Research and Evaluation of the National Youth Theatre's Assemble Programme

FINAL REPORT

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

1. Executive summary

1.1. Background

The National Youth Theatre (NYT), in collaboration with National Youth Arts Wales (NYAW), secured funding from the National Lottery Community Fund's Bringing People Together programme to run a local inclusivity programme, known as **Assemble**. The programme aimed to promote collaboration between disabled and non-disabled young people, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and establish grassroots inclusivity networks in England (Manchester and London) and in south Wales.

To support this program, the National Youth Theatre partnered with the Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES) at London Metropolitan University to conduct research and evaluation in relation to the programme's desired outcomes and the wider context of disability and young people's cultural inclusion. This report presents the findings of the Assemble's research and evaluation project (AREP).

1.2. The context

Evidence consistently reveals that significant challenges exist for disabled people in terms of developing social interactions and accessing opportunities. For young disabled people, opportunities to socialise with non-disabled peers are limited, with 4 in 10 parents and carers reporting their disabled children and young people rarely or never have the opportunity to socialise with non-disabled young people.[1] There are also significant disparities in access to activities beyond school for young learning-disabled people. highlighted that 1 in 3 young people with learning disabilities spend less than an hour outside their homes on a typical Saturday.[2]

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[1] Scope. (n.d.). *End the Awkward*. Retrieved May 8, 2025.
[2] Mencap. (2016). Almost 1 in 3 young people with learning disability spend less than 1 hour a day outside homes. Retrieved April 17, 2025.

1.3. About NYT and Assemble

The National Youth Theatre (NYT) is the worlds' first youth theatre founded in 1956. As a charity, it exists to provide training in theatre, enabling access to the creative sector for on-stage, off-stage and on-screen roles for children and young people. Furthermore, it provides a foundation in the soft and transferable skills that theatre can create, such as teamwork, social communication, self-confidence and attendance. The NYT work from the founding point of view that theatre and the arts have the power to enrich the lives of all children and young people whether as a participant, audience member, storyteller or designer. The NYT has developed the Assemble programme on the back of pre-existing work that was meant to break down barriers to the arts and to theatre for all children and young people, diversifying the future talent pipeline for the sector and growing future audiences of creatively confident children and young people, including young people with disabilities.

To further strengthen the collaboration between disabled and non-disabled communities, the NYT teamed with National Youth Arts Wales (NYAW) in the **Assemble** programme, which was designed to enable stronger collaboration between disabled and nondisabled communities, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and build local grassroots inclusivity networks that provide ongoing community- based opportunities and progression routes for young disabled people. The programme supported young disabled people, aged 16-25, working in partnership with 10 schools (4 in London, 3 in south Wales and 3 in Manchester). The Assemble programme further aimed to empower the young disabled participants to think about progression routes from school into the arts and cultural industries, commonly held up as a sector open to inclusivity.

In total the programme reached over 120 young people with mixed support needs including moderate and severe learning difficulties (MSLD), neurodivergence and social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). The delivery included regular creative workshops in schools over two years, alongside trips to cultural venues and a final celebratory performance and event.

1.4. The Assemble research and evaluation project

The aim of the Assemble research and evaluation project (AREP) was twofold. On the one hand, we evaluated the Assemble programme itself and its impact on young disabled people who participated in it. On the other hand, our project sought to get a better understanding of the wider context withing which the Assemble programme operates.

Our methodology included both qualitative and qualitative methods. To evaluate the programme, we conducted focus groups with stakeholders, reflective practitioners' workshops, participant observation, and co-design workshops with young disabled people. We also ran an evaluation survey and collated and analysed disability statistical data from various official sources. To research the wider context in relation to young disabled people's access to cultural activities, we conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with relevant policy makers, funders, disability and cultural organisations.

1.5. Key findings and recommendations

1.5.1. Findings and recommendations of the programme evaluation

NYT have taken the research and evaluation process seriously throughout the development and delivery of programme and used it to progress the opportunities that an intervention like Assemble can provide, addressing how challenges in the first iteration can and might be addressed in future iterations.

The most significant finding of our evaluation is that **Assemble** delivered a transformative and empowering experience for young disabled people through its creative workshops, cultural visits, and co-produced performances. Our evidence suggests that the programme led to increased confidence, greater sense of belonging and more quality interactions with their peers for young disabled people, and to greater engagement with cultural and artistic activities. Overall, this demonstrates the programme's unique value in promoting young disabled people's inclusion and voice in the arts and cultural sector.

However, the evaluation also highlights persistent structural and operational challenges such as engaging with parents, some limiting aspects of working within the school system, challenges in establishing feedback mechanisms and collecting baseline evaluation metrics, accessing cultural spaces due to transport, venue design and disability friendliness, and programming constraints. Most of these are common challenges in working with disabled communities.

The following lists the key findings of our evaluation of the Assemble programme:

- *Through its programme of creative workshops, trips and a final performance the Assemble programme successfully delivered a transformative experience for young disabled participant. The young people involved were positively impacted in terms of their confidence, sense of belonging, and engagement with arts and cultural activities.*

- *The combination of creative workshops, coupled with cultural visits, and co-production of a performance event, is an effective model of empowerment that should be shared and disseminated as good practice.*

- *Engagement with, and access to parents, and building school and parent trust early in the programme is key to long lasting impact and programme success.*

- *Our report endorses the importance of the volunteer training provided by the NYT and notes the time and logistical implications such training has on the programme.*

- *Building trust and relationships between cultural venues and disabled young people and their families early on and through multiple visits is key to creating sustainable inclusivity within the arts and cultural sector.*

- *The NYT and NYAW collect regular feedback from volunteers, programme facilitators, and teachers (those who are in contact with the pupils participating in the programme). This represents an important source of insights to inform programme delivery and evaluation.*

- *Nonetheless, drawing on existing academic evidence[1] and broader best practice we suggest that effective evaluation needs robust baseline data built into the start of the programme which should include clear metrics in relation to the programme objectives.*

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[1] Bamberger, M. (2009). Strengthening the evaluation of programme effectiveness through reconstructing baseline data. *Journal of Development Effectiveness*, *1*(1), 37–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/19439340902727610

We recommend that future iterations of the **Assemble** take account of the following:

- *Working in partnership with cultural venues to share best practice could include a more focused programme of workshops with cultural organisations at local level on specific aspects of inclusivity practice including audience engagement and pathways to employment in creative industries.*
- *Prioritising time for informal socialising among young disabled people and their families in community spaces as an effective way of reducing social isolation.*
- *Taking the Assemble model outside the school system and identifying and developing an additional third safe space such as in community and other arts facilities for young disabled people would broaden the opportunities to create multiple pathways into collaborations between disabled and non-disabled communities.*
- *Communicate compelling stories of best practice and success - use Assembles' success to highlight the need for integrated cultural policy that centres disabled youth. Sharing compelling stories of change can influence funders, policymakers, and public discourse.*
- *Any theory of change supporting the programme should be supported by clear evaluation metrics and indicators alongside an infrastructure of monitoring progress and collecting data. Rigorous methods for recording and analysing feedback from the young people and other programme participants and stakeholders is key to effective evaluation to ensure young disabled participants' voices are heard and systematically recorded, and good practice shared. This will support robust impact measurement. While feedback from the young people was collected following workshops sessions in the schools by volunteers and analysed as part of the evaluation, more rigorously developed methods would be useful in future iterations of the programme.*
- *Embed co-design with young people throughout the delivery of the programme: young people should be part of the design, delivery and evaluation of the programme. To do so, creative ways to involve them as well as adequate time in the programming should be reserved for this participation.*
- *Capitalising on existing local opportunities: Strategic engagement with festivals, initiatives, and government programmes can expand impact without duplicating effort. By working*

collaboratively with established spaces, such as local arts festivals or contributing to schemes like Connect to Work, organisations can ensure disabled young people's voices are embedded early in planning and benefit from wider visibility in cultural and policy arenas.

- *Deepen engagement with schools and families: engage teachers, parents, and carers at the outset to co-design inclusive participation. Early relationship-building can enhance trust and enable more tailored programme delivery.*

- *Volunteer role in programme evaluation needs to be clearly defined.*

1.5.2. Wider context findings and recommendations

More widely, other systemic factors can enable or hinder the success of programmes targeting inclusion and access to culture for young disabled people. On the one hand, the policy divergence between England and Wales can lead to innovation and more localised approaches. On the other hand, barriers such as fragmented policy attention to inclusive culture, the underrepresentation of disabled people in the decision-making processes, and the challenging funding landscape further hinder the goals of creating a long-lasting impact and legacy beyond the benefits to the programme participants.

Some of key our key findings in relation to the wider context are set out below:

- *Enabling inclusivity requires addressing persistent structural barriers in cultural organisations in relation to funding, employment and leadership, alongside practical issues such as transport, venue accessibility, scheduling and programming. These challenges are intensified by limited partnership working, few spaces for sharing inclusive practice, weak joined-up thinking, a lack of leadership on inclusivity, and insufficient representation of people with lived experience of disability at all organisational levels.*

- *The funding landscape is challenging across the UK and across all sectors. However, organisations such as the NYT are uniquely positioned to demonstrate the positive impact that arts and culture-based interventions have on young disabled people - not only on their lived experience, but also on creating opportunities and pathways to volunteering and employment within the arts and cultural sector.*

- *Making disability and young people visible on local, regional and national agendas – the Assemble programme is an excellent example of the links between culture, disability*

Therefore, from a strategic point of view, at policy, sectoral and organisational level, we recommend that:

- *Cultural organisations take a holistic approach to organisational change to take account of the audience journey from the 'street to the seat'.*
- *Cultural organisations, together with disability organisations should develop more partnership working opportunities and sharing of good inclusive practice.*
- *There should be more collaborative working – for bidding, programme delivery and/or advocacy, aligning and partnering with organisations with a similar profile and ethos.*
- *That future iterations of Assemble focus more on areas where local policy makers have clear statutory duties to deliver, for instance around education progression into employment.*
- *To address the gaps in the provision of disabled youth arts and cultural offer at hyper local level, future iterations of Assemble should consider carefully these spheres of influence, particularly employment and pathways to employment and volunteering (in the cultural and arts sector) as this is an important potential lever for change and influence for programmes such as Assemble at local level. Policy makers locally have more levers for change and responsibilities in this space. Additionally, whilst there is scope for progress in terms of how cultural venues and the sector address the needs of disabled people, the sector has been identified as one that is more open to offering volunteering and employment opportunities for disabled people.*
- *Communicating the success of Assemble and of the barriers encountered will put the spotlight on the persistent siloed approaches in the policy space.*
- *Broaden cultural and artistic opportunities: Future iterations of Assemble should embrace a wide range of cultural forms and artistic practices, ensuring disabled young people have the freedom to engage with and express themselves in ways that reflect their own interests and identities.*

2. Disability and (non)inclusivity – the context

2.1. Social isolation

Evidence consistently highlights the significant challenges disabled people face in terms of developing social interactions and accessing opportunities. This includes a lack of connection between disabled and non-disabled communities. For young disabled people, opportunities to socialise with non-disabled peers are limited. Four in ten parents report their disabled children and young people in their care as rarely or never having the opportunity to socialise with their non-disabled peers.[2] There are also significant disparities in access to activities outside of school for young learning-disabled individuals in England and Wales. It has, for example, been highlighted that 1 in 3 young people with learning disabilities spent less than an hour outside their homes on a typical Saturday.[3] The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these disparities, with over 90% of disabled children experiencing social isolation.[4]

2.2. Disability in England and Wales

Out of a total population of 59 million, 10.44 million people (17.56%) are classified as disabled in England and Wales.[5] Wales had the highest proportion (21.63%) of disabled people.[6] In England there was an increase in the number of disabled people over the ten years to 2021, from 9.4 million in 2011 to 9.8 million in 2021.[7]

Blackpool (24.7%), Blaenau Gwent (24.6%), and Neath Port Talbot (24.6%) had the highest proportions of disabled people out of all local authority areas in England and Wales.[8] Merthyr Tydfil, where one school took part in the Assemble programme, in Wales had the highest

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[2] Scope. (n.d.). *End the Awkward*. Retrieved May 8, 2025.
[3] Mencap. (n.d.). *Friendships and socialising.* Retrieved May 8, 2025.
[4] Hill, C. (2021). *New research indicates painful impact of isolation on disabled children during COVID*. WellChild. Retrieved May 6, 2025.
[5] Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Retrieved March 15, 2025.
[6] Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Retrieved March 15, 2025.
[7] Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Retrieved March 15, 2025
[8] Yu, Q., Singh, U., Stirbu, D., Nyby, L. (2025). Benefits and Limitations of Using Data-Driven Approach to Develop Inclusivity Networks for Young Disabled People: A Case Study of Assemble by the National Youth Theatre. In: V. Bhateja, P. Patel, M. Simic (eds) *Intelligent Data Engineering and Analytics*. FICTA 2024. Springer: Singapore.

proportion of young disabled people in England and Wales in 2021, with a figure of 15.71% (995 out of 6,335), while Brent, where two schools participated in the Assemble project, in London had the lowest at 6.96%.[9] In 2021 there were approximately 7 million people aged 15 to 24 in England and Wales, 12.35% (863,890) of whom identified as disabled.[10]

Recent official data[11] on pupils with special education needs (SEN) was also analysed and illustrated that almost one quarter of young people with SEN in England have Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) conditions. A further 17% of SEN young people are autistic while 17% have a Severe Learning Difficulty and 15% a Moderate Learning Difficulty.

