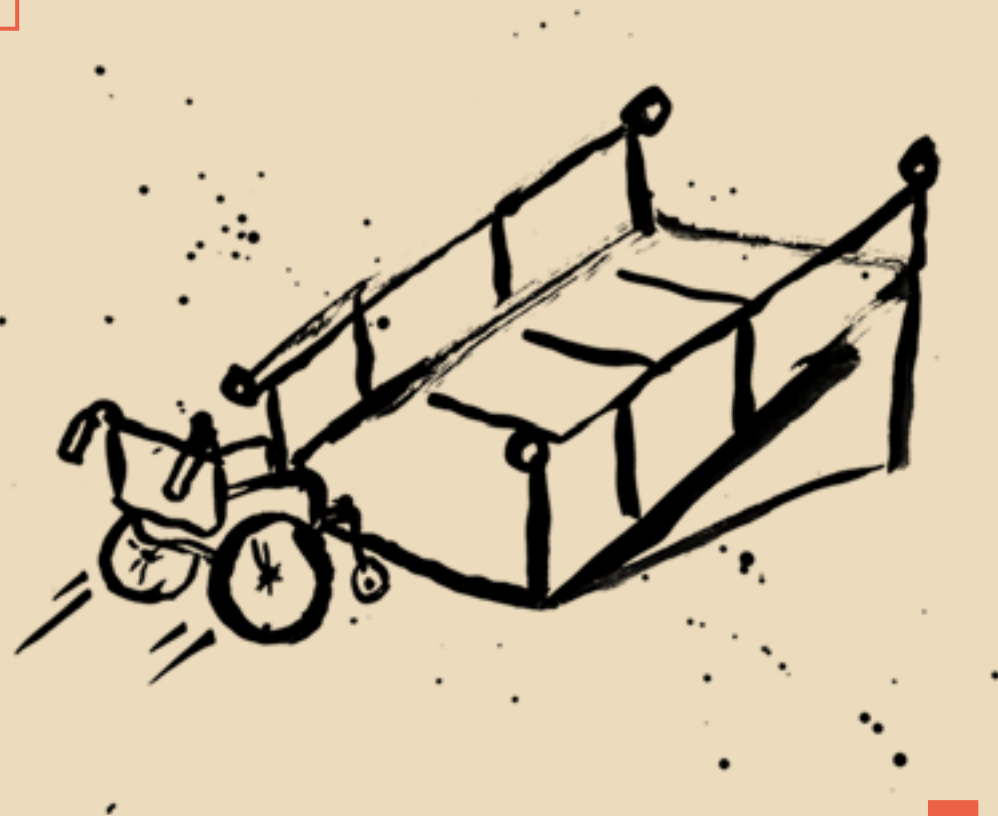
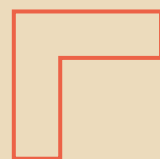


CVAN EM Toolkit

Written by
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Jo Tolley

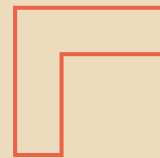
Commissioned by
Contemporary
Visual Art Network
East Midlands
(CVAN EM)

A Brief Guide to Combining Accessibility with Creativity



About	3	How to make creativity more accessible: Our recommendations	13
↳ Mission statement	4	↳ Working with disabled/neurodivergent artists	15
↳ Who are we as artists?	5	↳ A person-centred approach	15
↳ The importance of the toolkit and how it aligns with CVAN EM's project objectives	6	↳ Accurate representation	15
The current climate: Questionnaire results	7	↳ The freedom of self-expression	16
↳ Question 1	9	↳ Accessible funding processes	16
↳ Question 2	9	↳ Act upon feedback	16
↳ Question 3	9	↳ Supporting art experiences for disabled and neurodivergent audiences	17
↳ Question 4	10	↳ Opportunities for audiences to use their work access tools	17
↳ Question 5	10	↳ Accessible locations	17
↳ Question 6	10	↳ Using accessible language	18
↳ Question 7	11	↳ Basic accessibility	18
↳ Question 8	11	↳ Awareness training	18
↳ Question 9	11	↳ Arts taster days	19
↳ Question 10	12	↳ Avoiding conformity bias	19
↳ Question 11	12	↳ Legacy and long-term suggestions	20
		Conclusion	21
		Credits	23

About



Mission statement

This toolkit aims to provide action-based and meaningful recommendations that open dialogue between arts and culture organisations and the spaces they occupy within the communities that they serve. With the recognition that often an organisation has little to no resources to support artists or audiences who identify as having a disability, neurodivergent thinking or a health condition, we aim to remove such accessibility barriers at the door, promoting inclusivity, effective communication, creativity, and equitable cultural institutions.

