Action Research Group
Inclusive Recruitment

October 2023 – March 2024

Introduction

Diversifying our staff teams is a key agenda across the sector and certainly for most arts centres. Many of us have reviewed our recruitment policies and practices with varying degrees of success. There is a growing body of expertise in this area, but time, resources and finding appropriate advice and support for different circumstances are all barriers to making effective changes.

We set up an Action Research Group of Future Arts Centres members to explore these issues and this document shares headline learning and 'top tips' from that group.

Purpose of the Action Research Group

- To explore and test a range of practical approaches to improving inclusive recruitment for staff teams
- To understand models of best practice and how they might apply in different circumstances
- To help develop new models and approaches that support an equality, diversity and inclusion agenda for the sector

Membership and timeline

The group met five times in the period October 2023 to March 2024.

The group consisted of 10 arts centres:
- Battersea Arts Centre, London
- Cast, Doncaster
- Corn Exchange Newbury
- Dundee Contemporary Arts
- Eden Court, Inverness
- Lawrence Batley Theatre (Kirklees Theatre Trust)
- Norden Farm Centre for the Arts and Curve Venue, Slough
- Old Fire Station, Oxford
- Rich Mix, East London
- The Met, Bury

What happened?

We started by asking what inclusive recruitment meant in our different contexts and why it was important. We defined 'inclusive recruitment' as 'ensuring that there are fair and equal opportunities for all candidates during the whole recruitment and selection process.'

It is of course, a huge and wide-ranging topic, inclusivity means thinking about anyone who may be excluded, and inclusivity and diversity have different meanings in different contexts. It is also impossible to consider in isolation, and we were mindful that we need to reflect on the working environment and the culture of our organisations as well as the policies and procedures.

The elements of the recruitment process we considered included:

- Advertising (including use of community networks etc)
- Application packs – job descriptions, person specifications etc
- Selection – shortlisting and interviews
- External support – consultants and headhunters
- Induction, on-boarding and ongoing support

The group discussed a reading list of existing guides and toolkits (some reference included in Useful Links at the end of this document) and, over a period of six months, shared resources and learning whilst applying new approaches in their own arts centres. They reflected on the success of different approaches, and the barriers to applying them, finally agreeing a few 'top tips' to pass onto others.

Two external speakers shared their experience with the group. Helen Jaffa, Head of People at Watershed Bristol, talked about some of the impressive work they have been doing in this area. Shonagh Reid, from Spotlight Inclusion, who has worked with companies in the arts such as the National Theatre as well as organisations in other sectors, provided a wide-ranging perspective.

> "It was really interesting to hear how others do it. Peer-support models allow you to share what you're doing well, and hear how other people are approaching things. In a way that isn't "this is how you do it", but "this is what's worked for us".
> Jessica Jhundoo-Evans, Corn Exchange Newbury

Learning and Top Tips

The learning ranged from understanding the process of making change happen within organisations to practical tips about what to try and what approaches might work during the process of recruitment.

Making change happen

- **Incremental change** – as much as we fantasise about the big radical changes which will fix things, this is a long game. Given how many urgent priorities we all have, it's much better to try out small practical changes, allowing yourself to consistently think and adapt around this issue, rather than try everything at once.
- **Quick wins** – that said it's always useful to design a few 'quick wins' in any change process for motivation.
- **Toolkits** - can be useful but the sheer range of literature on the subject can be overwhelming. Yes go looking for inspiration but don't get bogged down with the 'reading list'.
- **Measure progress** – there is a real power in documenting what you've done and it helps to keep momentum.
- **Celebrate success** – reflect on your progress, maintain enthusiasm by celebrating success, even if it's minor (or feels cringy).
- **Create accountability** – report data back to your teams, to the Board. One suggestion which has proven successful is to create a cross-team internal working group to measure and drive progress.
- **Share resources** – this group found it incredibly useful to share and pool resources, from where to advertise to great interview questions, creating useful templates to use rather than toolkits.
- **Change the mindset** – work across teams, embed training and, where possible, prioritise how we use our money and resources.

"The overarching things we've done seem like minor improvements – like tiny adjustments to wording – but they feel important... We now have a wider pool of applicants and more variety of applicants."
Salomeja Arelyte, Dundee Contemporary Arts

Dealing with pushback

Most of the group experienced some pushback or resistance from staff teams or Board. We reflected on the things which make people resistant to change, from workload, capacity and staff feeling they're at the sharp end, to people having a different perspective and not placing the same value on this work.