Data was also analysed on educational qualifications and reveals a significant education gap between disabled and non-disabled people. According to the 2021 Annual Population Survey by the Office of National Statistics, over 42% of the non-disabled population have achieved a degree or equivalent qualification, compared to just 26% of the disabled population. For young disabled people (aged 21-24), the educational trends mirror those observed across all age groups in the UK. Only 18% of young disabled people have a degree as compared with 43% of young non-disabled people. A similar disparity exists in GCSE qualifications, with 27% of young non-disabled people attaining grades C or higher, while only 1% of young disabled individuals reach this benchmark.[12]

2.3. The disability employment gap in the creative industries

In terms of disability and employment in the creative sector, there are many good practice examples, including initiatives introduced by Arts Council England[13] (ACE, 2025) , to support diversity within the sector. These initiatives and the challenges that persist have been

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[9] Yu, Q., Singh, U., Stirbu, D., Nyby, L. (2025). Benefits and Limitations of Using Data-Driven Approach to Develop Inclusivity Networks for Young Disabled People: A Case Study of Assemble by the National Youth Theatre. In: V. Bhateja, P. Patel, M. Simic (eds) *Intelligent Data Engineering and Analytics.* FICTA 2024. Springer: Singapore.
[10] Office for National Statistics. (2023). *Disability, England and Wales: Census 2021*. Retrieved March 15, 2025.
[11] Department for Education. (2025). *Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2024/25*. Retrieved September 20, 2024.
[12] Yu, Q., Singh, U., Stirbu, D., Nyby, L. (2025). Benefits and Limitations of Using Data-Driven Approach to Develop Inclusivity Networks for Young Disabled People: A Case Study of Assemble by the National Youth Theatre. In: V. Bhateja, P. Patel, M. Simic (eds) *Intelligent Data Engineering and Analytics.* FICTA 2024. Springer: Singapore.
[13] Arts Council England. (2025). Diversity. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/diversity. Retrieved 9th Dec 2025.

documented in recent Creative PEC reports[14]. Still, however, data on Disability Confident employers in the Arts and Media sector highlights there is still significant room for improvement in terms of inclusivity. While 582 employers in the Art and Media sector were listed as Disability Confident Employers in May 2025, only a relatively small number (109) are registered as Disability Confident Employers at Level 2 and only 7 are registered as having a Leader (Level 3) role.[15]

In addition, it has been reported that disabled people's engagement with and employment in creative industries highlight the entrenched social inequalities across the Arts, Culture and Heritage (ACH) workforce are persisting.[16] Again, this highlights the importance of addressing inclusivity within the arts and cultural sector in terms of employment as well as access and engagement to venues and performances.

2.4. The disability employment and pay gap

The data above on the disability education gap and on inequalities in employment in the creative industries sector, reflect the wider employment gap faced by disabled people. Disabled people face higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of employment than non-disabled people. In 2024, the employment rate for disabled people was 53.0% compared to 81.6% for non-disabled people while the unemployment rate for disabled people was 6.9%, compared to 3.6% for non-disabled people. The economic inactivity rate for disabled people was 43.1% as compared to 15.4% for non-disabled people.[17] [18]

There is also a significant disability pay and skills gap. Overall, disabled people are more likely to work in health, retail and education, in lower-skilled occupations, part-time jobs, and in low paid

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[14] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024). *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage (Creative PEC State of the Nations report).* Retrieved March 24, 2025.

[15] Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *Disability employment scheme.* Retrieved April 17, 2025.

[16] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024). *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage (Creative PEC State of the Nations report).* Retrieved March 24, 2025.

[17] Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *The employment of disabled people 2024.* Retrieved March 8, 2025.

[18] Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *The employment of disabled people 2024.* Retrieved March 8, 2025.

and zero-hour contract jobs with less career opportunities than non-disabled people. [19]

Indeed, the pay gap was wider in 2023 than it was ten years previously in 2013 (17.2 per cent compared to 13.2 per cent).[20] In 2023/24, the disability pay gap was £2.35 per hour (17.2 per cent), wider than the previous year, when it was £1.90 (14.6 per cent).[21]

One consequence of the disability employment and pay gap is that disabled people are more likely to live in poverty and recent Government announcements to cut spending on disability and sickness benefits, particular PIP (Personal Independence Payment) payments as well as delays in decision and changes to the ATW (Access to Work) scheme, have been widely criticised by disability organisations, for further increasing poverty levels among disabled people and risk negatively impacting disability employment in the sector.[22] [23]

In order to improve the employment rates, including for those with disabilities and health conditions, the Government aims to achieve an 80% employment rate, partly by supporting 'employers who employ people with health conditions' and launching an independent review into employer recruitment of disabled people whilst also highlighting that there is too little employment support for disabled people and people with health conditions[24]. The proposed new Connect to Work funding aims to support around 100,000 disabled people, people with health conditions and those with complex barriers to employment to help them get into and on in work.[25]

2.5. Disability cultural access gap

As highlighted above, across England and Wales statistics show that young learning-disabled people have poor access to opportunities beyond school and are rarely able to attend mainstream events or socialise with their nondisabled peers. Recent data[26] highlights that

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[19] Collinson, A. (2024). *Disability pay and employment gaps*. Trade Union Congress. Retrieved March 27, 2025.

[20] Collinson, A. (2024). *Disability pay and employment gaps*. Trade Union Congress. Retrieved March 27, 2025.

[21] Collinson, A. (2024). *Disability pay and employment gaps*. Trade Union Congress. Retrieved March 27, 2025.

[22] Disability Rights UK. (2025). Access to work, the best kept secret? Retrieved 9th Dec 2025.

[23] Tourettes Heros. (2025). A career-ending decision. Retrieved 9th Dec 2025.

[24] Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *White Paper: Get Britain Working*. Retrieved April 6, 2025.

[25] Department for Work and Pensions. (2024). *White Paper: Get Britain Working*. Retrieved April 6, 2025.

[26] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024) *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage*

although engagement in cultural and arts activities has increased over the past two years, but this is not taking place equally across all groups. The data shows the percentages of people engaging in different forms of cultural activities in 2023/2024, distinguishing between disabled people and people who are not disabled. Unfortunately, the data does not allow identification of specific disabilities or neurodivergences, but it does indicate that there were large differences between disabled people and non-disabled people in terms of attendance at some cultural events. For example, for attending a film at a cinema, there was a 14-percentage point difference between disabled people and non-disabled people (45% and 59%, respectively). Other large differences were found for attending a theatrical performance (34% and 43%, respectively) and live music (32% and 42%, respectively).[27]

These differences in access to cultural activities and venues between disabled and non-disabled people are shown in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1. Rates of attendance and participation in cultural activities in England, 2023-24[28]

	Theatre	Cinema	Art Exhibition	Live Music	Reading
Non- disabled	43%	59%	28%	42%	**64%**
Disabled	**34%**	**45%**	**23%**	**33%**	67%

To tackle problems related to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), policy initiative and industry commitments have been put in place[29]. Despite this, however, it has been highlighted that inequality persist in various areas, such as workforce demographics, audience engagement and participation, including in a skewed geographic distribution of job opportunities.[30] The persistent inequalities highlighted in arts, culture and heritage employment and engagement demand further and continued targeted inclusion strategies by government, funders and individual organisations.

[27] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024). *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage (Creative PEC State of the Nations report).* Retrieved March 24, 2025.

[28] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024). *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage (Creative PEC State of the Nations report).* Retrieved March 24, 2025.

[29] Arts Council England. (2025). Diversity. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/diversity. Retrieved 9th Dec 2025.

[30] McAndrew, S., O'Brien, D., Taylor, M., C Wang, R. (2024). *Audiences and workforces in arts, culture and heritage (Creative PEC State of the Nations report).* Retrieved March 24, 2025.

To summarise, what the above picture tells us is:

- The large number of people in the population who identify as having a disability (18% in 2021).
- The high concentration of disabled people and of young disabled people in certain geographical (and deprived) areas.
- The social isolation faced by disabled people.
- The inequalities between disabled and non-disabled people accessing cultural activities outside of the homes, especially cinema, theatre and live music.
- The significant education, employment and pay gap between disabled and non-disabled people.

It highlights the importance of the Assemble programme to seeking to reduce social isolation and increase young disabled people's access to cultural experiences and activities and highlights the importance of extending this more widely to focus on access to employment within the cultural industries sector.

3. Assemble Research and Evaluation Project (AREP)

3.1. Background

The National Youth Theatre (NYT), in collaboration with National Youth Arts Wales (NYAW), secured funding from National Lottery Community Fund's Bringing People Together programme to run its Local Inclusivity Networks (LINs) programme, known as **Assemble**. The programme aimed to promote collaboration between disabled and non-disabled young people, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and establish grassroots inclusivity networks in two locations in England (Manchester and London) and in south Wales.

To support this program, the National Youth Theatre partnered with the London Met Lab Centre for Applied Research in Empowering Society (CARES) at London Metropolitan University to conduct research and evaluation in relation to the programme's desired outcomes. This report presents the findings of the evaluation of the Assemble programme.

About Assemble

NYT and NYAW's Assemble Local Inclusivity Networks programme was designed to enable stronger collaboration between disabled and non-disabled communities, reduce loneliness and social isolation, and build local grassroots inclusivity networks that provide ongoing community-based opportunities and progression routes for young disabled people. The programme supported young disabled people, aged 16-25, to develop greater independence and create new friendships around a shared interest in creativity, the arts and local opportunity. The programme worked in partnership with 10 non-mainstream schools, 4 in London (one in Islington, two in Brent and one in Southwark), 3 in Wales (Penarth, Swansea and Merthyr Tydfil) and 3 in Manchester (Wythenshawe, Ashton-under-Lyne and Oldham) and over 120 young people with mixed support needs including Moderate and Severe Learning Difficulties, neurodivergence and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs.

Assemble involved a programme of two-weekly creative workshop sessions in the ten schools over the two years of the programme alongside trips to cultural venues and a final celebratory performance and event. The aim was to build connections between disabled and non-disabled communities, instil confidence in disabled young people to access and engage in their local environments, and drive impactful, lasting social and policy changes at the local level, guided by their voices and experiences.

As the programme progressed, it aimed to expand participants' social circles beyond immediate school and family environments, introducing them to new people, cultural venues, and community opportunities. Participants were encouraged to explore their local communities, develop interests in cultural activities, and pursue creative careers. Throughout this journey, the voices of disabled young people were central, guiding the programme's development and championing inclusivity. Throughout the programme, collaboration with key partners to create lasting change was a priority, including cultural institutions, local authorities, statutory services, and grassroots organisations. Alongside this, Steering Groups, including local cultural and disability partners alongside young disabled people, were set up in each of the three areas to ensure the co-production of the programme.

The overall aims of the Assemble programme were to:

- Create connections between young people and build a network of local organisations that provide ongoing community-based opportunities and progression routes into the arts and employment and create connected networks sharing best practice and the embedding of inclusion as a core value of community programmes.
- Contribute to social inclusion and community building by reducing isolation and increasing community connections for young disabled people, creating long-lasting friendships between volunteers and young disabled people, and developing an inclusive environment that fosters social bonds and networks.
- Support personal development and empowerment: by improving confidence and team working skills among participants, highlighting the creation of a supportive and inclusive environment where all young people can develop agency and leadership skills, and, most importantly, by developing independence and confidence among disabled young people.

- Enhance capacity building and local inclusive cultural infrastructure by strengthened regional infrastructure and networks for young disabled people, improving inclusive practices and creative skills among volunteers, and by supporting a better understanding of inclusive programming from community organizations and policy makers.

- Foster collaborative and policy impact and influence by elevating the lived experience of young disabled people into local policy priority and by co-designed programmes and an enhanced cultural offer that benefits both disabled and non-disabled communities, leading to social policy changes.

3.1.1. Social model of disability

The NYT and NYAW adopt the Social Model of Disability (SMD) throughout their practice. including in the Assemble programme, in which disability is seen as the result of society's structures and barriers, rather than of a person's impairment or difference. This Social Model of Disability stands in contrast to and was developed as a critique of other disability frameworks such as the Medical Model of Disability (MMD).

3.2. Aims of the Assemble research and evaluation project (AREP)

Reflecting the aims of the Assemble programme, the Assemble research and evaluation project (AREP) was framed along the following 5 research questions:

- What is the policy and local governance landscape within which the local inclusivity networks will be established? (RQ1)

- What constitutes a good and excellent end-to-end cultural experience for young disabled people and their support network? (RQ2)

- To what extent can young disabled people's voices influence decision-making? (RQ3)

- How can the local offer, in terms of inclusivity and cultural opportunities, be enhanced through the work of the regional steering groups set up by the NYT? (RQ4)

- To what extent can policy makers, parents, schools, and community partners access up- to-date information about the inclusive cultural offer and its consumption and how can better information dissemination contribute to the success of the initiative? (RQ5)

3.3. Methodology of Assemble research and evaluation project (AREP)

The Assemble research and evaluation project employed a mixed methods approach combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis as set out below.

