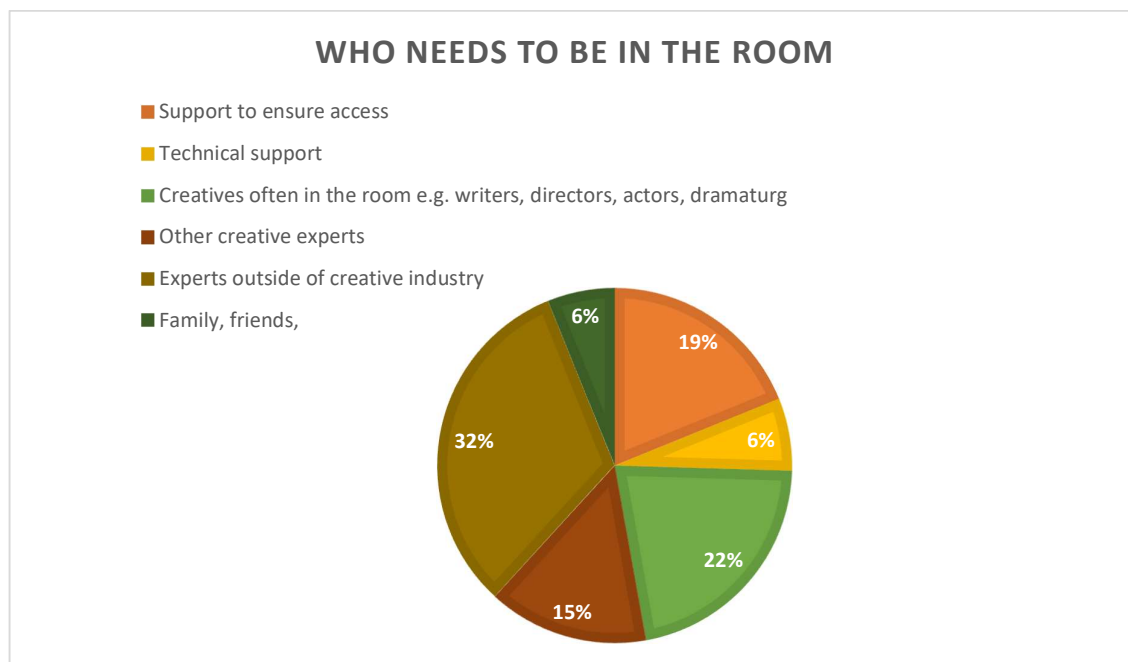
There was a general recognition that we're not where we need to be with use of tech in storytelling, and that what was considered innovative wasn't and that much theatre remains inaccessible for many. Having a multiplicity of storytelling methods was a common thread.

An interesting comment from a consultee:

“It's a bit like retrofitting an old building with a lift – often they're the, clunkiest, slowest crappiest lifts, aren't they? And I imagine that's what it's like if you try to retro fit BSL, or audio description. It's not a good experience. Captioning has to be in from the start.”

Responses could be grouped into six categories:

- 1. Support to enable access (19%)**
- 2. Technical support (6%)**
- 3. Creatives usually/often in the room (22%)**
- 4. Other creative experts (32%)**
- 5. Experts from outside the industry (32%)**
- 6. Family and friends (6%)**



Leaving aside the first three which have been covered above, there is some value in looking at the remaining categories which are both interesting and wide reaching.

Family and friends slightly bucks this trend as it seems at first glance to fit more in the category of support to ensure access and advocacy but it does also go further than that for some people in that it was having people on your side, with your best interests at heart who are thinking only of you and is akin to a well-being co-ordinator in a touring show who looks out for the interests of the performers (and that is all.) On the flip side, someone suggested a child “because they will tell you if it’s rubbish!”

Other creative experts pull in a huge number of potential collaborators who generate new and interesting ways of working in addition to the film, gaming, multi-verse suggestions. This group includes circus performers, clowns, and comics, all of whom would bring something different to the table and provide an additional lens for how stories are told and understood, and inadvertently plays into relatively well-worn paths e.g. Comedia dell’arte, troubadour, light relief (e.g. the porter in Macbeth) or trusted outsider who cuts through heavy stuff.

The largest group in terms of who needs to be in the room is experts outside of the creative industries at 32%. These also fall into a number of sub-categories, some of which are not without controversy.

These range from medical experts (which generated throughout the consultation a very mixed response

“I wouldn’t want anyone from a medical background anywhere near a rehearsal room, they’re not to be trusted.”