Who are we as artists?

[Benjamin Rostance](#) (he/him) is a working-class artist, born and based in the East Midlands. Rostance creates artwork predominantly in the form of photography, sound, video, and performance. When combined they document and share snapshots of his lived experience of childhood trauma, unpredictable mental health, and his experience of growing up in a large, poor working-class family in the U.K. The context of Rostance's art is also informed by his desire to find peace in recovery, coping mechanisms and resolution wherever it can be found. He draws heavily on his 16 years' experience of working in the health and social care sector to inform much of his attitude towards positive ways of coping with trauma. Rostance has exhibited in galleries across his hometown of Nottingham and was selected for New Contemporaries 2021, with exhibitions in Colchester and London respectively. He is currently doing an Internship at the Backlit Gallery in Nottingham as the resident Mental Health Coordinator.

[Jo Tolley](#) (she/her) believes in the vibrant, unstoppable force attributed to finding your own lane. An energetic writer, artist, and facilitator with lived experience of Cerebral Palsy, Jo is an all-round advocate for disability integration. Jo is passionate about ensuring accessible arts opportunities for all and leaves no stone unturned in offering an alternative perspective to breaking down barriers within society. Jo strives to create a new trajectory for disabled communities by championing equity and diversity, promoting self-acceptance as the key to positively influencing how disability is portrayed and understood.

The importance of the toolkit and how it aligns with CVAN EM's project objectives

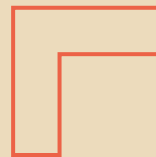
As outlined, in our Mission Statement we want to highlight the importance of ensuring everyone has a positive, fulfilling, and inspiring experience when engaging with arts and culture activity. Our toolkit is part of CVAN EM's Professional Network Grants project, delivered with Art Fund support. Together we strive to bridge the gap of inequalities and under-representation for disabled or neurodivergent artists and audience members, considering access within programming, commissioning, and engagement. In addition, and through our own lived experience, we know that there is an unequivocal need for carers to be recognised by organisations and more broadly in society for their invaluable knowledge, training, and experience.

This toolkit will aid in the effective communication between disabled/neurodivergent communities, their wider support systems and arts and culture settings. As a result, organisations will be better equipped to tailor spaces and experiences to support audiences and artists. Best practice will determine that organisations collaborate with these individuals to adapt any general access policy and procedure to be more fitting to their person-centred reasonable adjustments.

To emphasise equity and inclusivity in an accurate representation of society, the toolkit will look to eradicate the stereotype of who can make and enjoy art. By its very essence, creativity has no boundaries, so neither should creatives. It is our mission to break down the barriers of inaccessibility in the sector to enable everyone to create spaces for conversation, community, and culture.

The current climate

Questionnaire results



In October 2021 a questionnaire was completed by artists, creatives and arts audiences with lived experience of disability or neurodivergent thinking. It was shared directly, via organisations in the region and on CVAN EM's social media platforms. Participants and carers were also invited to attend online discussion sessions to share their feedback if this format was preferred. The information presented below has been included to illuminate current opinion of the accessibility of arts and culture organisations, with a focus on the East Midlands. It was important for us to include and platform the voices of creatives from the disabled/ neurodivergent community, to ensure that the advice and guidance given was a direct response to their access barriers.

It is recognised from the outset that the responses to the questionnaire are not wholly representative of the demographic. Due to the networks in which it was shared, the data is courtesy of fellow artists and creatives based in the East Midlands, and not the wider population. Instead, the data collected provides a richer perspective that comes from lived experiences and offers a regional insight.

Question 1

Have you visited a gallery before? If not, can you tell us why?

Happily, 12/13 people who engaged with the questionnaire said they had visited a gallery before.

Question 2

How many times have you visited a gallery?

Of the 13 responses, answers ranged from “5” to “too many to count”.

Question 3

Are you able to travel to see art? If not, can you tell us why?