It can be difficult to make change feel safe and build trust, though a lot of the tips in the previous section may be helpful. It also helps to point to other organisations that are trying things out and making progress.

It is important to have clarity across an organisation about why you are doing this, and not just to rely on assumptions that everyone understands or recognises why. Busy managers are understandably resistant to doing things differently if they aren't looking at the long-term goals and reasons that lie behind the change.

We need to clarify why it's important in a clear and confident way, not just as a 'good thing' to do, but necessary, meeting a need and bringing benefits to the organisation and the sector. The sector clearly needs to diversify to remain relevant and justify public funding in the longer term.

Potential audiences need to see themselves represented in the public facing teams of venues, and a diversity of thought and perspectives in staff teams enables more robust decision making and encourages new approaches to meeting the needs of changing demographics. Ultimately this work will strengthen staff teams, build stronger businesses, and help us diversify and build audiences.

Preparation and planning

The need to find someone quickly when someone leaves can feel paramount, but we must accept that good recruitment may take longer. Some useful tips included:

- **Rolling recruitment** – maintain a recruitment pool, or a bank of CVs, for casual and operational roles.
- **Extended notice periods** – if good recruitment takes longer, one way to buy more time is to extend notice periods, there's no reason why a month or three months should become a default setting.
- **Engagement** - consider Open Days, connect your youth programmes (and others) to entry level job opportunities, perhaps offering training and taster days. Recognise that all engagement across the organisation can make a positive contribution."
- **Networks** - nurture community networks so they're keen to share your jobs, making sure you're reaching beyond the 'usual suspects'.
- **Simplify processes** – how can you streamline the processes, appropriate for the role, do you need formal applications for all roles? Some of the group found it useful to invite video applications as well as written ones.
- **Be prepared** - be job pack 'ready', with a pre-prepared template, updated regularly.
- **Use the data** – we all tend to have a lot of data about past recruitment rounds but don't necessarily use it. It can be helpful to use the data to reflect on what's missing, what's needed and works.

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Getting the *'right'* message out there

- **Vision and values, actively selling the role** – communicating your vision and values in job packs is important in reaching the right people. Thinking about selling the role and the organisation to potential candidates is as essential as defining the role and what kind of experience you need. Think about detailing the learning opportunities in the role, and focus on what's positive about working for your organisation.
- **Focus on language** – beware of different lenses, don't make it feel like a closed club, avoid arts-speak, acronyms and jargon - and don't make the candidate you're looking for sound intimidatingly perfect.
- **Streamline the job description** – what do you actually need in the role, ask the team, consider how you might future proof this role? Keep the language simple and direct, focus on outputs rather than outcomes, remove the requirement for formal qualifications. Many of the group found it helpful to remove the desirable section of the person spec, and limit the essential to as few elements as possible.

As a slight side issue, we did discuss the uses of Artificial Intelligence for both recruiters and applicants. Despite obvious cautions, this could become extremely useful in the future, and will be the subject of further work undertaken by FAC in the coming months.

"*The biggest thing, to me, has been reconsidering how we sell the organisation to a potential employee. Not as a recruitment process, but centralising why the Met is a good place to work and putting that out into the public domain. That's switching the process around... We're a values-led organisation so it's about us pushing-out and sharing those values clearly.*"
Victoria Robinson, The Met

"*The biggest change that we've seen so far has been to our job descriptions. We just had a recruitment round and got the most diverse pool we've ever had...*"
Negede Assefa, Rich Mix

Selecting the best candidate

Interviews are an imperfect process, and we did spend a while considering what might be the alternatives. We concluded that they were necessary, although for some roles there should be a greater emphasis on practical tests and paid 'try-out' shifts. To make interviews as effective as possible, we suggest:

- **More diverse panels** – consider inviting people outside the organisation onto panels to provide a different perspective or external expertise. Invite young people or people from other parts of the organisation onto panels – this can be an invaluable development opportunity as well as providing fresh eyes.
- **Screening (or shorter interviews for more people)** – if there are a larger number of people who might be suitable, do much shorter, online, first interviews. Or ask someone to call candidates to screen them ahead of the first interview. It means you aren't randomly culling the shortlist, and you can often be pleasantly surprised by people who were less impressive on paper.
- **Validate non-professional experience** – encourage people to draw on their experience from not only work settings, but from home, education, voluntary settings etc.
- **Ask good questions** – share good questions from previous experience, and be mindful of language and the need for clarity. Most of the group found it helpful to send out questions in advance. However, we were aware that this doesn't help all candidates, as some tend to over prepare and script their answers, so it may be better to indicate the areas you will be covering and any specific examples you are going to ask for, rather than the actual questions.
- **Conscious bias** – there is a debate around the value of unconscious bias training, but we did say that it can be helpful to actively name any conscious bias in interview settings, to then be able to deliberately set it aside.