Oxford consultation

with some people naturally very suspicious of the medical professions and others feeling that the scientific way of thinking would push thinking in new and innovative ways.

Other professionals like social workers also make an appearance as a resource, to sense check and extend knowledge:

“I’m always fascinated by people who see people at their lowest and for a writer that’s really interesting and I’d be interested in having them talk about their work.”

Leicester consultation.

Sports people was also a very popular choice, because these things are linked in our collective conscience because they require enormous expertise but are considered non-academic but enhance physical movement in space.

Some of the more original suggestions included aliens, railway controller, time traveller, and Harry Potter experts.

Scientists, engineers, and architects crop up often enough for a mention – and which would if implemented see the world very differently and ask different questions that might otherwise emerge.

Lay person also crops up two or three times and this is seen as a sort of anti-expert who will cut through the process and ask simple but thoughtful questions of process, story, and product:

“For me it’s about getting some who doesn’t have the theatre language or knowledge.”

Newcastle consultation

3.4 A final small group exercise:

Prioritise themes of interest

Of all the activities this was the most contentious, with the most disruption (in a good way). Many consultees found it next to impossible to prioritise, or agree, but it did generate a lot of conversation.

The question was essentially: *thematically, what's on your mind?*

Here's the list of suggested themes for the exercise:

- 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
- Non-hierarchical devising practises
- Nothing about us without us
- Real connections to venues
- Social Justice
- Visibility

There was cynicism about why these choices were made, and also a degree of not understanding why these had been chosen against other things, and there was not a huge amount of consensus across groups, with non-hierarchical devising splitting opinions divisively more often than anything else:

"...it doesn't work in reality. It just goes round and round and round in circles until someone has to have the final say."

National Consultation (online)

“We used non-hierarchical devising elsewhere, and it took into account where people were starting the process.”

Leeds consultation

“Although it is clear that a number of people in the room are asking (internally at least) will it work? You can’t completely remove the hierarchy because someone needs to drive it.”

Leeds consultation

There was a strong following for the idea of non-hierarchical devising in theory, because intuitively it feels like the right thing to do, but in practice – particularly from jobbing creatives – it just seems impractical.

But then, none of the terms were defined, and this was also problematic for some:

“A lot of the items on the Theme list are really broad. What I think of as cultural change is probably very different from what someone else thinks of. The same with social justice for example, itself a loaded term for some (me!)”

National Consultation (Survey)

It is interesting to view responses to the list of themes above across the different regions:

In the **London** consultation innovative inclusive theatre practice was decidedly unpopular, with a strongly made argument that such practice should be standard, not innovative. However, there is a counter argument that for much theatre is not remotely innovative or inclusive.

There was a different approach to the prioritisation exercise in **Newcastle**. A consultee suggested that the structure of the arts and culture sector which makes decisions – and not always understandably – one way or another about who gets funds and who wins and who loses, and that it is broken. This is felt quite keenly by people, and it seems neither fair, nor reasonable. There is an unspoken but deeply felt idea about quotas which drives some people to not necessarily want to discuss or share their experience of disability. This seems to

be taking us no further forward to equality or equitability and away from the Social Model of Disability. This idea of hiding came up often enough to be mentioned, but also there was a fierce pride at play in an individual's disability:

"My disability is integral (to me). You can't take it off and put it down."

Leeds consultation

This sat alongside a keen preoccupation with just telling the stories that need to be told.

The conversation was rangy but also people fell on both sides or indeed somewhere in the middle about words. This related to tech but also to any tech that makes things accessible:

"People think accessibility is about one thing, but the truth is once you've made it accessible to one group of people, it then becomes immediately inaccessible for someone else."

In **Leeds**, the exercise was done as a collective because of the small size of the group. The most interesting moment came with a discussion about intersectionality, when someone felt they couldn't work with a company that was transphobic or homophobic. The reply was:

"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."

And this led to a further conversation about the need to tell complicated stories.

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

In the **online national consultation** there was a very interesting discussion about visibility and that should be at the top of the priorities so that the way disabled artists work and are supported is normalised, but there was also a recognition that disabled people aren't paid properly, and with a clear understanding and

reinforcement of what others have said elsewhere that in fact, visibility comes at a cost:

“As a disabled artist you get one chance to fail and that’s all. Once the wrong person has seen you fail, that’s not just you, that’s any part of an activity that shares your disability potentially not getting booked again. So I think the room you work in needs to be small and everyone in it needs to prove they have an understanding of and commitment to disability arts.”

