

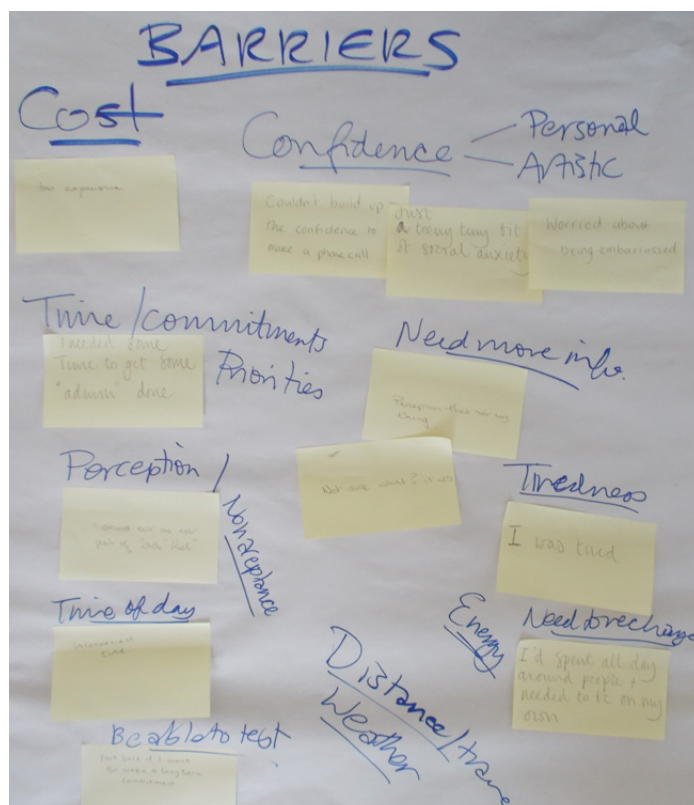
Breaking down barriers to participation

Many groups and practitioners would like more people to take part in the creative activity they already enjoy, though it is not always easy to work out what is getting in the way other people getting involved. It is also not always obvious what actions can be taken to help people overcome any barriers so they can join in your activity.

This Briefing focuses on a few exercises you can do as an individual or ideally, as a group, to identify potential barriers – both obvious and hidden, and possible solutions to them.

The second part is a collation of the results of over 50 training sessions held around the UK which can help confirm the barriers you've identified, fill in any gaps in your identification and provide some more ideas about possible solutions. Not quite 'answers to an exam', but more a 'collective wisdom' drawn from across the creative cultural activity sector!

The following three exercises are usually done with some post-it notes, 3 large sheets of paper (such as flipchart paper) and a couple of flipchart/marker pens. Ideally one person, if in a group, should lead the session or you can have a different person lead each exercise. Depending on the number of people and equipment you have available this can be down around a table or in a circle of chairs with a flipchart stand.



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Exercise 1:

Read this instruction (out loud if in a group):

"Think of a time you remember you consciously or deliberately said 'no' to doing or taking part in something. It doesn't have to be a creative activity or even recent. It could be that you decided not to go shopping, or not to go swimming. Once you've decided on that time, then think of the reason or reasons you decided not to take part or do the activity. Then write each one of these reasons on a separate post-it note."

Then when you have written all of your reasons out, or all the people in the group have completed writing them out, then go around the group with one person at a time saying one of their reasons written on their post-it notes out loud and place it on the large sheet of paper. Others in the group who feel they have the same reason can then also put their relevant post-it note with the first one on the sheet. The reason doesn't have to be written with the exact same word as long as the idea is the same. The leader of the exercise may choose to group the post-it notes under a title, eg. 'Confidence'.

If someone thinks 'oh I had the same reason but didn't write it down' they can write out a post-it note to join the others, but it isn't necessary as it's not about number of times something gets noted, but more that it has been mentioned at all.

Once you've completed putting out everyone's post-it notes, write the word 'Barriers' across the top of the paper you've been putting the post-it notes on. You might want to have a little discussion about how this exercise has identified barriers from people's own experience and then how that can be applied to the group. Or you can then go onto Exercise 2.