In the responses to this question access issues prior to entering arts spaces become apparent. Many of the respondents stated that “logistics of public transport” prevented them from visiting galleries that weren’t local. Other participants confided that their disability - whether physical, social, or emotional - was the main barrier. In addition, financial implications, as well as the relaxing of COVID-19 safety measures also impacted audiences making it more difficult or impossible for some to travel to see art.

Question 4

Have you ever avoided entering a gallery before? If yes, can you tell us why?

The responses here suggest that some commercial galleries can be “unwelcoming”, initially “alien” and “inaccessible”. Couple these comments with responses that allude to sensory overload due to overwhelming, clinical scents and avoidance due to crowds and it’s clear that some spaces do not always adopt a person-centred approach. Feedback also points to there being a divide in ‘class privilege’ which makes audiences feel “unwelcome” in an “intimidating” environment.

Question 5

When you visit a gallery, how often do you see art and artists that represent and depict life in a way that you recognise as being similar to your own life experience?

Respondents unequivocally said that diverse representations of disability and neurodiversity are not embedded in gallery spaces. On evaluating the responses given, the absence of accurate representation at first appears to be because of a lack of artistic depictions of disability. However, there is a recognition that not every disability is visible and so it is difficult for some audiences/artists to see themselves in any portrayal. Irrespective, communities would “love to see more in art galleries to do with disabilities/diversities”.

Question 6

When you are inside a gallery, do you feel:

In this list of multiple-choice statements given, most respondents said that when inside a gallery they felt “happy” and “inspired to make their own art”. On the other hand, over half also said they “do not understand the words used in galleries”. Given the prior acknowledgement that most of the participants are creatives, the latter statistic is concerning. If creatives are struggling to access the language used, this poses an even bigger barrier for wider publics and audiences/participants without a university education in the arts, taking us back to the issue of ‘class privilege’.

Responses

I feel happy: 7	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
I feel anxious: 5	● ● ● ● ●
I feel inspired: 7	● ● ● ● ● ● ●
I feel worried: 0	
I understand the words: 8	● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
I DON'T understand the words: 4	● ● ● ●
I feel out of place: 5	● ● ● ● ●
I feel the gallery is accessible: 5	● ● ● ● ●
I feel the gallery is NOT accessible: 2	● ●
I worry audio description won't have transcript: 1	●
Prices can be a barrier entry: 1	●
I feel rushed: 1	●

Question 7

Do you feel safe and protected when using creative spaces like a gallery?

It's clear from the answers received that despite the many access barriers faced by respondents, galleries and arts spaces are still considered to be safe spaces for disabled or neurodivergent individuals.

Question 8

Can you tell us ways that a gallery could adapt itself to make you feel more welcome and comfortable during your visit?

Responses to this question give organisations plenty to consider. All suggestions centre on “making [art] more inclusive for people with disabilities”. Ideas include:

- More seating
- No fluorescent lights
- No plug-in air fresheners
- Making spaces more suitable for family visits
- Events/exhibitions that cater for audiences who experience sensory overload e.g., designated ‘quiet times’
- Ramps as opposed to stairs
- Be aware of surfaces and materials that create an echo
- Less blurb on artworks

Question 9

Do you feel gallery staff need more training for diversity and inclusion? If yes, what training would you ask them to undertake?

Like the response to the previous question, suggestions are vast, and present ideas for action that would make venues more holistically accessible:

- Dementia awareness and allocated sessions for this community
- LGBTQIA+ awareness training
- Antiracism training
- Disability awareness training which is inclusive of invisible disabilities
- Socio-economic awareness training
- Training on all protected characteristics, made accessible and co-produced in collaboration with artists and audiences

Question 10

What is art and how do you experience it?

This question was included to illustrate that art is universally accessible when presented in accessible formats, providing audiences with multiple points of access. Answers included: “emotion communicated through the senses”, “life captured”, “a way to express myself”, “storytelling”, “art is culture, culture is art”. The most poignant responses were “any creative practice” and “I create”.

Question 11

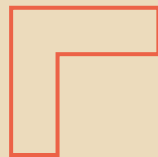
Do you feel that arts and culture organisations you have worked with in the past have shown best practice in supporting your access requirements throughout the commissioning process?

Can you tell us how they did or did not support your access requirements?