In the **South West** consultation one person was interested in the following:

- Chronic illness vs disability
- Models of disability (e.g. social model - does it still work?)
- Intersection between disability and queerness
- Disability and physical theatre

None of which are on the initial theme list, but nonetheless provide a clear steer on areas of interest, with intersection between disability and queerness having a very clear resonance with large numbers of those in the consultation more broadly.

In the online survey, there is a broad commentary from everyone, but this comment stands out, with an interest in competing and complimentary access:

“Sensory differences and how to create a space and a piece that is really sensorially accessible and actually it could use aspects of sensory stimuli in order to create a really impactful piece, because it would include other ways of getting a point than just hearing people talking about something or watching people's body language- like use of colours, mirrors to just reflection, dance or physical theatre or something else that is really creative, unique and new that different people could think of.”

The **Peterborough** group were largely made up of independent artists, and this was reflected in their choices. Notably they prioritised leadership, funding, and real and sustained change – which absolutely speaks to who was in the room.

In **Oxford**, consultees prioritised ‘nothing about us without us’ and ‘non-hierarchical devising’ with ‘innovative inclusive practice’ and intersectionality racing behind (with the caveat of storytelling and cast.).

Finally, in Leicester the group focused on the creative space, and the drive to write and complete work which forced up ‘visibility’ and ‘nothing about us without us’ to the top of their list :

“The Arts is seen as a vocation, a bit like nursing – I went on strike once, and I was standing outside the theatre with a placard, and the audience went past us and said ‘you should get yourself a proper job’ sort of thing as if those aren’t real jobs.”

In the end the desire of the group was about the sort of space they want to work in:

“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 a free-flowing space.”

4. 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, drip 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.

5. 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.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Our thanks to:

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Philippa Cross, Executive Director, Talking Birds

Vici Wreford-Sinnott, Artistic Director, Little Cog

Alice Barber, Creative Producer and Programmer, Red Ladder Theatre

Team

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@vitalxposure



APPENDIX 1:

List of Partners

Arts at the Old Fire Station, Oxford: a centre for creativity in Oxford housing two organisations: the homelessness charity Crisis and Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS).

www.oldfirestation.org.uk

Attenborough Arts Centre, Leicester: a socially and civically-engaged public cultural venue based at the University of Leicester, producing visual arts, live performance, learning, community and research programmes.

www.attenborougharts.com

BOLD Elephant, London: a versatile building supporting artists and presenting theatre work. They also offer writing rooms, self-tape rooms, mentoring and co-working space, to theatre freelancers.

<https://boldtheatre.com>

Ego Theatre, Coventry: a well-established theatre that works with everyone to create original, eclectic, radical work.

www.egoarts.co.uk

Interplay Theatre, Leeds: specialise in working with a range of ability and age ranges and their performers and staff are also all highly trained in working with young people with a range of complex needs.

www.terplaytheatre.org.uk

Landmark Theatres, Peterborough: is a portfolio of regional theatres in North Devon and Peterborough. Predominantly receiving houses, they host a range of product, including theatre.