3.3.1. Quantitative data collection

- **Census Data and production of a Disability Research Dashboard**

  As a first step in our research, Census and other data sources were collected and analysed and an interactive disability data dashboard produced. The interactive Disability Research Dashboard[31] which is an important by-product of this evaluation, provides detailed information on disability for each local authority area in England and Wales. It also includes data on different types of disabilities among pupils in England, for each local authority area and data on the numbers of pupils under Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Education, health and care Plans (EHCP).

- **Community Maps of the Local Offer**

  A comprehensive mapping of the Local Offer for young disabled people was conducted in the local authority areas in London, Manchester and Wales where the participating Assemble schools were located. This resulted in a further set of key outputs from the project in the form of Community Maps of the Local Offer for young disabled people. These community maps can play a helpful role in signposting the Local Offer to young disabled people, their parents and carers, and disability and other organisations.

- **Evaluation survey**

  Finally, following the final celebratory events, an evaluation survey was sent to parents, teachers, facilitators and volunteers, cultural and disability organisations. A total of 17 responses were received, providing insights into perceptions of different stakeholders in relation to how the Assemble programme achieved its goals.

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[31] https://nyt-dashboard.azurewebsites.net/

3.3.2. Qualitative data collection:

The qualitative data for the evaluation of Assemble was collected using the methods listed below:

- **Reflective Practitioner Workshops (RPW) and participant observation**

  We held 2 reflective sessions at different stages of the programme, with the facilitators in each of the 3 locations (Manchester, London, and three locations in south Wales). We also observed meetings with NYT and NYAW team members and gathered information from the Programme Reflection Sessions (PRS) held in each of the three locations. Through the process of facilitating reflective practitioner sessions and through observation of internal meetings we gathered rich insights into the challenges faced in the implementation and delivery of the programme and into the NYT and NYAW's capacity to problem solve, mitigate risks and adjust so that the objectives of Assemble were met.

- **Co-design workshops**

  We facilitated 4 co-design workshops with young learning-disabled people in participating schools – 2 in London, one in Merthyr Tydfil, and one in Manchester. The aim of the co-design workshops was to enable and elevate young disabled peoples voice in relation to a) the impact the participation in the programme had on them, b) what a good cultural experience looked like for them and c) their aspirations for the future. For this purpose, the LondonMet CARES brought in an expert disability co-design facilitator who worked along the research team at London Met and the programme facilitators from the NYT and the NYAW. The workshops provided an invaluable insight into how the young disabled people who took part in the programme felt about the social connections they developed, the cultural experiences they took part in, and about their future aspirations. In total, we engaged with 29 young people in the 4 schools.

- **Stakeholders Interviews and Focus Groups**

  We conducted interviews and focus groups with relevant stakeholders to gain a more granular understanding of the context in which programmes such as Assemble pursue their goals. We took an ecosystem view and attempted to include a wide range of stakeholders, from policy makers to cultural venues. In total we conducted 4 focus groups with cultural venues and disability organisations, interviewed 7 individuals representing

policymakers and funders, and 2 representatives from disability and cultural organisations across England and Wales.

- **Continuous evaluation and acting as a critical friend**

  Our independent evaluation was carefully designed along the principles of co-production and co-design. Our broader engagement consisted of:

  - commenting on NYT's theory of change and delivery programme;

  - shadowing their facilitators in schools observing the delivery of a session;

  - observing steering group meetings and team meetings;

  - attended the flagship NYT inclusivity training;

  - attending events, and the celebration events at the end of the programme in London and Cardiff.

4. Findings: Evaluation of the Assemble programme

This chapter presents our findings in relation to the evaluation of the Assemble programme. First, it provides an overall evaluation of Assemble against its stated objectives and in relation to the desired outcomes for each group (young disabled people, schools and teachers, parents, cultural venues and organisations) as developed in the theory of change supporting the programme. Then, it outlines major themes that underpin our findings in relation to the challenges and barriers young disabled people face in accessing culture. Furthermore, it outlines the themes underpinning the findings in relation to good practices encountered or developed through the Assemble programme. Finally, it highlights the strategic considerations which may help guide future iterations of the Assemble programme.

4.1. Young disabled people

At the heart of the Assemble programme were the young disabled people (henceforth in sections 4.1. and 4.2. for consistency: *pupils*). To capture their experiences of the programme, different strategies were employed. The most central one was the co-design workshops with pupils in schools in each of the three locations. These workshops captured their experiences when it came to how they experienced the programme, including the bi-weekly workshop sessions in school, the trips and visits to cultural venues and the end of programme celebration events. They expressed an overwhelmingly positive experience in terms of the positive feelings they articulated of being heard, accepted and of making friends and new relationships.

The NYT and NYAW internal Programme Reflection Sessions (PRS), that we were privy to, as well as Reflective Practitioner Workshops (RPW) that we arranged with staff members of the NYT and NYAW, also highlighted the success of Assemble through:

- **Empowerment and visibility:** many pupils felt seen and celebrated, often for the first time in their educational or social lives. As one NYT member stressed in the PRS, referring to what one pupil had stated: "I've never been allowed to be this much of myself before."
- **Sense of belonging:** pupils described Assemble as a space where they were valued. They felt they were treated as peers, not as people to be managed or contained.

- **Skill-building through joy:** pupils gained confidence, collaboration experience, and creative skills through meaningful, joyful activities. Success often comes from play, movement, or unexpected breakthroughs.
- **Autonomy and trust:** Assemble built pupil's trust by treating them as capable and allowing failure as part of learning. That sense of autonomy translates into increased self-direction in both creative and everyday life.
- **Transformation:** Pupils changed from withdrawn to confident throughout the programme showed the transformative power of Assemble.

To get even more insight into how the pupils had experienced Assemble, we surveyed teachers, volunteers and facilitators. Our survey highlighted the positive impact Assemble had on the pupils. Responding teachers said they either strongly agreed or agreed that there had been a positive change in pupils' confidence, commenting that:

"A [pupil] who has previously been reluctant to speak aloud in front of groups of pupils has engaged fully in sessions, we were so proud to see them perform at the Assemble event in front of an audience." (Survey respondent. Teacher)

"Speech and communication skills have improved hugely from all the pupils involved - it's been amazing to see their confidence grow throughout the programme" (Survey respondent. Teacher).

"The cultural visits have provided opportunities for pupils to access places and events that would have otherwise been unattainable. This has in turn given pupils the confidence to try new things and go to new places. Pupils have also performed on stage and in school assemblies as a result. They also built up really good relationships with the facilitators." (Survey respondent. Teacher).

"Pupils have become more confident; they have been a part of an exciting project where the Assemble team have made them feel so welcome and they have used various approaches to encourage pupils to try something different in a supportive way. Pupils have come out of their comfort zones, developed their teamwork, increase in motivation, engagement and pupils have looked forward to the sessions each week." (Survey respondent. Teacher).

Teachers highlighted improved communication skills including improved speech, body language and listening skills, as well as enhanced social skills and interaction, increased confidence, turn-taking and cooperation and growing self-awareness and self -expression with pupils beginning to explore and understand their emotions and how to express them appropriately.

In addition, facilitators and volunteers working on the Assemble programme also highlighted the growth in confidence of the pupils:

> *"I loved seeing the [pupils] develop and grow in confidence"* (Survey respondent. Facilitator/Volunteer)

> *"It was wonderful to see the [pupils'] involvement increase over the weeks, and to see the joy the project brought them. For some this was instantly obvious, but for some - especially those with more profound disabilities - the improvements were small and incremental, but by the end of the project we saw things happening that weren't there in the beginning. Some [pupils] were engaging more in eye contact, smiling more or even just lifting their heads up. Most were doing really well at following instructions, and some were laughing and smiling throughout the whole session and performance. It was a privilege to witness."* (Survey respondent. Facilitator/Volunteer)

> *"Success is endless. The joy in the room every session, their passion, their creativity. Every one of the students had a moment to shine - they were so supportive of each other and all their varying requirements. E.g. Really taking time to listen when a student with a slower speech has something to say*." (Survey respondent. Facilitator/Volunteer)

As Assemble showed to be a huge success from the perspective of the pupils, the co-design workshops with the pupils also recorded and highlighted the challenges they face in their social interactions outside of school. While many pupils did go to the park or to shopping centres or restaurants during their leisure time, activities outside of the school and home were limited and almost always with close family members. This again highlights the importance of the Assemble programme's aims of widening connections with local activities and with non-disabled peers.

Lessons learned:

- *The Assemble programme successfully delivered a transformative experience for young disabled participants through its creative workshops, trips and final performances.*

- *Young people involved were positively impacted in terms of their confidence, sense of belonging, and engagement with arts and cultural activities.*

- *The combination of creative methods, coupled with cultural visits, and co-production of a performance event, is an effective model of empowerment that should be shared and disseminated as good practice.*

- *The production of tangible outputs that could be more widely distributed would raise the profile and visibility of such initiatives (i.e., the artefacts - collective drawings, props, poems, stories - produced in workshops could be preserved and curated for the Celebration Days).*

- *There are numerous powerful stories of empowerment, inclusion and personal growth that could be captured (in the form of vignettes or case studies) and shared as compelling stories of empowerment through arts and culture. These can be shared in various settings in society to bridge the gap between the disabled and the non-disabled communities. For example, feedback from teacher, volunteers and young people could be aggregated and creatively transformed in personal vignettes that could be enacted by young people in celebration days or in stories narrated by young actors.*

4.2. Schools and teachers

For the participating schools, the Assemble programme had many positive outcomes. In particular, the length of the Assemble programme, which took place over two years, enabled strong and meaningful relationships to be established between the facilitators, volunteers and the pupils as well as between the school and the programme. Normally practitioners come into schools for a shorter period, whereas the Assemble programme was long enough to enable more sustained development among the pupils.

A key legacy for Assemble were the skills and experiences the teachers were able to gain. The RPW, the PRS and the survey all identified ways in which teachers had changed their creative practice as result of Assemble which showcased new and different ways of working creatively with pupils.

In the survey, teachers identified how Assemble has helped them reflect on and change their

creative learning practice and how they would integrate this experience into their teaching:

> *"The various approaches the Assemble staff have used such as the warm-up activities, they have made pupils feel empowered to try something new and to not be afraid, they have listened to the students' ideas and turned these into real concepts."* (Survey respondent. Teacher)

> *"I would like to integrate the use of role-play, open-ended questioning to support communication, social interaction and creativity."* (Survey respondent. Teacher)

> *"In creative arts specifically, I have enjoyed watching the process of how they build a performance which I will implement into KS3 drama*." (Survey respondent. Teacher)

Teachers also said that the Assemble programme had helped staff be more adventurous with ideas about trips outside of school and accessing different venues:

> *"Helped staff to see we can be more adventurous and access different venues."* (Survey respondent. Teacher)

Assemble also enabled schools to build new relationships with cultural organisations via the Celebration Days, particularly around increasing school visibility while attending arts venues and opening doors for future collaboration. However, there were some mixed experiences among the participating schools. Some schools engaged more meaningfully than others. Sometimes teacher engagement was limited, and teachers absent or inconsistently present, making it hard to embed the work in the school culture. The most impact occurred where schools treated Assemble as a collaborative opportunity, not an add-on, and engaged with the programme.

There were also challenges presented from basing Assemble in schools. Overall, the positive benefits outweighed the challenges as the students were in a space that was trusted and comfortable for them and basing the programme in non-mainstream schools meant Assemble had access to the young people they wanted to work with. However, some aspects of school logistics and engagement were a challenge. In particular, the timetable and restrictions of the school day meant accessing cultural visits in the afternoon or evening were a challenge and mostly not feasible. Finding time for trips in the school timetable was difficult and most schools did not welcome evening performances. These were challenges everywhere but particularly so

in more rural areas and areas with poor public transport infrastructure. Teachers noted that:

> *"One of the biggest challenges we face is transportation, especially for wheelchair users. For example, if we have more than two [pupils] in wheelchairs, we need to book two buses for a group of just 10 [pupils], as each wheelchair requires the removal of multiple seats. These logistical and care-related challenges greatly impact our ability to plan and carry out cultural trips."* (Survey respondent. Teacher)

> *"Independent travel, the majority of our [pupils] do not travel independently due to their needs and it's really difficult to get parents to collect their children if we're on a trip outside of school hours."* (Survey respondent. Teacher)

Parental and school safeguarding was also a challenge with schools not facilitating contact between Assemble and the participating pupils' parents and schools often blocking trips due to 'fear of parental backlash' or 'outdated safeguarding views, which led to missed opportunities for powerful, relevant content' (noted during the PRS). The productions and themes the young people selected were often seen as 'too serious by the schools, who wanted to prioritize productions with a younger age rating, which would be easier to explain to parents. This created a conflict as the young people's choices were removed and perpetuated a common issue that accessible performances are aligned to children's performances, and cannot be serious or challenging. In some schools there were problems of being allocated small and cluttered classroom spaces and inefficient access to buildings for Assemble staff and volunteers. On occasions, communication and coordination could also be slow and fragmented between project and school staff.