Responses to this question were mixed. Some opinions suggest that applying for funding is not an easy or accessible process for disabled artists and that it is “hard to find the correct opportunities”. Some expressed that access requirements are a “nightmare” within organisations, making artists feel unvalued. In contrast, some respondents stated that galleries were “accommodating”, “kind” and “understanding” when it came to sharing and acting on feedback given by artists around access and inclusivity.

How to make creativity more accessible

Our recommendations



Based on the information gathered through the questionnaire, coupled with lived experiences of living and working within the disabled community, in partnership with CVAN EM we would like to recommend the following. By no means is this an exhaustive list, however, we hope our suggestions are a starting point for arts and culture professionals, with a focus on those in management and leadership roles, to begin a conversation around accessibility that leads to a commitment to action and organisational change.

Working with disabled/ neurodivergent artists

A person-centred approach

Many artists/creatives practice because they have found a method to express their differences and unique lived experience through their work. It is important that organisations recognise these differences and embed a person-centred approach into their own practices when communicating and working with every artist. This must come at the start of a relationship and continue through to project evaluation.

Accurate representation

For there to be diversity within the arts sector, emerging and more established artists alike need to feel inspired by others and work that reflects or offers some insight akin to their own lived experiences. By providing more/different opportunities for artists to present work outside of an exhibition format (e.g., workshop, residency, public sharing event, screening, performance, reading group, or exchange opportunity) organisations could support the presentation of work by more artists and so from more diverse backgrounds with a focus on those currently under-represented by the sector. Likewise, organisations need to do more to recruit and support staff with disabilities, ensuring representation within their staff team with a focus on senior and management positions. Tools for workplace inclusion published by Rebuilding Heritage can be found [here](#). Work around access must not be carried out solely by disabled members of staff.

The freedom of self-expression

Innately, disabled/neurodivergent artists implement many different artistic processes that may not be used by their non-disabled/neurotypical peers. Reasonable adjustments need to be made organisations to better support how artists develop and present their artwork. For example, facilitating an alternative method of communicating the blurb that accompanies an artwork (e.g., use of braille, audio, or large letter copy) and locating work in an accessible area in the gallery, considering factors including lighting, noise interference, height of work, and avoiding installation approaches that might obscure work (e.g., vitrines with opaque sides). This, in turn, will make artwork more accessible for more audiences.

Accessible funding processes

For artists to seek and succeed in opportunities that are right for them, funding applications need to be less complex and be made available in alternative formats. In the case of a funding body of an organisation accepting video applications, more information may need to be given as to how artists complete the process (e.g., format, where to upload, question prompts and information around duration of response). Organisations could provide training for staff to carryout processes over the phone and provide tools and links to appropriate existing resources including [Access Docs for Artists](#). Financial support for artists with access requirements should always be written into funding applications made by organisations, this might include financial support for artists to be able to participate in a long-term project, or support by way of skills development for artists to make their work more accessible.

Act upon feedback

For all of the above to be successful, organisations must actively ask for, and act upon feedback. This process needs to be ongoing and involve all areas operating within an organisation (e.g. HR, gallery staff, and marketing). At the pinnacle of making creativity more accessible is the ability to start an open dialogue between artists, audiences, and organisations.

Supporting art experiences for disabled and neurodivergent audiences

Opportunities for audiences to use their work access tools

Using the example of an exhibition panel, text about a show is typically presented on a gallery wall, organisations can use approaches that offer different points of access. For example, including a QR code next to a panel that an audience member can scan using their phone, a device that a disabled or neurodivergent person might use day to day as a tool, equipped with apps to support their access needs. This could bring up an audio or large letter version of the text or present the text on a coloured background or on the backlit phone screen.

Accessible locations

People with disabilities and neurodiversities may be limited to where they can travel. Therefore, it is important that organisations think about the spaces they inhabit, exhibitions don't always need to be presented in traditional gallery settings. Organisations can look to support the development and delivery of artwork in the public realm, working with local authorities or online/hybrid activity. 'Virtual galleries' might be a worthwhile line of development for many organisations, seeing venues providing high quality virtual tours of physical exhibitions. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, many organisations have implemented approaches to sharing work and events online, though this may improve access for some, many struggle within a virtual environment, or are unable to access or use tools or software. Online activity also removes many of the person-centred approaches that make for positive interactions and experiences of art.