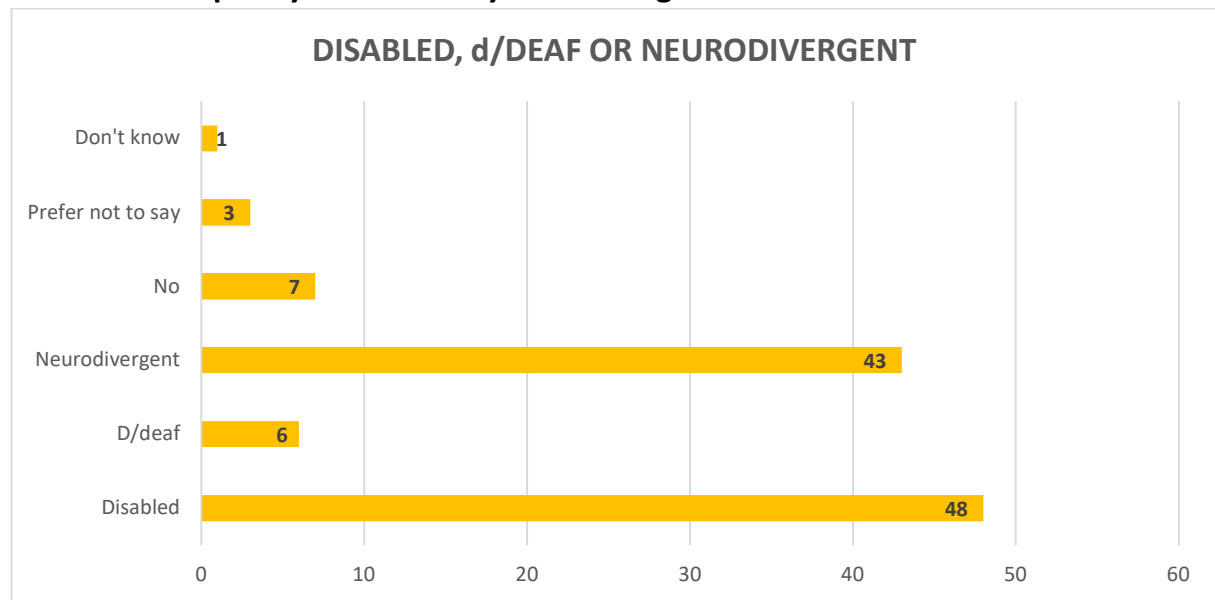
www.newtheatre-peterborough.com

Live Theatre, Newcastle: Live has an international reputation as a new writing theatre. As well as producing and presenting new plays, it seeks out and nurtures creative talent.

www.live.org.uk

APPENDIX 2

Charts with Equality and Diversity monitoring data



Numbers and (percentages) per response:

Single identification

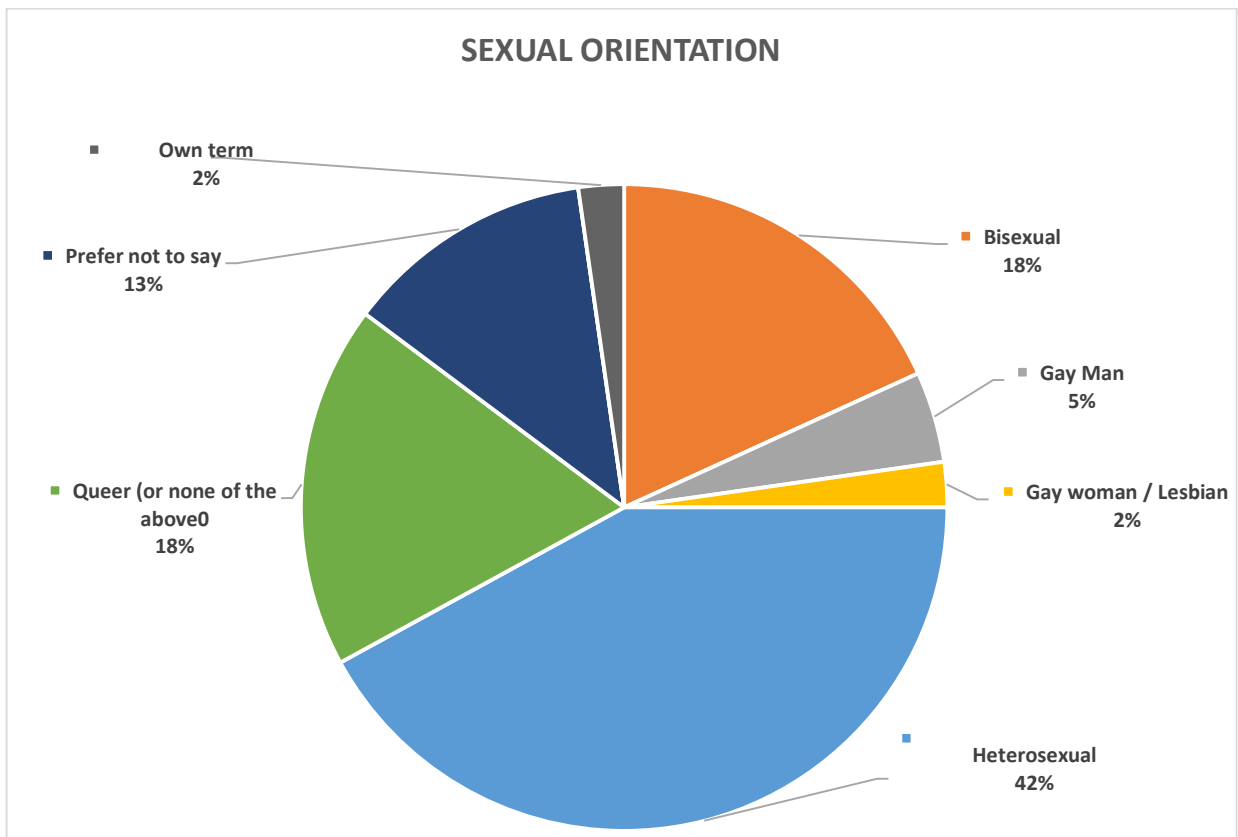
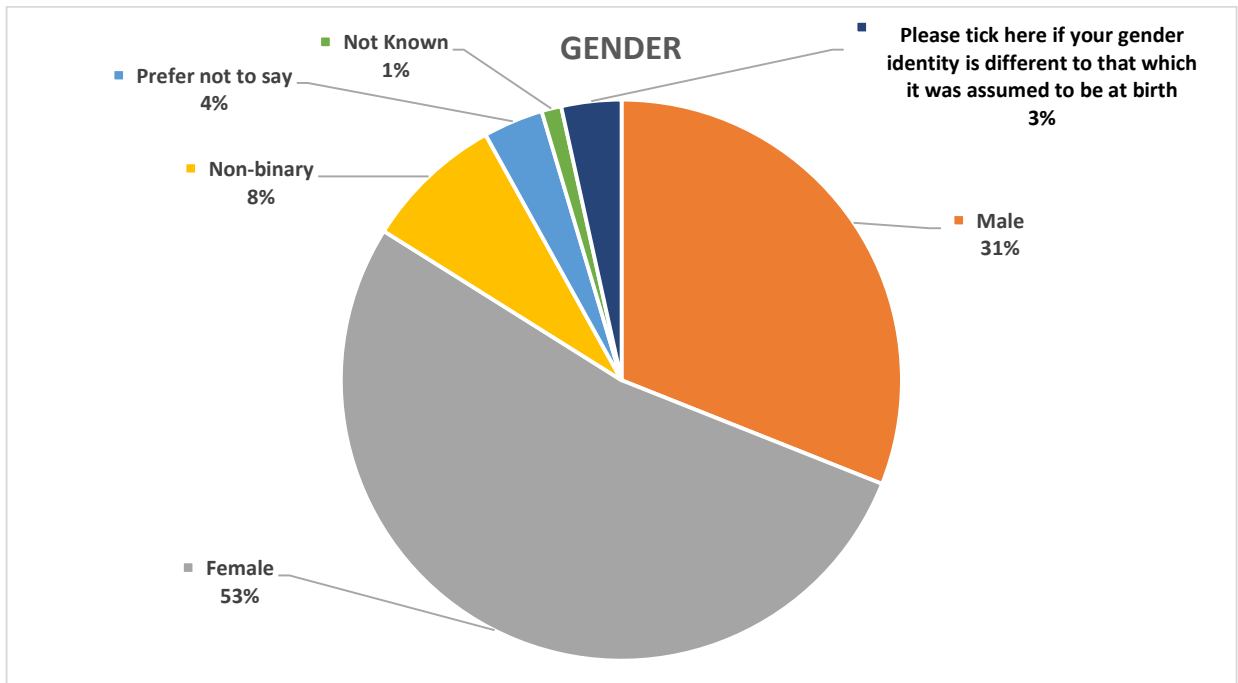
- Disabled: 29 (34%)
- Neurodivergent: 23 (27%)
- Answered 'no': 7 (8%)
- Prefer not to say: 2 (2%)
- Said they didn't know: 1 (1%)
- D/deaf: 1 (1%)