Inductions and onboarding

We discussed a holistic and practical approach, with a 3-6 month timeline (and sometimes up to 12 months), for effective inductions. Almost all of us felt we needed to tighten up our approach, and ensure the process established a clear 'welcome', was consistent and values-led, and allowed people to meet everyone and understand the workings of the organisation.

For many, particularly entry level roles, we suggest an informal check in with candidates to allay any unnecessary worries before they start – many people might worry about things like what they'll do for lunch or what to wear.

Organisational culture

We are inviting people into our organisation, and we want to ensure that people from diverse backgrounds can thrive not just survive in that environment. It's important to consider what it's like to work in your organisation, the organisational culture, the balance within teams and the sense of self-belonging. It's good practice to undertake regular anonymous staff surveys to gain a clearer perspective on these issues.

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Impact on Organisations

Below are excerpts from stories captured from participants using the Most Significant Change methodology, which show some of the impacts of being part of the Inclusive Recruitment group for individual members:

> *"Our people are now more comfortable talking about inclusivity. When I'm sharing back with the team and executive, that's now in the context of a continuing dialogue, which is enabling ongoing changes. That's the key change: conversations around equity, inclusivity and therefore recruitment are now much more on the radar of the exec team."*

> *"It's given me confidence, and us confidence as an organisation, in our processes... In my role, I can only advise. But I realised that I could change the environment...That was empowering. It was personally really good for me to see how I can make an impact. I learnt a lot about how to communicate the need for change, to advocate and explain the need for change to other people. It was helpful to be part of an external group in this; it was helpful to say that others were implementing change."*

> *"Ultimately, going through all these processes allows for a fairer recruitment process, and opens-up one another's minds. That's what I experienced in the group through peer learning – you could bring new ideas and, whether they were good or bad, you got to discuss it all in a safe, open forum and take the learning."*

"Overall, it gave the freedom to do things differently – that was a real theme throughout the whole process. It also re-affirmed that we're on the right path...I know it's entirely about where we put our focus. Where we put our focus, is where we will see change...that's what blossoms and grows."

"Internally, there's now more of an openness to questioning our processes ... Now, we've given space to challenge each other, within our team. We're willing to ask the harder questions. This is now a priority for us... It's been so powerful to learn how to have these conversations."

"In this group, I've personally been challenged about my ideas about recruitment. We're all guilty of sometimes getting stuck in a rut. But that doesn't make you inclusive, and therefore that doesn't give us diverse organisations. So, this has personally, challenged engrained ideals that inhibit me or the organisation. You don't get that kind of challenge in this this kind of role, as a Chief Exec, very often."

"The most significant thing, for me, was having a period for reflection – and the encouragement of being in a group with others... For ambitious people coming up through management roles, it's really exciting to be in those conversations... but we need to make sure we're connecting to the right people, and that's what this group felt like."

Impact for
Future Arts Centres

In establishing the Action Research Groups in our first year as an independent, funded organisation, we wanted to set out with enough of a framework that everyone could understand what we were doing, whilst also allowing space for our work to be informed and influenced by the needs and interest of our members.

The element of peer learning was one of the most valuable parts of the process and we quickly identified that incremental change was the most realistic approach for this subject, particularly given everyone's time constraints and multiple priorities. The element of our work that members most value – reflected in the feedback from this group too – is the power of the collective to tackle isolation and build confidence. A group supporting each other also provides accountability, ensuring there is momentum even if change is incremental.

Overall the experience has helped inform our approach for future work; to adopt a more flexible framework, less rigid in structure and more dynamic in building events and activities as we go, responding to what we are hearing.

Useful links

Accessible Employment Guide - Attitude is Everything

Recruitment and Workforce Development Toolkit | Arts Council England

Socio-Economic Diversity and Inclusion in the Arts: A Toolkit for Employers - Jerwood Arts

How we are reimagining recruitment at Watershed | Watershed

Anti-racism | Inc Arts Unlock | United Kingdom

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