Exercise 2:

Read this instruction (out loud if in a group):

"Thinking again of the time you remembered for Exercise 1 when you consciously or deliberately said 'no' to doing or taking part in something – what would have made you say yes instead of no?"

This time the leader of the session or exercise, or a volunteer scribe, should make a note of the points coming up on the second large sheet of paper. You can take ideas from anyone in the group in any order. Before completing your list, make sure everyone has had a chance to have their input.

When people feel they have finished contributing their what 'would have made them say yes' points – go through the list to see how many of them would work for, or how you would realise them, to help the group and/or the creative activity you are currently involved in get more people taking part.

Once you've finished this latter part of the exercise – write the word 'Solutions' at the top of the sheet.

This list can then form the basis of the actions you look at taking in the future to improve access to your group and activities. You could also see which ones could be implemented quickly or may need to take time as they involved making bigger changes and prioritise work on them.

Exercise 3:

This is designed to look at the hidden, often internal, barriers that can also get in the way of a group being as accessible as it would like to be. They are often barriers that can get in the way of achieving things in life in general too! When doing this in a session from a single group, rather than multiple groups, it is important that people do not see this as any kind of personal criticism as much of what you will be examining is common to whenever people come together for any purpose.

Read this instruction (out loud if in a group):

"Now think of a time you've had where you took what you think is a great idea (it doesn't necessarily need to be related to a creative activity or the group you are involved in) to a group of people who will make a decision on it. It could be the committee, or Board, or the rest of your family, or your boss and their boss. You come in with your idea, full of enthusiasm and energy and

then describe what can happen at this point that can be a barrier to getting them to think your idea is as good as you think it is?"

Note for the leader - a further prompt if there's no comments from people at this point – *"What kind of reactions or remarks might you have got when proposing a new idea?"*

Write down what will generally be negative comments on the third large sheet of paper. (This exercise can be a great way for people get the experience 'off their chest'!)

Then go through the list and think about how it could be possible to change what are usually 'nay-sayers' into 'yay' or 'yea' sayers? Usually it is a case of anticipating the above responses and using them to put relevant 'counter' information in a proposal. This can also be a good way for a committee to become more aware of how they could be getting in the way of new and good ideas coming through.

Once you've done some discussion around these points then write the words 'Organisational Barriers' across the top of the sheet of paper.

We would suggest that you also look at the 'collective wisdom' under the Exercise Three section in the second part of this Briefing for other hidden barriers you may like to consider or be aware of so you can hopefully work on reducing their impact on the potential success of your group or activities.

They may seem a bit of a negative note to end the exercises on but in examining your barriers – external and internal – you will find opportunities to improve how you do thing. This will make better use of all the time, effort and dedication that goes into your creative cultural activity and encourage more people to join you on your journey!

Finally, once you've got your plans in place, make sure you look at the other [Voluntary Arts Briefings](#) available online which cover topics such as marketing and accessibility for further ways you can be in touch with more potential participants.



And now the collective wisdom of the sector...

Barriers to participation

We've noted some of the comments made during training events under each heading to help illustrate how people described the barrier in their own words which can be helpful when thinking about how you describe the solution to potential participants!

Exercise 1:

Time

- I needed some time to get some 'admin' done
- Not enough time
- Could not commit so much time to the activity
- Too busy
- Simply didn't have enough days in the week
- Wanted to do other things with limited time
- Too late at night
- Don't want to commit in case I miss one week or can't make it
- Inconvenient time of day
- Poor timing (during work hours/outside transport times)

Commitments/Family/Care/Obligations

- Family commitments - no one to look after my children
- Not sure if I want to make a long term commitment – wanted to test it out
- Wanted to simplify my life and cut down on some activities
- I needed to put myself first and not commit myself to doing something that would take so much time
- Over-committed already
- Had other responsibilities
- The person I was with didn't want to take part, so I didn't want to delay them
- Wanted to be alone