More widely, there was some reflection as to whether basing Assemble in schools was the most effective model in terms of delivering the outcomes of reducing social isolation. There were very good reasons for basing Assemble in schools in terms of accessing young disabled people and in terms of the programme being based in a space which was familiar, comfortable and accessible to young disabled people, and as mentioned above, overall, it was the case that the advantages outweighed the challenges. However, in terms of addressing the fact that many young disabled people rarely access activities and venues outside of their home and school and with reducing social isolation as a key aim, looking at new and alternative safe spaces in cultural venues is also important going forward. The importance of making trusted and safe spaces in

cultural organisations and venues was highlighted in the cultural organisation focus groups. Cultural venues felt that while links with schools can be the most effective way of accessing young disabled people, in terms of sustainability, it is vital to build trust among disabled young people to independently access and use cultural venues and spaces. As with most things, it is not an either/or option, it is important for cultural venues to build relationship with schools and in many cases taking cultural activities and performances into schools is an effective way of young disabled people accessing the creativity of cultural activities and performances, but it is also vital that cultural venues prioritise becoming inclusive and safe spaces.

Lessons learned:

- *Importance of pre-project planning and on-going conversations with teachers and other school staff to set clear expectations on engagement including more time for school feedback*
- *Greater engagement with parents and a need to build school and parent trust early in the programme is key to long lasting impact and programme success*
- *Taking this model outside the school system and identifying and developing an additional safe space for young disabled people within cultural venues would broaden the opportunities to create multiple pathways into collaborations between disabled and non-disabled communities.*

4.3. Parents

Teachers highlighted parental confidence as a barrier to attending events, especially in the evening and at venues away from schools. Despite attempts to engage parents (via newsletters, flyers and via schools), parents did not engage with Assemble apart from one instance (a relaxed performance of Sister Act). Schools cited GDPR concerns when blocking the programme's parental engagement via school. Therefore, we were unable to know exactly what the issues underlying parental concerns were. It is also notable that no parents responded to the survey circulated by the Schools after the Celebration events as part of the Assemble evaluation, further highlighting the lack of contact between the Assemble team and participants' parents. Lack of access to parents is a significant challenge and lessons learned from the programme. New ways of linking to parents and building

trust were seen as a key lesson going forward. In addition, stakeholder focus groups also highlighted the importance for arts and cultural venues of gaining the trust of parents that spaces are comfortable and inclusive for disabled young people. Parental experience and expectations are important here. Learning disabled and neurodivergent young people may be living in families where parents, carers and siblings are themselves disabled and do not necessarily have first-hand experience of arts and cultural venues themselves. Testimonials recall one parent who did not know their child loved music and assumed they could not take them to musicals saw them have a great time at Sister Act, highlighting the importance of working with parents and raising parental expectations as key to raising young people's access to arts and culture.

Lessons learned:

- *Access to parents is critical to better understand the context in which young disabled people can thrive.*

4.4. Assemble facilitators, assistants and volunteers

A further major positive outcome of the Assemble programme was the ways in which the facilitators, assistants and volunteers involved were given the opportunity for professional growth, to deepen their own practice, and particularly to experience a model of inclusive practice as a blueprint for future inclusive work elsewhere.

> *"The most successful thing for me has been my personal development in being able to*
>
> *think and act in a more inclusive way for workshop leadership. Before, I struggled to adapt plans and activities, but now I feel very confident in it and actively encourage it. It makes the workshop feel much more organic and is more enjoyable for everyone. A challenge I faced was being able to make every activity accessible for everyone, whilst still making it engaging and challenging. I think if I were to complete similar work again, I would already know how to approach this a lot better."* (Survey respondent. Facilitator/Volunteer)
>
> *"I loved seeing the young people develop and grow in confidence over the programme. Sometimes it was difficult to manage a variety of needs, but the training and support from NYT was fantastic."* (Survey respondent Facilitator/Volunteer)

Several volunteers described Assemble as transformative for their own career paths and personal development. Some of the volunteers, for example, went on to work in SEN schools and as facilitators and producers with cultural and disabled organisations.

In terms of lessons learned, a key issue highlighted by volunteers in the survey was a need for clarity over their role and of the boundaries with other roles. Moving forward, a clearer volunteer role and focus on progression have been incorporated into proposals for Assemble 2.0 in which the volunteer role has been reframed as a structured, developmental pathway into paid creative support work.

Systems for recording feedback on individual pupils after each session or visit were in place but proved a challenge and time-consuming to effectively administer, collate and analyse. These need to be clearer. Some volunteers were not sure what they were meant to be reporting and feedback lacked direction and structure. Tracking the young people's progress needs to be built into the programme from early on, and clear and well-developed methods of systematically recording progress need to be implemented. Volunteers need clear roles in this process. This is key to effective evaluation of the Assemble programme and to ensuring young disabled participants voices are fully heard and recorded.

Finally, in some locations, finding volunteers was a challenge. Gig Buddies was identified as a good model and travel buddies were highlighted as a useful model.

Lessons learned:

- *The need for a clearer role and progression for volunteers was highlighted and has been incorporated into proposals for Assemble 2.0 in which the volunteer role has been reframed as a structured, developmental pathway into paid creative support work.*
- *The need for more training for volunteers was also highlighted, particularly in safeguarding but also in methods of recording feedback from the young people. This was highlighted and is key to effective evaluation to ensure young disabled participants voices are heard and systematically recorded and to ensure outcomes are clearly recorded to share good practice going forward. Volunteers need to be aware of and trained in their role in collective feedback and evaluation of the programme.*

4.5. Cultural venues and organisations associated with Assemble

The trips to cultural venues were a key part of the Assemble programme and were experienced by many of the young people as transformative with some young people experiencing the arts 'as something for them' (noted at PRS) for the first time. It was especially important that venues 'welcomed participants with thoughtfulness, preparation and care' (noted at PRS). Whilst some venues and activities achieved this, the programme included very mixed experiences with some venues ill-prepared and some making participants feel unwelcome:

> *"Even going to a West End relaxed performance that is specifically marketed for disabled young people and yet there are still only two wheelchair spaces in a very large theatre, and they've refused to move seats."* (PRS participant)

There are numerous examples, which are discussed further in sections below, of venues which were not accessible to young learning-disabled people. Examples include a lack of wheelchair spaces, lifts unable to carry wheelchairs, inappropriate placing of wheelchair spaces, use of strobe lighting, and lack of relaxed spaces.

Community-led spaces were often more accessible and while attending a theatre performance was a key aim of Assemble and often had a highly successful outcome, less formal spaces where more social time and more interaction between the young people was possible were highlighted as perhaps even more impactful, particularly in relation to the programmes aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation.

Cross-organisation working was highlighted as a key outcome of Assemble, particularly the relationships established between partners (the schools and cultural organisations and among cultural and creative organisations and practitioners). Numerous examples were citied of good practice in cross-organisation working. Some venues which had hosted visits highlighted the lessons they had learned from the NYT Assemble programme which they had subsequently built into and had changed their own inclusivity practice.

Key lessons highlighted included the value of integrating trips into the programme early on, visiting venues several times to build familiarity and, as stakeholders also emphasised, involving parents and families to help reduce parental concern and makes families more familiar with arts

and cultural venues and spaces. Providing more inclusive travel and public transport experiences to support independence was also highlighted.

Lessons learned:

- *Building trust and relationships between cultural venues and disabled young people and their families early on and through multiple visits if possible.*
- *Working in partnership with cultural venues to share best practice in relation to inclusivity in accessing venues.*
- *Community spaces are more welcoming. Cultural spaces such as galleries can be too.*
- *Prioritising time for informal socialising among young disabled people and their families in community spaces may be a more effective way of reducing social isolation than attendance at cultural performances.*

4.6. Steering Groups and delivery model

Initially, the Assemble programme aimed to set up and run Steering Groups in each of the three locations which would include young disabled people and cultural venues and organisations. The steering group model proved a challenge, and different ways of engaging with organisations proved necessary. It was a challenge to get stakeholders together, even online, and attendance at steering group meetings was frequently low.

The challenges experienced in setting up Steering Groups suggests other methods are needed to set up collaborations between young disabled people and cultural and disability organisations locally. Cultural organisations seemed keen to develop such methods of collaboration and to share good practice going forward. Perhaps the main challenge presented by the difficulties in successfully getting Steering Groups to function was that the voice of young disabled people was not as present and involved in the co-production of the programme as was initially planned. This reflected one of the challenges and down-sides of basing the programme in schools as due to safeguarding and logistic issues, facilitators and Assemble could not access the young people outside of school hours and it was not possible to hold the Steering Group meetings in the schools. This further suggests a different model to the Steering Groups is required.

Lessons learned:

- *Ways forward could include a more focused programme of workshops with cultural organisations at local level on specific aspects of inclusivity practice including both audience engagement and employment.*

- *Co-production needs to be embedded earlier on in the delivery of the programme to ensure the voices of young disabled people play a full role in shaping the programme.*

- *Additionally, seed collaborative funding could be sought for the development of a community of practice around cultural inclusion for young disabled people as an essential pillar to their health and wellbeing.*

4.7. Cultural venues: persistent barriers and challenges

Sections 4.6 and 4.7 focus on the barriers and enabling factors from the perspective of cultural venues when it comes to young disabled people accessing culture. In these sections, evidence is drawn from focus groups in which both cultural venues who are associated with Assemble, and cultural venues who are not associated Assemble took part. As the quote below indicates, many in the sector sense ongoing challenges to inclusivity:

> *"There are venues and programmers not programming work that is disabled-led or even mentioned, as seen as a risk... we are going backwards … Producers not just nervous about marketability, but openly nervous."* (Cultural Organisation Stakeholder Focus Group).

From the qualitative data, we identified a wide range of structural, institutional and cultural factors that hinder access to an inclusive cultural offer for young disabled people.

4.7.1. Funding

Cuts in arts funding nation-wide is a major barrier and challenge to increasing inclusivity across the cultural sector, affecting everyone in the sector from charities, such as the NYT, as a recipient of funding from the cultural sector to large national arts and cultural organisations. Arts Council England, the leading statutory funding body for the arts, is itself currently under review by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS).

The challenge of inadequate funding was repeatedly highlighted in the focus groups with cultural

organisations and venues. The current funding climate in the arts has resulted in the loss of many good practice inclusive arts organisations and projects and in a more competitive funding climate with a focus on short-term funding. Participants highlighted many examples of funding being cut to good practice, tried and tested inclusive models:

> *"I think that we are having this conversation at a particularly difficult time in the cultural sector in Wales. Organisations, institutions and agencies that used to exist 10 years ago, 20 years ago, don't exist anymore and it's so much more difficult to deliver on access"* (Cultural Organisations Stakeholder Focus Group).

Participants also noted how it is often hard to make the case to finance inclusivity in organisations.

4.7.2. Transport

Travel and transport were also highlighted as a major challenge to young disabled people accessing cultural venues, particularly in more rural locations and areas with poor public transport infrastructure. Comments made included 'the last bus leaves here at 7.30pm', 'the trains are hit and miss, and the buses are not good', and 'It's just getting [young people] to the building that is our biggest challenge' (Cultural Organisations Stakeholder Focus group).

This is also something that was highlighted in the survey for the teachers (see above), who suggested that transport is the key barrier to young disabled people accessing cultural activities and venues. In particular, the cost, the difficulties of wheelchair access and the fact that most students do not travel independently.

4.7.3. Access to young disabled people and to disability skilled volunteers

Because of funding and transport problems, gaining access to young disabled people was difficult for some cultural venues – this was linked to transport and to the timings of performances but also goes wider and highlights the need for long term, community-and venue-based programmes to gain the trust and confidence of young disabled people and their parents, families and carers. Indeed, the needs of the wider families of disabled young people was also highlighted, some being disabled themselves and many having other caring responsibilities. Finding disability skilled volunteers and travel buddies was difficult in some locations, despite the importance of it.

4.7.4. Programming and timings of performances

The programming and timings of performances is a key challenge to facilitating access for young disabled people and raises complex issues concerning 'real' or deep inclusion. Evening performances can be hard for young disabled people to access (especially with low parental confidence) and yet matinee and morning performances are often targeted at a very young audience. However, programming can often act to further segregate young disabled people and participants in the cultural organisations focus groups emphasized that an 'industry-wide discussion [was] needed' on programming. Many mainstream cultural institutions only offer accessible performances at limited times, typically matinee performances whereas most focus group participants wanted to see a broader programme made available to young disabled people. It was suggested that some shows don't even want the discussion ('serious drama won't do it'). Age-appropriate performances were also highlighted as an issue, with many accessible and day-time performances targeting a younger audience.

4.7.5. Uncertainty and lack of confidence of parents

The uncertainty, anxiety and lack of confidence and experience of parents of young disabled people was highlighted above and was reiterated by participants in the cultural organisations focus groups as a major challenge to increasing the access and inclusivity of young disabled people to arts and culture, especially to evening performances. More broadly, across the sector, cultural venues we engaged with, suggested ways of approaching this challenge such as involving parents more and over a sustained period to gain their confidence. This could include offering parents' tickets and inviting parents and families to visit venues in an informal way with coffee and food available.