Using accessible language

One major barrier in accessing arts and culture venues is the language used on gallery panels, website content, promotional leaflets and by gallery staff. Communicating with less jargon and using terms that a larger percentage of the wider public can understand is key. For example, it might be advisable to have an easily accessible glossary of terms for visitors to use, these can be presented both in the gallery and online, with access being central to the visitor experience before they even enter the venue.

Basic accessibility

Basic accessibility adjustments which universally cater for everyone are vital, such as lifts, ramps, automatic doors, seating, and accessible toilets. Audience members with sensory conditions may need access to hearing loops, braille, audio descriptions or BSL. It would be useful for organisations to consider easy read texts and the ability to alter colour contrasts on texts for those who may find 'original formatting' difficult to access. For some neurodivergent individuals, access can be improved by implementing adjustable lighting, quieter periods and the removal of factors that may contribute to sensory overload. Organisations should approach access at the start of the commissioning process, ensuring that the artist who may or may not have a disability considers how their work will be accessed, and who by. Considerations around making work more accessible are essential, e.g., using captions in video work, making work available online for audiences unable to access the gallery and ensuring immersive installations are made physically fully accessible for wheelchair users.

Awareness training

Organisations should have a comprehensive induction training programme for staff and volunteers. Venues should continue to provide opportunities for additional training and support, with an awareness of requirements through conversation with staff, artists, and audiences. Training should include access to disability/neurodivergence and LGBTQIA+ awareness courses and antiracism training, with a focus on intersectionality. Training should support staff to appropriately handle incidents of abuse or discrimination directed at members of the public, occurring onsite or online during programmed activity, minimising harm. Mental health first aid training should be made available to staff with focus on individuals in management or team leader roles and public facing members of the team. Where possible, training should be conducted by professionals or artists and creatives with lived experience.

Arts taster days

As stated in the previous point, disabled or neurodivergent people can find it challenging to feel included in arts settings. Therefore, to create more diversity within audiences, staff and artists should work with communities of interest in an environment that they are familiar with and feel comfortable in. Again, art doesn't have to be experienced in conventional settings and initial 'offsite' participation opportunities for new audiences may allow participants to feel more comfortable with visiting a more traditional gallery setting.

Avoiding conformity bias

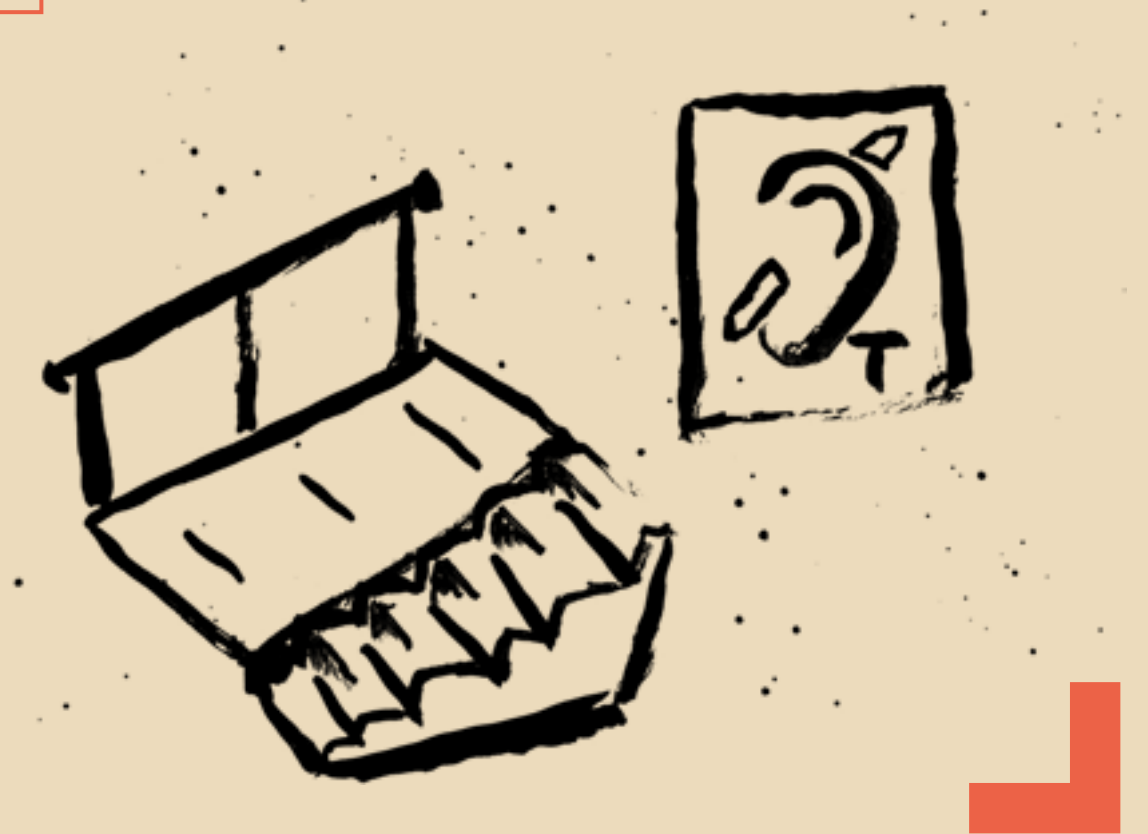
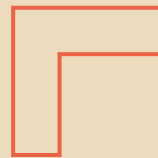
These adjustments must be carefully considered by an organisation in dialogue with their audiences, what works for one venue may not work for another.