Money/Cost

- lack of funds
- unemployment
- Too expensive
- Is it worth it?
- Had to commit to full term and pay for it
- Didn't want to spend lots of money

Fear/ Confidence/rejection

General / Physical (nervousness)

- Lack of peer/family approval
- Couldn't build up the confidence to make a phone call
- Comfort & safety – feeling welcome
- Not wanting to phone a stranger to find out details
- Scared of making a fool of myself
- Social confidence - Shyness/embarrassment – making the first step
- Fear of going alone - attending on my own
- Worried about being embarrassed
- It made me feel anxious/nervous
- I was scared of heights
- Unable to attract friends along (didn't want to go by myself)
- Felt unsure about meeting people
- Self-conscious
- Lack of ability to physically do something
- Dreaded going and outcome
- Educationally inadequate – intimidated

- Won't make final call to set up a business

Artistic

- Not good enough to sing
- Previous bad experience
- They were looking for people who were good at the subject – I didn't feel 'good enough'
- I felt I was not intelligent enough to appreciate the artist's work
- Feel like I won't be good enough at the activity
- Low self-esteem (not good/talented enough)
- Not wanting to perform in public
- Skill level - Level of existing group pitched too high
- New members not well integrated
- Attended a film but didn't stay after the film for discussion as hadn't prepared for it and lacked confidence to take part in it
- Fear of being the worst!

Weather

- Because the weather was horrible
- Cold and dark
- It was raining! Made the path slippery.

Travel/Distance

- Location
- Too far away
- Too inconvenient due to where I live
- Lack of public transport

Motivation /Tired/Energy

- Guilt
- Too knackered
- It started too late and I was tired
- Too much work - I was overworked
- I'd spent all day around people and needed to be on my own to 're-charge'
- Lack of incentive - not personally satisfying
- Apathy – been there done that
- No obligation
- Couldn't be bothered (easy route out)
- I had run out of inspiration and wanted to let someone else take over
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Laziness
- Something better on TV!

Access

- Lack of quality
- Unfamiliarity with language
- Gender
- Venue - can I get there? Find it? Get in? Access it easily?

Health/Disability

- Didn't feel well
- Bad back
- Needed me time for better quality of life
- Illness
- It was making me stressed

Lack of Marketing/Information

- Perception it was not my thing - didn't seem to be the right demographic
- Not sure what it was, what to expect, unknown quantity

- Language
- Is it worth it the effort?
- What skill level is required?

Not good experience

- It was always a negative experience
- Wasn't sure if it was going to be any good
- Stopped dancing when moved house and new area wasn't welcoming
- Lack of goal
- Lack of appreciation/thanks/value
- Negative reputation
- Hated the teacher and it was too cold
- Boring/no challenge as already had the skills
- Fed up with lack of progress, no opportunity to learn something
- Felt like an outsider – existing participants are already friends
- Felt pressured to continue on a project I wasn't enjoying so I left!
- No socialising afterwards – everyone departs!
- Not interested, there was something else I could do that seemed more interesting
- Didn't want to follow the rules/obligations
- Like to do my own thing and not what people tell me to do

Issues with the group/people concerned/'dynamics'

- Internal group bureaucracy
- Found remarks made by Board member offensive
- Too many different agendas
- Sexism
- Ethics – not ethical – made me feel bad about myself afterwards – couldn't live with myself if I continued
- Clashing of personalities within group
- Narrow minded negative thoughts
- Badly organised
- I felt I was being railroaded, Bullied



Possible solutions to the barriers above – a sample list

Some of these will suit your group or activity more than others but all may be worth considering especially as a number of the ideas can help overcome more than one barrier.

Be social! Fun & enjoyment attracts people:

- Offer refreshments eg cake, tea & biscuits (this can be done as a kitty system or people take turns supplying the food. If meeting in a café make it clear if you are expected to

purchase something or not if you attend – though with the right café attenders may have no problem buying something if it's worth it!