4.7.6. Venue accessibility

As highlighted above, venue accessibility is a key challenge across the sector, especially with old theatre buildings and with many independent theatres (above or below pubs). Whilst it was recognized that you 'couldn't solve some of this even with a blank cheque', participants in the focus groups of cultural venues raised the wider issue of the need for holistic organization or

venue wide inclusivity:

> *"For example, if we want to support BSL users to access our venue, they should be able to access the venue socially as a BSL user, and they should be able to order a coffee, they should be able to order a ticket and so on, I realise there's' a great deal of work we need to do to be able to do that. – across the whole 'audience journey' 'from the street to the seat'"* (Cultural Organisation Stakeholder Focus Group).

4.8. Cultural venues: areas for growth

4.8.1. Building of trust

Many cultural venue participants highlighted that building trust among young disabled people and their parents and carers is key to inclusivity in the sector, as is putting inclusivity in place at every level from the start. This involves a process of building relationships with young disabled people, their families and carers locally, getting everyone to visit and gain confidence in using the spaces. As one participant noted:

> *"a holistic 360 approach is really important in terms of the journey and user experience and the parent engagement as well as child engagement, but also in the creative engagement because what comes back from our focus groups is very much knowing that whatever space they're going into is going to be exciting but safe. Where they can sort of be themselves, it's just, finding ways to say, OK, this is a safe space you can come to. We've got fidget box; we've got different things just so people can be allowed to be themselves. And I think that also helps parents or whoever is supporting them feel a little bit more at ease and feel like, OK, this isn't going to be a problem if I go and they suddenly need, something they've got the space they need."* (Cultural Venue Stakeholder Focus Group)

> *"I think trust is a really big thing and that takes long a long time to build, especially if you're like a theatre, a big institution."* (Cultural Venue Stakeholder Focus Group)

> *"You're kind of relying on people having that trust that they know what it's going to be like when they turn up. And that's kind of hard to build sometimes. And when we've done it well. It's been working in partnership with other organisations or schools that already have that trust and really building that relationship"* (Cultural Venue Stakeholder Focus Group)

What worked well in one of the Assemble evening events, in which one disability cultural venue participated, was young people not going home first from school but staying on and having a social time in between, and parents picking up later at venue or by taxi.

4.8.2. Sustainable and embedded outcomes – embedding inclusivity

What is important, and was highlighted by participants across our evaluation, is the need for 'deep inclusivity', sustainable and embedded inclusivity, and inclusivity that is led by the lived experience of disabled people. This came out of discussions about the dangers of ghettoizing versus mainstreaming inclusion. Discussions highlighted the reticence of theatres and audiences to perform relaxed performances. Theatres can be very reticent to run relaxed performances and audience education of accessible performances was highlighted as a priority, so audiences recognise 'it's just a performance that also happens to be accessible'. Many mainstream cultural institutions only offer accessible performances at limited times, typically matinee performances. Whilst most cultural venues have an accessibility and inclusion page on their website, sometimes it goes no further than this and embedding inclusion was not felt to be taking place particularly in bigger institutions and spaces and among leadership, artistic directors and producers. As one participant stated:

> *"What if every job description required a working knowledge of the social model of disability. That would change the sector overnight"* (Cultural Venue Stakeholder Focus Group)

There were discussions about the importance of embedding inclusivity within venues and about different creative learning through the arts models. As highlighted in the above section, what emerged was the need to work in schools but also to embed youth disability access into venues themselves so that young people become confident in accessing the venues independently.

4.8.3. Organisational change and lived experience of disability

The need for organisational change was highlighted especially within large organisations, with the focus being on the need to consider the whole 'audience journey' from the 'street to the seat'. This includes reviewing the whole commercial ethos including how cafés and shops look and whether they are accessible:

"if we want to support BSL users to access our venue, they should be able to access the venue socially as a BSL user, and they should be able to order a coffee, to buy a ticket and so on , there's a great deal of work we need to do to be able to do that' - 'from the street to the seat'"
(Cultural Venue Focus group participant)

Good practice models were highlighted and had been visited by the participating cultural venues including to the Watershed in Bristol and Mayflower in Southampton.

Access audits were seen as a good starting point within organisations. Disability awareness training for all staff working in cultural venues was also highlighted as vital. Some venues pointed out the challenges of costs involved in ensuring all staff had disability awareness training. The need for a transformation within the cultural sector from the top was emphasised.

"the real issue, a common thread in this conversation is a lack of joined up thinking at, and a lack of leadership at, a very high level, in terms of cultural provision, some of these things we can share some we can't do – we're hanging on by our fingernails – 'we really need some leadership in the cultural sector in terms of how we do this work and we really need some money" (Cultural Venue Stakeholder Focus Group)

The need for people with lived experience of disability to be employed at every level within cultural and creative organisations was seen as key to organisational and leadership change in the arts and creative industry. It was highlighted that disabled staff frequently only get the inclusion work rather than being represented at every level.

CRAIDD in Wales was identified as a good practice model in many respects but especially it's 'agents of change' model in which people with lived experience of disability are on the staff team and represented at each of the participating venues.

4.8.4. Collaborative and partnership working - sharing good practice

Partnership and cross-organisation connections are seen as a key outcome of the Assemble programme and as fundamental to lasting and sustainable change in the adoption of more inclusive practices within the cultural sector. Throughout the research and evaluation, the value of collaboration between arts and theatre companies and grassroots organisations in developing inclusive practices and informing and changing practice was emphasized. Networking

opportunities and informal networks were identified as key to sharing good practice and experiences towards adopting inclusive practices.

In terms of collaboration with cultural organisations, one of the key outcomes from the focus groups with cultural organisations was how useful they found forums for meeting up, even the focus groups themselves were seen as providing a forum participants found useful to share thoughts, ideas and good models of inclusive practice. Indeed, the Manchester cultural venues focus group concluded with participants arranging to meet at one of the venues to continue cross-venue working and discussion. All three focus groups with cultural organisations highlighted the value of meeting and of networks to share experiences and good practice, although it was emphasised that disabled people should themselves be centre stage in any future collaborations or creative industry networks. One comment from one of the focus groups with cultural organisations highlights how the agenda needs to be led by young disabled people themselves:

> *"We don't want to just invite young disabled people to events – we want them leading, creating and setting the agenda"* (Cultural Organisation Stakeholder Focus Group).

4.9. Summary

This chapter has highlighted the positive outcomes of the Assemble programme especially for the young disabled participants. It has also highlighted the many barriers and challenges experienced by the Assemble team in delivering Assemble. A key lesson learned from the Assemble programme is that co-design and co-production needs to be embedded in the delivery programme from the beginning. It should be emphasised that NYT's co-design and co-production processes consistently engaged young people's voices throughout the workshop sessions and arts and cultural visits. What needs further thinking is how this youth voice can be better and more systematically recorded throughout the programme alongside a revisiting of the Steering Group model of co-production. This might include working with facilitators and course assistants and volunteers to consistently and systematically incorporate the co-design focus in their sessions to fully understand what an excellent end to end cultural experience is for a young disabled person.

In the NYTs' (2024) Assemble Year One Report, the importance and cost and time of cross-organisation working as key to developing sustainable inclusive practice was highlighted:

"We are working with organisations who have so much to share with us in terms of best practice and disabled centred working, and we are also meeting many organisations who want to build and expand their practices; to do this to the best of our ability we need long term presence in these areas and communities." (Internal NYT document, 2024).

The Assemble programme is presented as a case study of a good practice model in partnership and collaborative working in the recent Arts Council England (2024) report on addressing deprivation through culture.

In Wales, the CRAIDD programme (based on Ramps on the Move project based in Sheffield in England), although in its early days, was seen as a good model in providing a framework of collaboration with partners in order to share good practice and give partners the 'opportunities to share what works and doesn't work'. This was seen as 'really helpful as often you feel quite isolated in the stuff that we do' (Cultural Venues Focus Group).

CRAIDD is a collaboration between 5 Welsh partner organisations with the aim of improving mainstream representation of deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people across Wales. CRAIDD is funded by the Arts Council Wales to work with partner organizations on both (a) accessibility to the workforce in the industry and (b) audience access. In its first year, work has focused on organisational change including access audits and ensuring the policies and procedures are in place to provide a welcoming environment to deaf, disabled and neurodivergent people. It works closely with disabled-lead organisations recognising that it is hard to access young disabled people, its first step has been to connect with disabled groups.

Participants in Wales also highlighted the role the Youth Arts Network Cymru played in bringing together arts organisations in Wales before it had its funding stopped, with a regular newsletter, regular meetings and an annual event and workshops, again identifying this as a good model in cross-organisation collaborative and partnership working.

Some of the persistent challenges noted include: funding, transport, venue accessibility, timing and programming of performances, parental confidence, lack of partnership working and spaces

for sharing good inclusive practice, lack of joined up thinking, lack of leadership on inclusivity in cultural organisations, lack of employment of people with disabilities at all levels within cultural organisations.

Enabling inclusivity involves confronting all these challenges including funding, employment and leadership within cultural organisations, holistic organisational change which takes account of the audience journey from the 'street to the seat' and the need for partnership working and the sharing of good inclusive practice.

5. Findings: Assemble within the wider context

To get a better understanding of the wider context within which Assemble operate, we also engaged with stakeholders (cultural venues and disability organisations) and policy makers and funders (local, regional and sub-national governments). Particularly the latter revealed a very complex, contested and fragmented policy space underpinning inclusivity and accessibility to arts and culture for young disabled people in England and Wales. This landscape shapes the ability of organisations such as the National Youth Theatre and the National Youth Art Wales to develop programmes that have a long-lasting impact and legacy beyond their delivery, and to elevate young disabled people's voice into decision making.

5.1. Disability organisations

Disability organisations play the most central role when it comes to advocating for inclusion of disabled people. Whilst some of these organisations focus on specific age groups or types of disabilities, others may advocate a particular cause, such as access to culture. However, to better understand the wider context in which Assemble operates, we were interested in understanding the views of disability organisations, who are not specifically focusing on culture, or inclusion and culture. In the focus group with representatives from such disability organisations, it became clear that the participants had great insight in the challenges facing disabled people in general, including culture.

5.1.1. Accessible and inclusive spaces

Despite the participants' organisations focus on advocating other disability related causes, such as social security and housing, it became clear in the focus group that access to culture was very important as well. This was mainly understood as an important aspect of inclusion, as exclusion from culture also implies exclusion from society. It was pointed out that a great place to start inclusion is in an educational setting, and that the educational setting then can function as a catalyst to other spaces.

When it comes to actual spaces being used, participants highlighted that they ought to be created by those who will use them, including those with invisible disabilities, and that a social model of disability should be incorporated when planning the space. It was also stressed that the space ought not only to be accessible, but that people should *feel comfortable* using that space. Another interesting point that was highlighted, was the importance of multicultural and 'multi-ability' spaces as part of true inclusivity. Oftentimes, disabled people are confined to certain spaces, but to build connections between the disabled and the non-disabled communities, 'multi-ability' spaces are needed. It was highlighted time and again, that the educational setting could function as a starting point when it comes to fostering a more inclusive and accommodating society. One participant argued for opening 'disabled spaces' to non-disabled communities, particularly within the educational setting.

> *"So, if there is a, you know, a sensory room or an or a space within a secondary school or a sixth form for disabled people [...], why is it that those spaces aren't opened up for non- disabled people? [This would be done so] they [could] make friends with each other, and I think explore that, you know, sort of the feeling of youth and you know, just to be able to have those memories".*
> (Participant, Disability organisation)

Whilst the educational setting was considered a natural space to foster accessibility and inclusivity, it was highlighted that leisure time, in which culture and the arts could be included, could offer opportunities to enhance meaningful engagements, inclusion and wellbeing. Spending time outside of school hours pursuing meaningful activities could allow for deeper inclusivity, as the disabled and the non-disabled communities could bond over interests they have in common. As one participant put it:

> *"I'm keen for people to come together through a shared interest, not through a shared disability."*
> (Participant, Disability organisation)

To pursue shared interests, the spaces in which they take place are crucial. In relation the culture and the arts, participants in the focus group highlighted some good practices. For example, virtual guides of 'what to expect' when coming to a venue is making a venue more accessible. Another good practice are venues where Gig Buddies tend to go to, as they are much more accommodating than others. The caring manner of staff members in those venues was

highlighted as great support to young learning-disabled persons. For example, to ensure the young learning-disabled person's safety, door staff can call a taxi if the young person is making their way home on their own, bar staff are patient and take time to explain what costumers can order, and they have reverted to cash payment options. The latter is a great enabling factor. However, it was stressed that most venues operate a cashless system, which technically excludes young learning-disabled people, who may not have a debit card. Despite being able to, for example, buy tickets online with someone's help, they miss out on part of the experience due to not being able to buy a drink or a snack in a break or interval.

Another challenge that was highlighted in relation to accessibility and inclusivity was the public transport to and from the events. It was highlighted that not all young learning-disabled people feel safe in public and this could also be the case having to use public transport, or, that public transport is not often available. This was particularly highlighted by organisations operating in more rural areas.

5.1.2. Different types of culture

It also became clear, that due to the organisations represented in the focus group partner up with other organisations, some participants had the possibility to offer cultural activities for the community they served. It also became evident, that many different forms of cultural experiences and activities in the arts can mean many different things.