Legacy and long-term suggestions

CVAN EM, Colette Griffin, Jo Tolley and Benjamin Rostance hope that this toolkit becomes a catalyst for generating positive change. With time and investment this project has scope to evolve and reflect the access needs of specific demographics. We invite feedback and welcome organisations to get in touch to speak in more detail about how they can implement suggestions outlined in this toolkit, to make their venue more accessible and more inclusive. We hope the toolkit can elicit ongoing collaborative conversation between arts organisations, artists, and audiences across the East Midlands. One approach that we hope to develop in conversation with others to achieve some of our aims is a **sticker system**. The system would be designed to represent an individual's needs, not their disability. Staff in organisations across the region would be trained to recognise and act on this simple system, to easily understand how to better cater to an audience member by observing the colour of sticker they are wearing, if the individual chooses to wear an access needs identifying sticker. To realise this concept, we hope to design **workshops** to support the implementation of the scheme. Sessions would be led by individuals with lived experience, with

the aim of broadening an organisation's perspective on how art is created and accessed by those with different needs. We hope that by supporting creatives and giving them control over the content and format of a workshop it will open doors for work and employment opportunities for disabled and neurodivergent individuals.

Conclusion



This toolkit is by no means a definitive guidebook of how to make arts and culture organisations more accessible to disabled and neurodivergent communities. We acknowledge that each disabled or neurodivergent person is different and has varying access needs. We hope that by using the toolkit you will be able to make your organisation more accessible and diverse, sharing your progress and learning with CVAN EM and other venues in the region. Disability is not fixed, and organisations need to continue to provide opportunities for conversation, to listen and to develop best practice. Creativity is universal but more needs to be done to make it accessible!

Benjamin Rostance and Jo Tolley, in collaboration with Colette Griffin, Regional Director of CVAN EM.

If you would like to share feedback or request the toolkit in a different format, please contact CVAN EM at info@cvaneastmidlands.co.uk

An audio version of this document, read by Benjamin Rostance is available [here](#).

A Brief Guide to Combining Accessibility with Creativity has been developed with Art Fund support as part of CVAN EM's Professional Network Grants project. Addressing Inequalities and Under-representation in the Region's Sector is focused on establishing a firm foundation to positively impact on public programmes and commissioning in the East Midlands. For more information on this project please visit www.cvaneastmidlands.co.uk

This toolkit was commissioned in September 2021 by Contemporary Visual Arts Network East Midlands (referred to in this document as CVAN EM), under the supervision of Regional Director Colette Griffin.

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CVAN EM is the Contemporary Visual Arts Network for the East Midlands, working alongside 8 other regional networks to amplify voices, debate, and democratic change across the sector. We are part of the national Contemporary Visual Arts Network, an organisation where visual arts meet policy change. CVAN EM celebrates and supports arts and culture in the region, fostering an inclusive long-term future for the sector, emphasising equity and access for all arts workers. Our strength lies in our network.

Freyja Perkins is an East Midlands-based editorial illustrator specialising in political portraiture.

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