- Be welcoming at the door with 'meeters and greeters' (e.g. on a rota), people who can inform new members about how things work, where things are & say thank you for coming. This could also be in the form of a 'buddy' system to support new attenders
- Give people's names at the beginning/have name badges
- Start a new group of people together
- Avoid assigned seats/or 'cliques'

Helping with costs:

- Use the FREE Taster session option, eg. first time free or reduced fee with possible further incentivise with refreshments. Plus you can research what people like and want for further sessions.
- Offer different payment options to suit ability to attend/commit for example drop in/pay as you go sessions and/or money off if you can pay for a block of sessions in one go.
- Offer concessions.
- Free tickets to create more attendees long term.

Information is a key way to attract people with clear messages/marketing:

- Give testimonials/quotes/case study/stories – in various ways with information from other group members.
- Demonstrate previous successes and achievements – to clearly show what your purpose is and your credibility.
- Pay attention to the language you are using to encourage people through the door – should be inclusive and relevant to more people e.g. use the word FUN!
- Show the diversity of participants on website/documents.
- Use of mix of marketing – posters, leaflets, online including videos/photos, advertising, news articles, radio interviews.
- Explain things clearly e.g. bus routes, maps – much easier if you have an online presence eg website or social media. Use the digital space to have photos, videos to let people see and know more about the group, activities and venue(s).
- Be clear on level of ability expected and requirements such as any specialist equipment to be supplied or if there are auditions or not.
- Attract school partnerships by understanding many are judged on results – and how you can help their pupils do well.
- If reaching out to different communities – go to them rather than necessarily expecting them to come to you.
- Use 'champions' to help spread the word.

Encouraging more volunteers/helpers

- Help with expenses.
- Offer incentives such as see the show for free.
- As appropriate use a Volunteer contract/job description as it shows you are valuing the role. Also have a possible initial period of probation as it is a 2 way thing.

Variety of times and locations available to take part:

- Using experienced people as coaches/tutors/organisers to expand choice of locations/time of day options.
- More experienced group members can teach newer people which could allow the group to have more locations/times of day which means that attending is convenient for more people. These longer term attendees can meet the main tutor

beforehand for guidance and also it keeps their interest longer as there is further challenge for them.

- Consider more suitable/alternative times of day or week and/or locations – especially if there is a change of people attending as you may get more commitment if they suit more of the potential members.
- Check out possible different venues such as libraries, museums, fire stations
- Do sessions in 'blocks' with breaks in between eg for school holidays

Communication

- Different ways of contact to help possible participants eg website with photos, videos, directions, names of committee etc
- Have a designated contact person who answers/returns emails, phone calls and make sure they do (!)
- Is an event on/off? Make sure there are clear messages and plenty of notice where possible
- Email address can be better than a contact form on a website for some people (especially if the submission of a form doesn't have a sent note)
- Have a virtual/digital space for the group as appropriate
- Make contact personally
- Use signs to make it clear where your activity is in a venue

Transport

- Offer transportation support or sharing rides/car share/pooling or 'buddying'
- Have information about car parking, relevant bus routes, proximity to train stations

Creating a good environment and atmosphere

- Work towards a goal
- Genuine praise when deserved
- Managing issues early
- Give the message 'you're wanted & important to us'
- Ensure access for all
- Quantity vs quality? This needs to be decision for 'the long game'
- Be open to people asking questions – maybe build in a regular opportunity to do this?
- Offer different levels of activity and maybe mixed levels as appropriate
- With problems of 'no shows' for free events – suggest looking at time limited options of availability or limit the number of free tickets available so less of impact if don't turn up, or first come, first served

- Try to create safety / security as much as possible
- Be aware of competing priorities / influences
- Consider a childcare offer and/or family friendly events

Organisational/Internal Barriers

Reactions you often face when proposing a new idea:

- Not a good idea
- Where are the money/resources? Can't afford it!
- I have a better idea than yours! A good idea but do it my way
- 'We need it to fit into to strategic context'. Does it fit our programme?
- Already tried that 25 years ago - didn't work!
- That's not what we do, how we do it, we've always done it this way
- Haven't got the money/capacity
- We'll discuss it at the next meeting or never get to it on the agenda
- It's a waste of time. No-one will be interested. Wouldn't appeal to the target audience/local people
- Too busy; No time for it
- You're crazy! You can't do that - acting as a 'gatekeeper'
- The rules lawyer – health & safety
- Dismissive, 'oh just shut up!'
- Inertia/Apathy/Stagnant
- We're so nice & agreeable – we don't need to make decisions

How to counter these often hidden barriers in groups:

Think how to change 'Nay'sayers into 'Yay/Yea'sayers – anticipate the responses you might get as those above and use them to put relevant 'counter' information in a proposal. For example 'Not what our group does' – if your idea aligns with your group's aims and objectives then show how your idea fits with them. If money is an issue – identify a couple of possible funding sources. Answer the likely questions – put it into your 'audience's language' - take the time to put things together – and make sure you show enthusiasm if you believe in your ideas!

Regularly review your plans and/or constitution or equivalent documents to make sure people are sharing the same view of the priorities so your group is not being pulled in different directions. Remember 'Age is relative' – young people are not just 18-25 year olds as we get told by funding opportunities and government policies. If the average age of your group is 60 then a forty year has twenty years to give to the group before they reach that average age range!

Some specific barriers you will find helpful regarding disabilities which were collected together at a training session organised by Voluntary Arts Wales:

- Type of door, handles, weight of door, width to allow for all sizes of wheelchairs
- Putting text at different heights
- Appropriate transport to the venue
- Not accommodating physical needs in an activity
- Language

- 'Adventure' areas – woods, beaches not being accessible
- Lighting – visual impairment / hearing – lip reading, strobe lighting
- Toilet facilities – actually accessible toilets and enough of them
- Availability and accessibility of service of food & drink plus water specifically
- Crowds with no 'quiet' space
- Distance – how far do people have to travel within your venue eg how far are the lifts from the entrance? Can transport be provided within the venue?

Can cars get right to the door onsite?

- Attitudes:
 - Ignoring the preferences of disabled people – taking away autonomy
 - Peer pressure – stopping someone from making their own choices
 - Knocking confidence in various ways
 - Tensions within the group itself
 - Behaviour within the group by other participants



Honesty is important - beware of hidden prejudices that are affecting how your group operates. An example is of a youth drama group that asked a volunteer to leave after working for over a year with them on funding applications and backstage functions, 'because they had no PVG certificate' even though that volunteer had no requirement legally to need one nor had ever been asked to apply for one. This incident happened a couple of days after the committee found out that the volunteer was in a gay relationship as they had suggested their partner was also interested in volunteering for the drama group. This prejudice cost the drama group (that was a secular group) not just one, but two experienced volunteers.

Sometimes it's an issue around 'power/control'. Look at other organisations to find examples of good practice. If one is considered an 'authority' – ask them to come and help 'see' your group from external point of view. This can be as an exchange of information or even consider a physical visit.

Resistance is a reaction often considered 'bad' if it is contrary to your opinion but 'good' if it is you who is 'standing up for something'. Keep this perspective in mind if you are finding someone is resistant to an idea – giving them a chance to properly air what their concerns are can often reveal a possible way to a compromise/way forward.

Further Information

"We've got a Briefing for that!"

Voluntary Arts publications

Once you've decided what your actions will be there are a number of Briefings around running and marketing events such as:

Briefing 128: Events checklist - disability and access;

Briefing 141: Finding a Venue

Briefing 67: Risk assessment for event organisers which can help you take things forward.

Find the full range of Briefings and resources on the [Voluntary Arts website](#).

See also:

[Euan's Guide](#) - accessibility reviews for UK venues

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Created 2017 by Fiona Campbell (thefabspot@yahoo.com)

'Breaking Down Barriers' training session presented by: Fiona Campbell, Development Manager, Voluntary Arts

Do you need this publication in an alternative format? Telephone 02920 395395 or email info@voluntaryarts.org

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