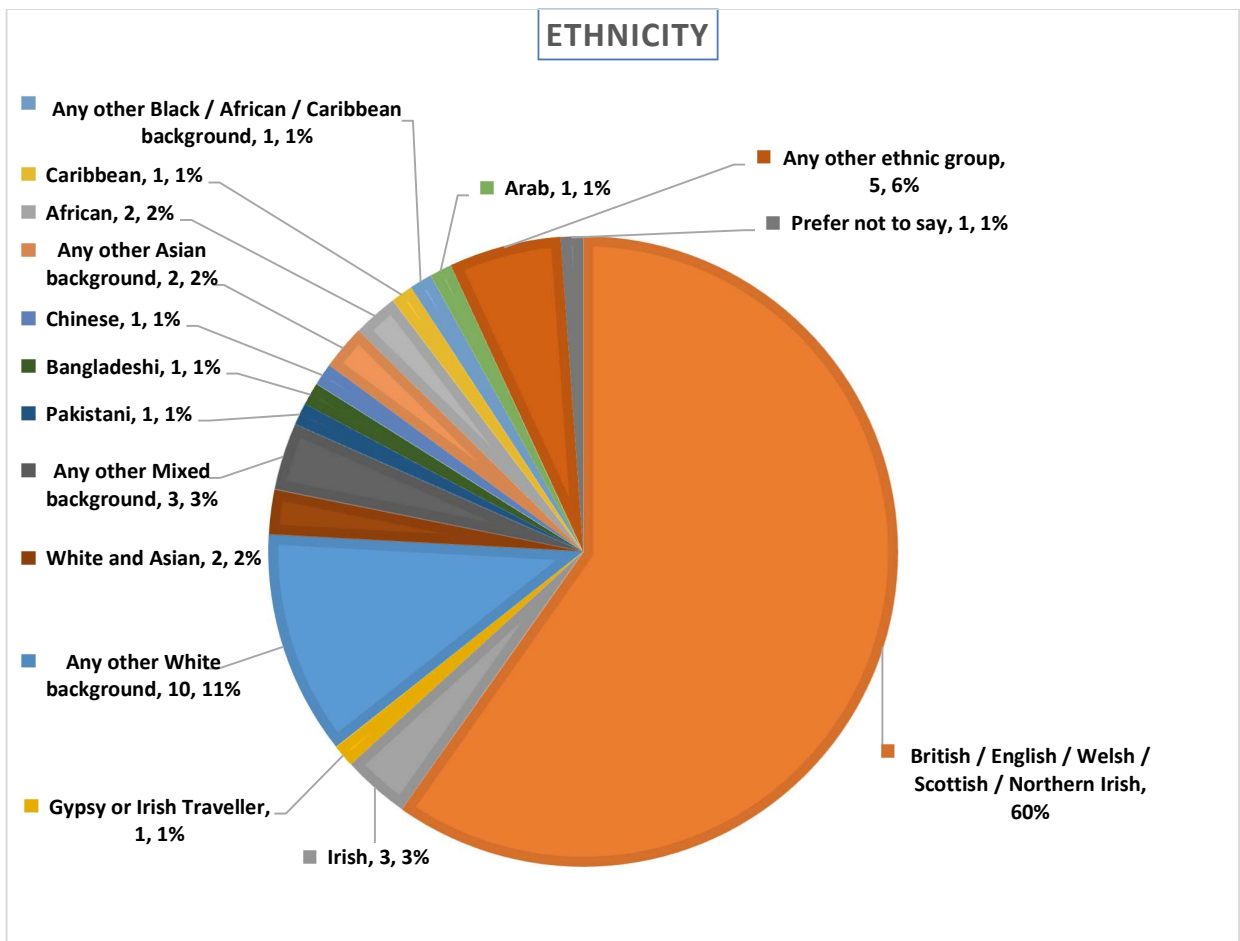
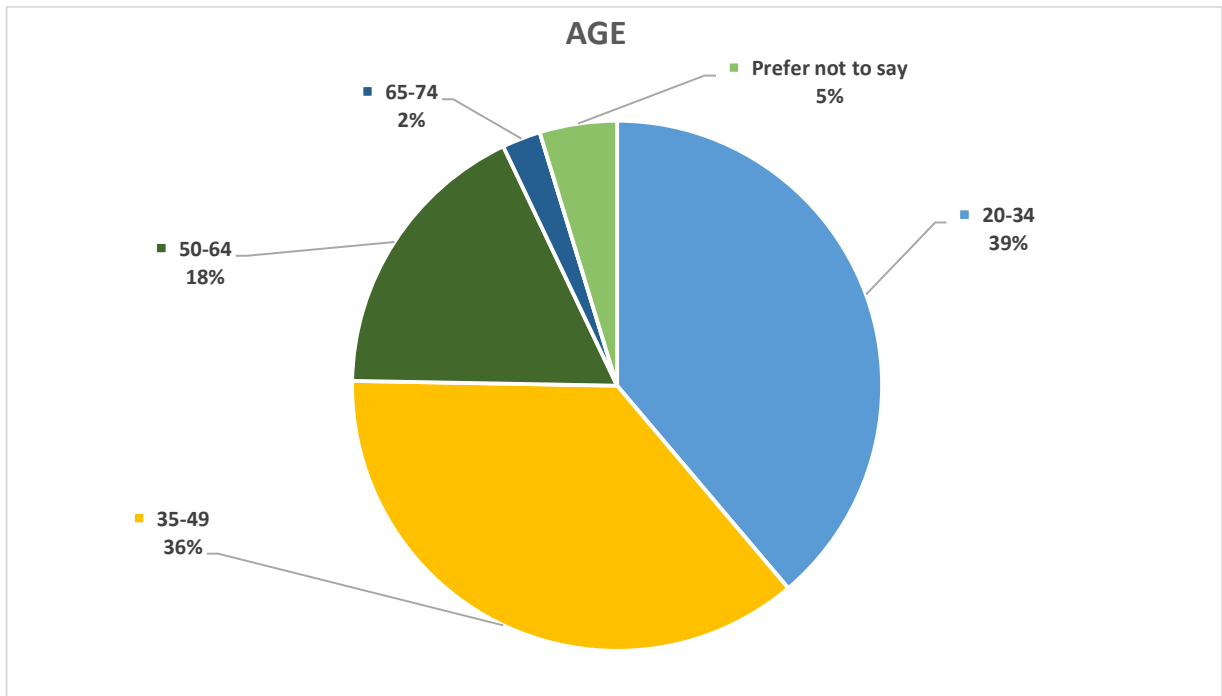
Double identification:

- Disabled and Neurodivergent 16 (19%)
- d/Deaf and Neurodivergent: 2 (2%)
- d/Deaf and Disabled: 2 (2%)

Triple identification:

- Disabled, d/Deaf and Neurodivergent 1 (1%)
- Disabled, d/Deaf and Prefer not to say: 1 (1%)





APPENDIX 3

ONLINE SURVEY QUESTIONS

Vital Xposure Consultation - have your say!

Vital Xposure (VX) are a disabled-led, new writing theatre company promoting hidden voices with extraordinary stories to tell. For 12 years, VX has been creating and touring work informed by stories from people often exclude or under-represented in society and the arts.

We are currently consulting about the content of a series of laboratories (or 'labs' for short: theatre making residencies) that will take place between 2024 and 2026, for disabled, d/Deaf and Neurodivergent theatre makers and creatives. VX are really interested in what the community feels is needed to deliver the labs to ensure the best results that will really make a difference to how theatre is made and presented.

The survey will take less than 30 minutes to complete. If this form is not accessible to you, please contact Mandy on vxlabs@vitalxposure.co.uk We look forward to receiving your thoughts!

Warm regards,

Vital Xposure team

www.vitalxposure.co.uk

YOUR THOUGHTS

Your answers will not be another 'box-ticking' exercise! Through **VX Labs**, we want to be surprised with ideas, imagination, fresh processes in making and presenting theatre that we have not dreamt of yet

- 1. How would you describe your art/creative practice?**
- 2. What do you feel is needed to create a successful theatre making space that makes you feel seen and heard?**
- 3. VX are keen to develop an innovative space for making theatre: who do you feel would need to be in the room for this to happen?**
- 4. Why should this person be included?**

5. Thematically, what's on your mind?

Please rate how important the following are on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being not important at all and 5 being very important.