> *"I think because we work in partnership with a lot of other organisations that do offer the opportunity for people to have a creative experience, whether it's art, dance, music or, I mean, ceramics is quite a big thing at the moment."* (Participant, Disability organisation)

The role of disabled people, and particularly learning-disabled people, on the cultural scene was also discussed. Participants recognised that arts and culture are powerful sources for change.

However, disabled people should not only be considered tools for pushing for a change. For example, the inclusion of disabled people in films, plays and in series was indeed considered progress. However, the participants highlighted that often the disability itself becomes part of the story line, instead of them just being part of the ensemble or cast.

5.1.3. Working with parents/guardians and society

The focus group also touched on that many young learning-disabled people need to be encouraged, and sometimes pushed, to challenge themselves. Here, a discussion on the role of parents/guardians emerged. The participants in the focus group underlined that it is crucial to work with them, but also with society.

The focus group described the 'parental anxiety' as often quite strong. The participants, however, showed great empathy for the parents, though, and understood that the parental experience for parents with a learning-disabled child differs from the experience of parents with a non-disabled child. For example, the route to independence and transition to adulthood of non-disabled children happens gradually and through many ways of expressions, which allows for parents to become used to 'letting go of control'. However, for parents with learning-disabled children, typical 'transition periods' of their children happen within the educational setting: transitioning from one setting to the next. Therefore, when formal education ends, or when independence is explored through other avenues, such as through friendships and leisure time, it can be a challenging experience for the parents. Furthermore, the participants highlighted the pressure parents are under, and that they often are exhausted. It became evident, however, that parents/guardians are crucial in supporting their child in gaining more independence. To help the parents being supportive, the participants highlighted that they should work together with parents/carers on long(er) term projects. This would allow for making the parents feel more confident and allow their child to explore themselves. Furthermore, the focus group suggested peer learning, where older learning-disabled people would be able to share their lived experiences with the parents. Sharing the lived experience of (learning-)disabled people was suggested as key to making society more inclusive in general. Returning to the educational setting, this should function as a place where the disabled and non-disabled communities meet.

> *"[It] should be introduced in schools, encouraging young [non-disabled] people to accept learning-disabled people as part of their peer group, you know, [...] rather than having separate departments"* (Participant, Disability organisation)
>
> *"That's the big target for them again, is just finding opportunities and resources to be able to go and do that, find the time to do that."* (Participant, Disability   organisation)

5.2. The policy and governance of disability and cultural inclusion

Programmes such as Assemble operate within a complex policy landscape. The Equality Act 2010 is a Great Britain-wide legislation that covers nine protected characteristics and places duties on public bodies to consider equality in their decision-making. It applies to both Wales and England. But there are other policies areas that are relevant to the success of programmes such as Assemble. These policies both provide discretion and require choices about which priorities to pursue. The devolution process in the UK resulted in policy fragmentation and differentiation especially in areas such as education, arts and culture, as well as health and social care.

5.2.1. Disability and cultural inclusion of young people in England and Wales

Narratives underpinning disability policy, as well as arts and cultural policy in Wales are quite different compared to England. Whilst the UK Government signed up to the Convention for the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2009, it faced criticism about the implementation of the Convention and its transposition into national legislation.[32] The Welsh Government, in turn, reaffirmed its commitment to the Social Model of Disability, to co-production with disabled people as a core principle in developing disability policy, and to incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into Welsh Law.

Two of our interviewees from Wales pointed out that this is a significant departure from the UK Government approach, albeit there are lots of limitations to how much the Welsh Government can substantially differentiate in the absence of policy levers around social security (Policy Interviewees 1 and 2).

The 2025 draft Disabled People's Rights Plan[33] was developed following the engagement with "over 350 external stakeholders and over 200 policy leads from across government" that aimed to co-produce recommendations that improve the lives of disabled people in Wales and build a culture of trust and collaboration (Correspondence with the Welsh Government, April 2025). The

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[32] 29 House of Commons Library (2022). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: UK implementation, Commons Library Research Briefing CBP07367, Retrieved 20 May 2025
[33] Welsh Government. (2025). Draft Disabled People's Rights Plan: 2025 to 2035 (Consultation draft). Retrieved June 27, 2025.

Disabled People's Rights Plan[34] in Wales outlines an integrated framework based in co-production principles which is aimed at a societal transformation where disabled people can thrive. This plan, which is based on the UN's Convention of the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD)[35] and the social model of disability, sets four leverage dimensions to improve the lives of disabled people: neighbourhoods and places, employment, income and education, independent living and wellbeing, and justice and supportive environments. The plan, however, does not have a youth focused strategy, nor does it include a focus on arts and culture.[36]

England does not have its own devolved administration; the UK Parliament legislates for England as part of its UK or Great Britain legislative process. The UK National Disability Strategy[37] published in July 2021 by the UK Government as a cross-government strategy to improve the lives of disabled people, was struck off by the High Court in the first instance, in January 2022, as unlawful, based on a case brought by four disabled people in relation to the consultation process. Whilst the Supreme Court overruled the High Court decision, this meant that the implementation was delayed.

The Strategy also includes long term commitments to embed disabled people's voice and lived experiences into decision making and promises to adopt a cross departmental approach and monitor progress, amongst others. The Strategy bundles commitments to widening participation in arts and culture within the leisure and sports activities. The only significant reference regarding culture is that:

> *"Arts Councils across the UK are working together with the British Film Institute to launch a free, UK wide arts access card by March 2022."*[38]

Whilst there are other strategies (education, social security, etc) that have focused on improving the lives of disabled people, there was little focus on young people in the 2024 Disability Action

[34] Welsh Government. (2025). *Draft Disabled People's Rights Plan: 2025 to 2035* (Consultation draft). Retrieved June 27, 2025.

[35] United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.* Retrieved June 25, 2025.

[36] Welsh Government. (2025). *Draft Disabled People's Rights Plan: 2025 to 2035* (Consultation draft). Retrieved June 27, 2025.

[37] UK Government. (2021). *National Disability Strategy.* Retrieved June 25, 2025.

[38] UK Government. (2021, page 80). *National Disability Strategy.* Retrieved June 25, 2025.

Plan[39] for instance, and almost no mention of arts and culture.

The *National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults[40]* sets out a vision and an implementation plan on how to transform England (this is only applicable to England) into a society that truly understands and includes autistic people in all aspects of life by 2026. It covers health, social care, employment, criminal justice and social security.

In terms of cultural inclusion, this is enshrined in Welsh legislation[41] as a right and a policy priority, whereas in England cultural inclusion is not fully embedded as a national policy. One of our interviewees from Wales draws attention to the fact that whilst the right to culture is an enshrined right, it is not sufficient for the goal of sustainable cultural inclusion:

> *"I think to have a national aspiration gives people hope. However, just because of all the things that we're being told all the time that are impacting all funding everywhere, I guess it's extra challenging to push forward with this. So, I don't know, I'm naturally an optimist, but it's hard, isn't it, currently, to see how. We can hold onto these really important ideas and really important policies when we're so challenged financially, as much as anything, as is, you know, as everything." (Policy Interview 7)*

In April 2025, the Future Generations Commissioner (Wales) called that a future Culture Act in Wales needed to embed cultural equity, combat the cultural postcode lottery, and ensure universal participation and reflection in Welsh culture, including disabled youth.[42]

5.2.2. Limited (disabled) youth and/or culturally specific strategies at local level

The differentiated policy space around disability and cultural provision and access in the UK is further complicated by the sheer variety in local governance provision, with local authorities taking different takes on the development and promotion of the Local Offer. In line with

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[39] UK Government. (2024). *Disability Action Plan.* Retrieved June 25, 2025.
[40] Department of Health and Social Care C Department for Education. (2021). *National strategy for autistic children, young people and adults: 2021 to 202c.* Retrieved July 8, 2025.
[41] Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. (n.d.). *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*. Retrieved June 25, 2025.
[42] Walker, D. (2025). *A cultural reset for Wales – Future Generations Commissioner calls for a Culture Act*. Retrieved June 25, 2025.

requirements of the 2014 Children and Families Act[43], all local authorities must publish and maintain a Local Offer that includes a wide range of information about existing support and provisions (health, education, and social care mainly) for those families with special education needs children and disabled young people (up to 25 years old) to access.

In terms of how policy makers engage with complex and cross cutting issues such as promoting young disabled people's voice in decision making around the development of an inclusive Local Offer, one challenge identified by our interviewees is the often-siloed approach taken by local authorities (funding bodies) to deliver services or distribute funding.

In the case of a programme like Assemble, there are a lot of intersecting areas (disability, culture, education), that do not always have a youth specific focus and strategies enshrined. This results in young disabled people's issues (such as access to inclusive cultural offer) becoming an afterthought in the wider cultural programming that happens at local level. To illustrate this, one of our interviewees, who oversees funding and commissioning, noted that

> *"the commissioning process and programming and curating processes in the art world could be more inclusive... Who had access to those platforms? Who was visible on those platforms, and there wasn't so much work focused on young people, a little bit, a few pieces, a few projects..."* (Policy Interview 5)

Our mapping exercise also revealed that the local inclusive cultural offer for disabled young people can be quite patchy. Whilst the Local Offer itself does not specifically refer to arts and cultural provisions specifically (an important finding in itself!), and these are not signposted as such (rather they may fall under the health and wellbeing category, or the education category), the local authorities' directories do include provisions relating to arts and culture activities for young disabled people.

In Figures 1-6 in Appendix 1, we provide a visual representation of the Local Offer in all 10 participating Assemble locations across England and Wales and then filter the provision to what we identified in our mapping exercise as inclusive arts and culture provision. The maps, which can be found via clicking the links in the footnotes, demonstrate the scarcity of provision in south

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[43] *Children and Families Act 2014*. Retrieved June 25, 2025.

Wales and in Manchester in particular. In London, in contrast, cultural provision is more abundant, with higher concentrations in boroughs including Southwark and Islington.

We conclude that inclusive cultural provision availability in many places is subject to a postcode lottery, depending on many factors, such as the availability and proximity of cultural venues, geography, and the socio-economic characteristics of place, but also to the prominence given by municipal actors to inclusive arts culture. Additionally, the visibility of cultural provision depends largely on the existence of local champions advocating for the cultural rights of young disabled people.

5.2.3. Challenging Funding Landscape

The challenge of short-term funding has been mentioned in our engagement with all stakeholders as a major barrier for organisations to plan and deliver inclusive arts and cultural activities for young disabled people. Policy makers and funders struggle to balance the need to ensure sustainable long-term programme funding with the immediate needs for public service delivery. One of the policy makers interviewed reflects on this inherent tension, noting that

> *"Everything is competitive… if you don't get the contract, the work just stops."* (Policy Interviewee 3)

Overall, it appears that success from (government) funders' perspective can include:

- Bigger consortia of organisations with similar profiles and delivering similar programmes are better placed to be successful as they show a more cohesive vision than those who have different (even complementary) profiles but struggle to articulate a clear coherent vision. (Policy Interviewee 5)
- Avoiding silo working and fostering collaboration.
- In a competitive and ever shrinking funding context, joint bidding may be a solution:

> *"I know that it's competitive so that makes it harder to collaborate although it would feel like there should be better collaboration in order to draw down funding together. I know, that XX from [cultural organisation in Wales] has been working a lot with other dance organisations and I think that's really positive"* (Policy Interviewee 7)

5.2.4. Access infrastructure

Access infrastructure has been mentioned by policy makers as a barrier not only to cultural inclusion but more broadly, to achieving positive outcomes for young disabled people in general (including employment and education) and has been highlighted in the above sections on challenges to inclusivity. In Wales, access is further complicated by the rurality of places. A lot of the funding from the Arts Council for Wales for instance goes on funding transport.

> *"Some schools are travelling a very long way to access arts because of the nature of, we have large rural areas which have become less viable for arts to flourish. And so there is less available maybe in those areas. And so, there are a small number of, for example, theatre companies creating really high-quality theatre for children. If you can get there, then that's great. They're not necessarily touring, maybe they are a bit, some of them."* (Policy Interview, 7)

In the context of funding cuts to arts and culture, the closure of arts and cultural venues poses significant challenges as well. The survival of cultural spaces, including those providing experiences for disabled young people, depends to great extent on the existence of localised social capital, local champions and community partnerships.

5.2.5. Strategic cultural inclusion and working in partnership

Strategic cultural inclusion emerged as an important theme in our engagement with policy makers. Cross-sector initiatives, such as the GLA's Liberty Festival in London can create opportunities for disabled people to access a richer and more inclusive cultural offer. The Liberty Festival is "the Mayor of London's flagship festival of high-quality work by D/deaf and disabled artists. The annual free festival offers an inclusive, accessible and cultural experience for multigenerational audiences" but does not have an explicit focus on young people. Locally, in London, it is essential that disability champion organisations engage with the boroughs hosting the festival at an early stage to ensure that young disabled people benefit from it.

Similarly, local commitments such as '11 by 11 in Islington (ensuring young people have 11 cultural experiences by Year 11) provide early opportunities for children and young people to engage in arts and culture. However, the initiative does not have a disability focus per se.