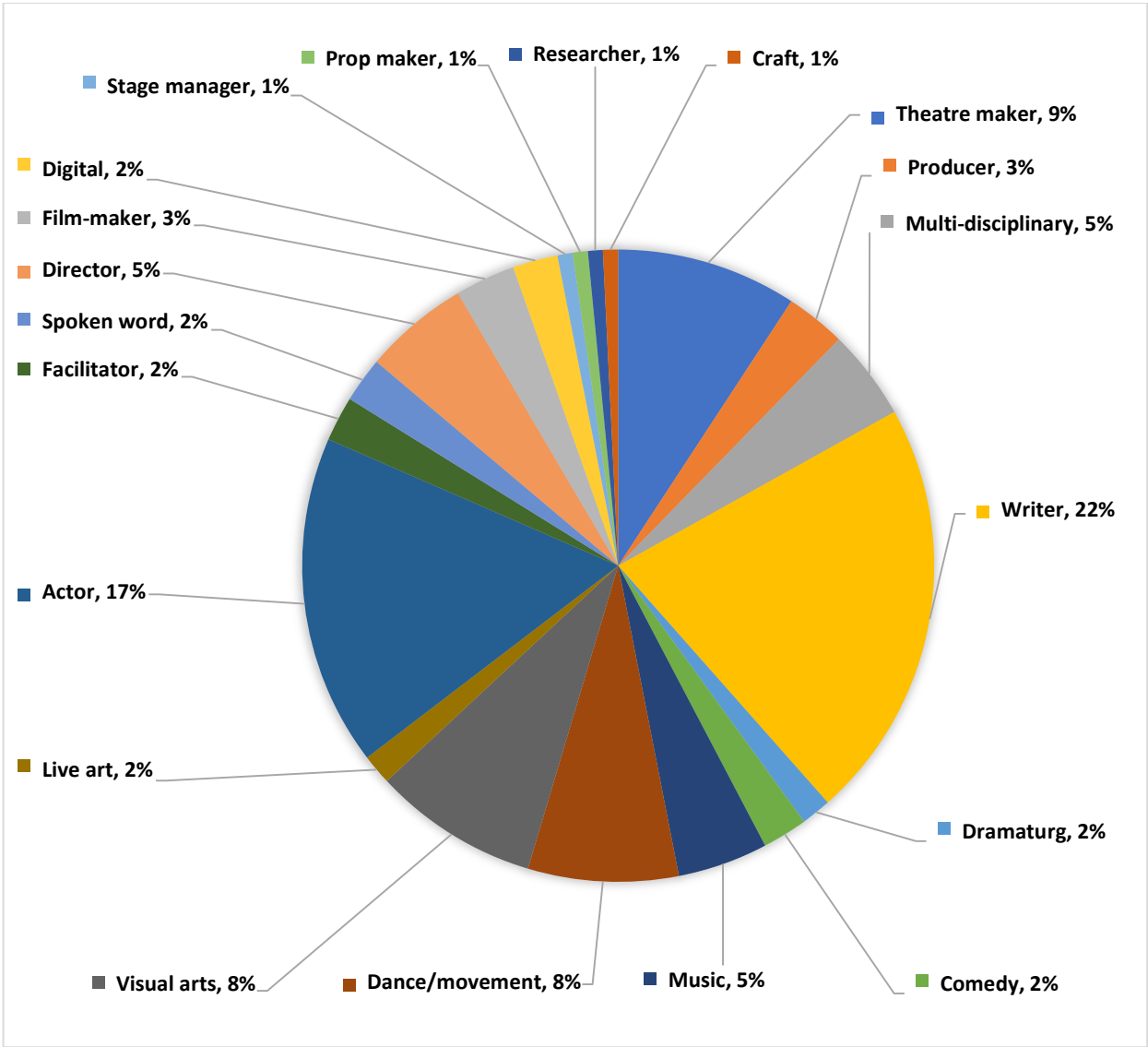
- Climate Emergency
- Cultural Change
- Digital Tech for accessibility
- Digital Tech for creativity
- Funding
- Innovative inclusive theatre practice
- Integrated British Sign Language
- Integrated Creative Captioning
- Intersectionality
- Leadership
- Non-hierarchical devising practises
- Nothing about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

6. Did we miss anything from the list? What else would you add?

7. Any further thoughts or comments?

APPENDIX 4

Artistic Practice



APPENDIX 5

University of Kent: module called Disability and the Arts, delivered by Shaun May, who has a wide research interest including comedy and autistic spectrum disorders.

<https://www.kent.ac.uk/courses/modules/module/ARTS5220>

Birkbeck, University of London: module Visual Cultures of Disability, delivered by Suzannah Biernoff.

<https://www.bbk.ac.uk/courses/modules/arvc/ARVC291S7>

York St. John University. Institute of Social Justice: they have a current project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and delivered in collaboration with disability arts companies. The project is called: *I'm Me: Identity, Representation and Voice*.

<https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/news/2023/im-me-creative-project/>

Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London: course for people aged 18+ delivered in collaboration with Access all Areas and Skylight.

<https://accessallareastheatre.org/artist-development/performance-making-diploma-2023/>

D4D – Disability and Community: a large scale programme funded by the Arts and Humanities Council. Academics include Martin Levinson, Bath Spa and Sue Moffatt at Keele University. Elements delivered by Sue Moffat Director at the New Vic Theatre in Stoke on Trent, and a research fellow at Keele University

<https://d4d.org.uk/>

Sue Caudle, research on learning disability and leadership Manchester University:

<https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/defining-moments-leadership-and-learning-disability-theatres>

Brighton University, the development of online space for performance:

<https://research.brighton.ac.uk/en/projects/collaborative-solutions-for-the-performing-arts-a-telepresence-st>