Hence, strategic cultural inclusion is neither straightforward, nor easy to accomplish unless

disabled young people's voice is embedded effectively into programme design and decision making locally. This is a space in which policy makers recognise the value of working in partnership with relevant partner organisations. Talking about the partnership working with an established local disability-led organisation, one interviewee suggests that

> *"They help shape the policies… we rely on them to show us what's missing."* (Policy
>
> interviewee 4)

Our interviews also revealed that one council sees strong connections and opportunities for young disabled people in the cultural sector, especially in terms of employability.

> *"Cultural spaces are very supportive of this agenda… they're able to think outside the box and work*
>
> *with young people."* (Policy interviewee 3)

This further supports our previous point around the importance of anchoring programmes such as Assemble into local employment strategies and agendas. Strategic cultural inclusion and the existence of spaces such as the Liberty festival in London, can act as important pathways for young disabled people to progress into volunteering and/or employment in the sector.

### 5.2.6.   Data, representation and impact

The power of data insights could be harnessed to influence decision makers locally. Programmes such as Assemble generate significant and meaningful data that needs to be captured so that compelling stories could be told about the importance of young disabled people's engagement with arts, cultural and creative activities. From a funder's perspective, one of our interviewees suggested that the lack of tracking access and progression (in projects and programmes) makes it hard to make the case for disabled youth-led culture work:

> *"We need better data… not just attendance figures."* (Policy Interviewee 5)

Data gaps limit accountability of local policy makers as well as of delivery partners. Therefore, embedding evaluation in programme delivery frameworks is critical for organisations such as the NYT and the NYAW.

A succinct model of our recommended evaluation framework is represented below:

Diagram 1. Recommended Evaluation Framework
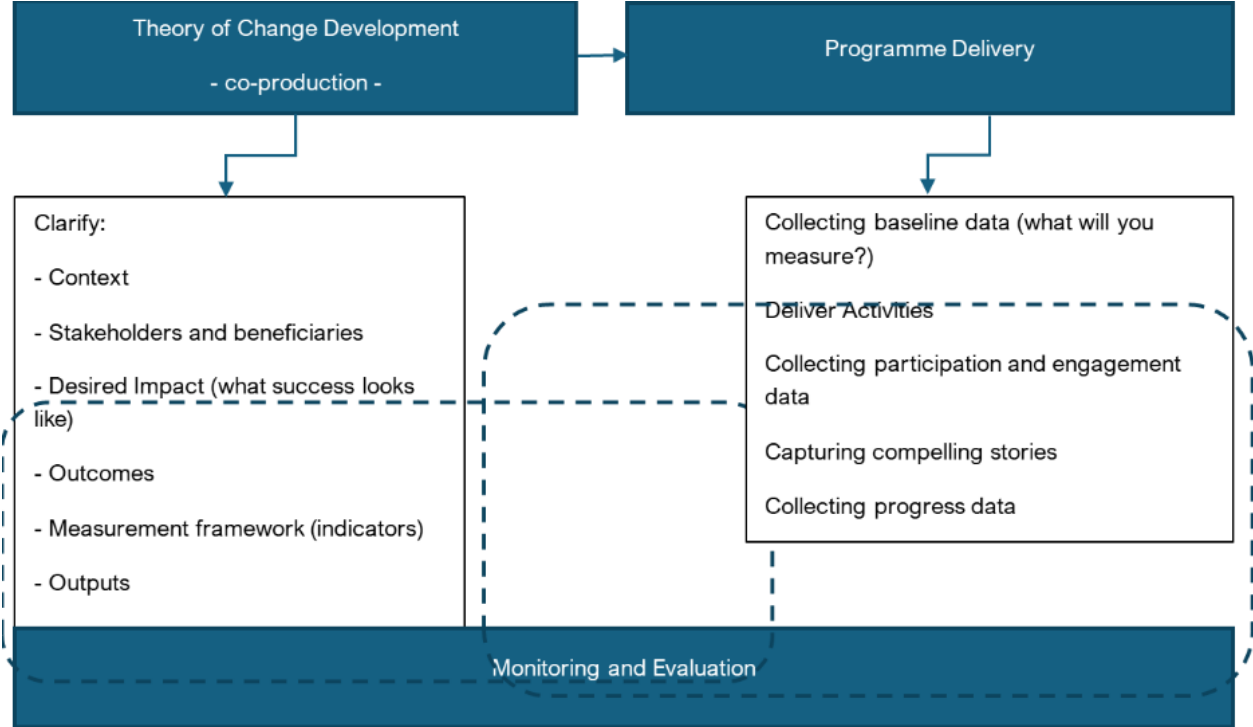
In terms of voice and agency for young disabled people, despite some strong commitments, cultural voice infrastructure for young people is not yet sufficiently developed, but good examples exist. For instance, the Welsh Government's Taskforce on disability rights "involved over 350 external stakeholders… building a culture of trust and collaboration." (Policy Interviewee 6). This comes on the back of statutory requirements of public bodies in Wales to involve stakeholders and the public more widely, in line with the 2015 Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. The Welsh model for the Disability Taskforce could be an interesting model of co-production that allows the lived experiences of disabled people to be embedded in policy development and enhance agency and representation.

5.3. Summary: Ensuring impact legacy in terms of inclusivity networks

Overall, this chapter explored the wider context in which the Assemble programme operates in England and Wales, by examining insights from disability organisations, policy makers, and funders. The findings illustrate the fragmented and often contested policy and governance landscape surrounding cultural inclusion for young disabled people, and the challenges organisations face in creating sustainable, impactful programmes.

Disability organisations, though not primarily focused on cultural inclusion, offered significant insights into how cultural engagement intersects with broader experiences of social inclusion. Access to culture was widely viewed as integral to participation in society, with educational settings identified as key arenas for inclusion. Disability organisation representatives argued that schools could act as catalysts for inclusive practice, where both disabled and non-disabled young people build shared experiences. The need for spaces to be not only accessible but also co-designed with disabled users was stressed, and the social model of disability should be the starting point. The concept of 'multi-ability' spaces emerged as vital for genuine integration, enabling all young people to connect beyond shared disabilities and instead through shared interests.

In discussions around cultural venues and practices, organisations noted promising examples such as virtual guides and supportive staff behaviour that enhance accessibility. However, widespread adoption of cashless systems was identified as a significant barrier, particularly for learning-disabled youth who often lack access to bank cards. Transport infrastructure, especially in rural areas, further limits access, revealing how geography and socio-economic factors compound exclusion.

Cultural inclusion was also explored through the lens of representation. While the inclusion of disabled people in the arts was recognised as progress, concerns were raised about the tendency to centre narratives around disability rather than simply integrating disabled individuals into broader artistic expression. The potential for arts to serve as platforms for social change was acknowledged, yet participants cautioned against tokenistic approaches.

Parental involvement emerged as another critical theme, reverberating earlier findings from the Assemble programme evaluation. Many learning-disabled young people rely on parents or guardians for support, and participants noted the anxiety parents often feel about allowing their children to explore independence. Long-term, trust-based engagement with parents was seen as necessary to build their confidence and support their children's participation in cultural activities. Peer learning, involving older disabled individuals sharing their experiences with families, was suggested as a powerful strategy to facilitate this.

The policy environment surrounding disability, cultural inclusion, and education is marked by significant divergence between England and Wales, driven in part by devolution. While both nations are covered by the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Government has more explicitly embraced the social model of disability, co-production principles and a desire to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into Welsh Law. The 2025 Disabled People's Rights Plan, although ambitious, lacks specific youth or cultural strategies. The UK's National Disability Strategy has been hampered by legal and procedural issues and makes only cursory reference to arts and culture. The lack of targeted youth and cultural focus in both nations limits the structural support for programmes like Assemble.

At the local level, provision remains inconsistent. While all local authorities are required to publish a Local Offer outlining available services for disabled youth, arts and culture are rarely prioritised or clearly signposted. The resulting offer is highly variable, often dependent on local champions advocating for inclusive practices. In many cases, the cultural offer for disabled youth remains fragmented and underdeveloped.

The competitive and short-term nature of funding was repeatedly cited as a barrier to sustainable inclusive programming. Organisations struggle to secure long-term support, with funders favouring larger, more homogenous consortia. Collaboration is seen as a solution, yet the competitive funding environment often undermines genuine partnership working. Transport and access infrastructure also continue to be major obstacles, particularly in rural areas in Wales where cultural provision is sparse and logistical challenges are more severe.

Despite these challenges, some strategic initiatives show potential. The Liberty Festival in London and Islington's '11 by 11' initiative offer opportunities for inclusive cultural engagement, though they often lack a specific focus on disabled youth. Effective inclusion, we conclude, requires the voices of disabled young people to be embedded in programme design and decision-making. Partnerships with local disability-led organisations can facilitate this, ensuring programmes are shaped by those with lived experience.

Data collection and evaluation were identified as important areas of focus. Funders highlighted the need for all inclusion programmes to provide meaningful data beyond attendance figures to

demonstrate impact and support future funding. Without robust data, it is difficult to advocate effectively for sustained investment in inclusive cultural programmes.

We conclude that while promising models and frameworks exist, particularly in Wales, the broader landscape remains fragmented and under-resourced. A more coordinated, youth-focused approach that embeds disabled voices, improves infrastructure, and ensures sustainable funding is essential to realising the full potential of programmes like Assemble.

5.4. Wider Context Recommendations for the Sector

- Broaden cultural and artistic opportunities: Future iterations of Assemble could embrace a wide range of cultural forms and artistic practices, ensuring disabled young people have the freedom to engage with and express themselves in ways that reflect their own interests and identities.

- Address rural inclusion: Inclusion programmes in general, across the cultural sector, should prioritise outreach in rural areas to reduce geographical inequalities. Expanding provision beyond urban centres will make access to inclusive cultural opportunities more equitable across regions.

- Strengthen relationships with parents and carers: Assemble and similar programmes should work closely with parents and carers, building their confidence by involving disabled young people who have already participated in the programme to share their experiences. Peer testimony can be a powerful tool to reassure families and encourage greater independence for their children.

- Strengthening collaborative partnerships: Future programmes should prioritise collaboration across organisations with shared values and missions. Whether in bidding, delivery, or advocacy, strong partnerships create coherent visions, improve competitiveness in funding applications, and amplify collective influence over policy makers and funders.

- To address the gaps in the provision of a disabled youth arts and culture offer at the local level, future iterations of Assemble should consider the issue of spheres of influence.

- Leveraging employment pathways in arts and culture: Employment and volunteering opportunities in the arts are a powerful lever for change. The sector is comparatively open to inclusive practices, and local authorities have statutory duties around education-to-

employment progression. Assemble should position themselves as vehicles for building pathways into the cultural workforce, thereby aligning with local policy priorities while empowering young disabled people.

- Capitalising on existing local opportunities: Strategic engagement with festivals, initiatives, and government programmes can expand impact without duplicating effort. By working collaboratively with established spaces, such as local arts festivals or contributing to schemes like Connect to Work, organisations can ensure disabled young people's voices are embedded early in planning and benefit from wider visibility in cultural and policy arenas.

- Demonstrating impact in a challenging funding landscape: Given the highly competitive and short-term funding environment, any future iteration of Assemble should capitalise on its ability to showcase evidence of impact. Demonstrating how arts-based interventions improve the lived experiences of young disabled people, while also creating tangible pathways into employment, could strengthen the case for sustainable and long- term investment.

- Increasing visibility of disabled youth cultural inclusion on policy agendas: Cultural inclusion for disabled youth is often overlooked in fragmented policy contexts. Assemble can help spotlight this gap by sharing successes and barriers, thus highlighting the importance of linking culture, disability, and youth. Doing so will counteract the often- siloed approaches ever present in government decision-making and raise the visibility of disabled young people across local, regional, and national agendas.

- Embed evaluation and evidence: Robust evaluation frameworks should run throughout programme delivery to generate meaningful data. Beyond attendance figures, capturing progression, lived experience, and long-term outcomes through varied qualitative and quantitative methodologies is critical to build the evidence base that could fuel compelling storytelling about the success of the programme.

6. Recommendations

The Assemble programme delivered a transformative and empowering experience for young disabled people through its creative workshops, cultural visits, and co-produced performances. The young disabled people involved reported increased confidence, greater sense of belonging and more quality interactions with their peers, and greater engagement with cultural and artistic activities. Overall, this demonstrates the programme's unique value in promoting young disabled people's inclusion and voice through the arts and cultural sector.

However, the evaluation also highlights persistent structural and operational barriers including limited engagement with parents, some limiting aspects of working within the school system, gaps and inconsistencies in feedback mechanisms and baseline evaluation metrics, and challenges in accessing cultural spaces due to transport, venue design and disability friendliness, and programming constraints. Systemic barriers such as fragmented policy attention to inclusive culture and underrepresentation of disabled people in the policy making and funding landscape further hinder the goals of creating a long-lasting impact and legacy beyond the benefits to the programme participants.

Strategically, the programme's potential to influence pathways into employment and volunteering in the arts is a powerful lever. While the UK policy landscape is inconsistent in recognising inclusive culture as a statutory concern, local authorities do have obligations in areas like education and employment. Therefore, positioning Assemble to effect change by aligning more directly with these statutory duties around employment is a significant lesson learnt.

We recommend that the future iterations of Assemble (and similar cultural inclusion indicatives):

- Deepen engagement with schools and families: engage teachers, parents, and carers at the outset to co-design inclusive participation. Early relationship-building can enhance trust and enable more tailored programme delivery.
- Establish a third 'safe space' for young disabled people: the programme design should explore moving beyond school and home settings by partnering with community arts and theatre venues that feel socially and physically accessible.
- Focus on creating structured opportunities through volunteering: formalise volunteer roles

as developmental opportunities into paid creative roles.

- Systematically embed evaluation throughout the programme from the very start: the theory of change developed by NYT should be supported by clear evaluation metrics and indicators alongside an infrastructure of monitoring progress and collecting necessary data. This will support robust impact measurement to ensure youth voices which are at the heart of the Assemble programme, are continuously heard and ensure the outputs and value of the programme can be more widely shared.

- Embed co-design with young people throughout the delivery of the programme: young people should be part of the design, delivery and evaluation of the programme. To do so, creative ways to involve them as well as adequate time in the programming should be reserved for this participation.

- Strengthen cultural partnerships: work closely with cultural venues and employers in the sector to model and disseminate best practice in inclusive programming and design.

- Communicate compelling stories of best practice and success: use Assembles' success to highlight the need for integrated cultural policy that centres disabled youth. Sharing compelling stories of change can influence funders, policymakers, and public discourse

- Use employment as a strategic lever at local level: frame Assemble within existing local authority duties on education, skills and employment, providing clearer pathways into cultural work and increasing sector diversity.

- Capitalising on existing local opportunities: Strategic engagement with festivals, initiatives, and government programmes can expand impact without duplicating effort. By working collaboratively with established spaces, such as local arts festivals or contributing to schemes like Connect to Work, organisations can ensure disabled young people's voices are embedded early in planning and benefit from wider visibility in cultural and policy arenas.

- Demonstrating impact in a challenging funding landscape: Given the highly competitive and short-term funding environment, any future iteration of Assemble should capitalise on its ability to showcase evidence of impact. Demonstrating how arts-based interventions improve the lived experiences of young disabled people, while also creating tangible pathways into employment, could strengthen the case for sustainable and long-

term investment.

- Increasing visibility of disabled youth cultural inclusion on policy agendas: Cultural inclusion for disabled youth is often overlooked in fragmented policy contexts. Assemble can help spotlight this gap by sharing successes and barriers, thus highlighting the importance of linking culture, disability, and youth. Doing so will counteract the often-siloed approaches ever present in government decision-making and raise the visibility of disabled young people across local, regional, and national agendas.

- Broaden cultural and artistic opportunities: Future iterations of Assemble should embrace a wide range of cultural forms and artistic practices, ensuring disabled young people have the freedom to engage with and express themselves in ways that reflect their own interests and identities.

Appendix 1

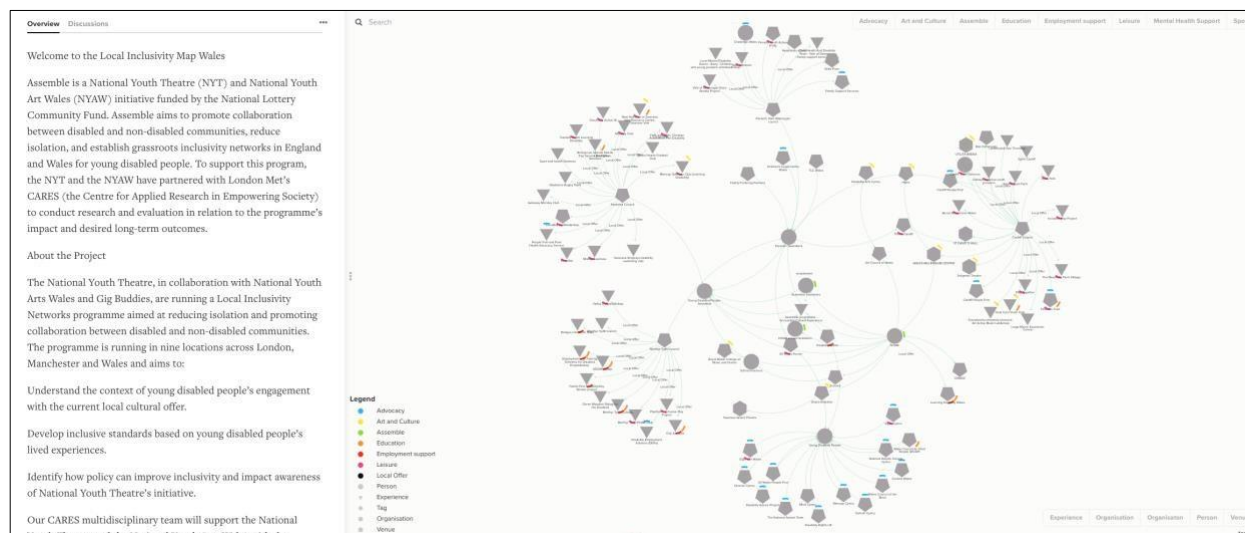*Figure 1 – Local Offer Mapping South Wales - Available here.*

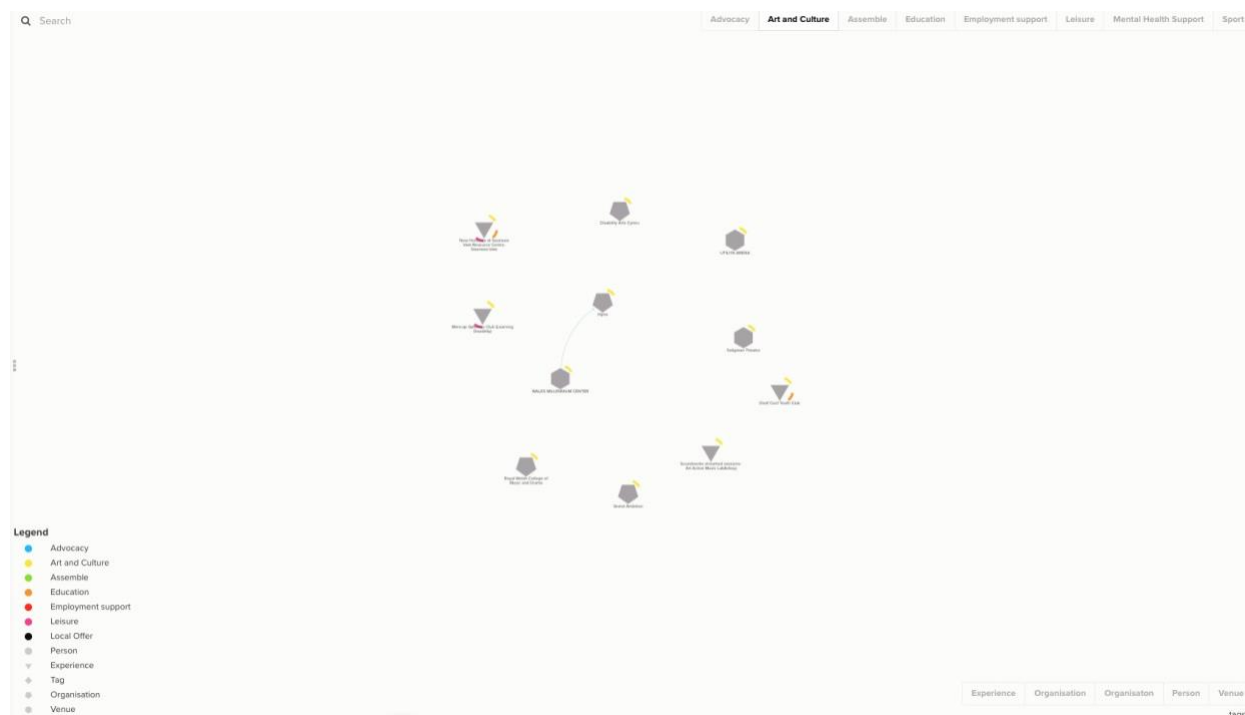*Figure 2 – Arts and cultural provision in the local offer South Wales - Available here.*

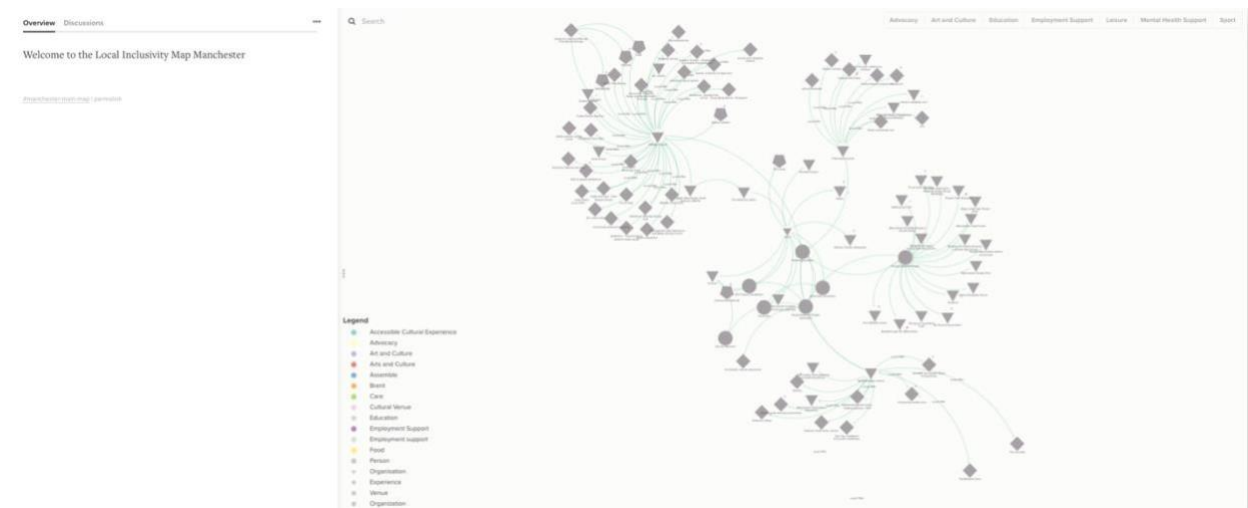*Figure 3 – Local Offer Mapping Manchester - Available here.*

Figure 4 – Arts and cultural provision in the local offer Manchester - Available here.

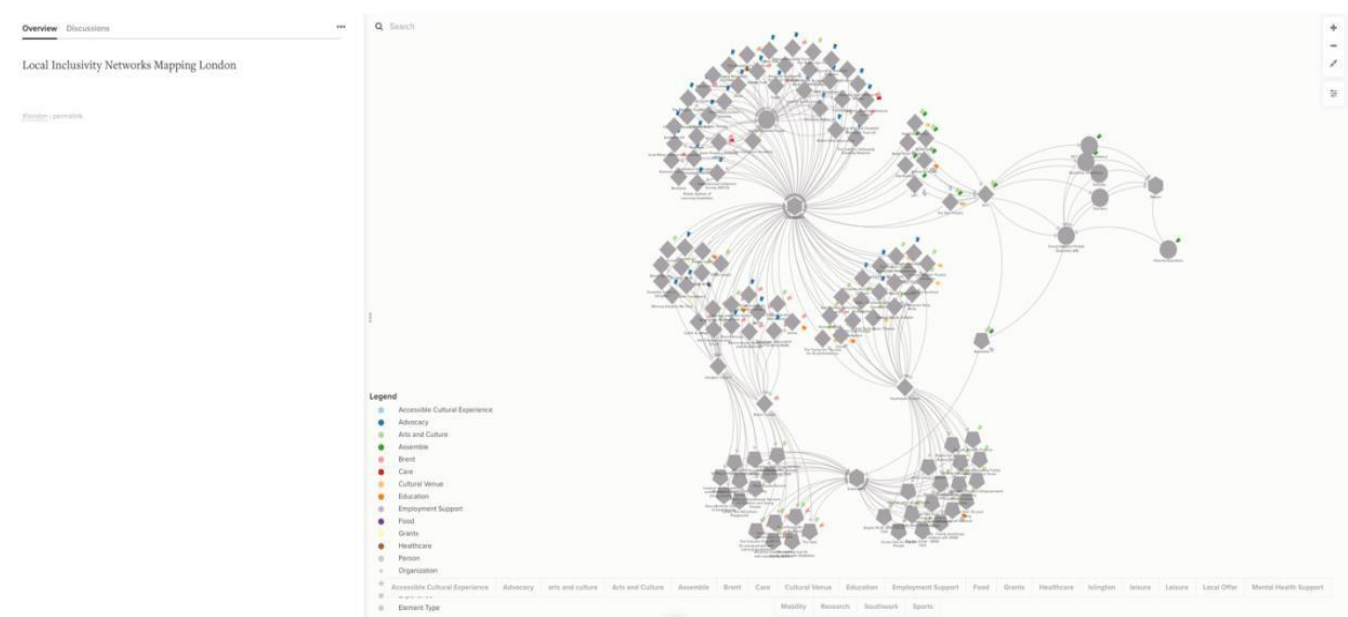*Figure 5 – Local Offer Mapping London (Southwark, Islington and Brent) - Available here.*

Figure 6 – Arts and cultural provision in the local offer London (Southwark, Islington and Brent) - Available here.