

Access to Literature: Case Study - the Retreat

This Case Study of the Retreat for deaf and disabled writers forms part of the Access for Literature research carried by Jamie Hale (CRIPtic Arts) and Ruth Harrison (Spread the Word) between June - October 2021.

The research informed the *Access to Literature* Report (October 2022) which presents the first national picture of the barriers deaf and disabled people experience in accessing the literature and publishing sectors as writers, creative producers and audience members.

The *Access to Literature* research and report have been made possible through support by public funds Arts Council England.

Jamie Hale and Ruth Harrison

The Case Study and the *Access to Literature* Report are available in the following formats:

Executive Summary: text (.doc and .pdf), audio, BSL video, Easy Read

Full Report: text (.doc and .pdf), audio and BSL video

Case Study: text (.doc and .pdf), audio, BSL video, Easy Read

The *Access to Literature* Report can be accessed at:

<https://www.spreadtheword.org.uk/projects/cruptic-writes-x-spread-the-word/>

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About the Retreat

“Access is an intention. As a disabled person I realise that no space could ever be fully accessible to everyone, but the commitment we are making is to reach as far as possible to meet everyone’s access needs and create a space which is open and welcoming to all. This Retreat is somewhere you could come to us about an unmet need, and where access provision needs are seen as crucial to the work.” Jamie Hale, Retreat host

The Retreat was for deaf and disabled writers of poetry, fiction and/ or scriptwriting. It ran online over four days between Thursday 29 July - Sunday 1 August 2021 and was co-produced and managed by CRIPTic Arts and Spread the Word. It aimed to encourage people to experiment and broaden their writing practice, get insight into the industry and become part of a writing community.

It was free to participate in and open to deaf and disabled writers (including: neurodivergence, chronic and long-term health conditions and mental health conditions) based in the UK and over 18 years of age.

Places on the Retreat were by application. The criteria for participation included: 1) being committed to taking your writing forward; 2) writing regularly in at least one of the Retreat’s genres and 3) interested in joining a community of writers, sharing your work and working across different genres.

Promoted through an open call between 4 June - 7 July 2021, deaf and disabled writers could apply either by an online form or by a text form. They were asked to provide two samples of their work which could be provided as a word, pdf, audio or video file.

38 deaf and disabled writers applied to be part of the Retreat, with 14 being selected (the original target being 10) from across the UK.

Hosted by Jamie Hale, the Retreat comprised of:

- Three **creative workshops** with Jamie Hale;
- Three **guest artist workshops** with Charlotte Heather, Matilda Ibini and Omikemi;
- Three **readings from guest artists** Elle McNicoll, Stephen Lightbown and Nadia Nadarajah;
- Three captioned **industry insight films** from Vici Wreford-Sinnott, Artistic Director, Little Cog, Julie Farrell, a writer, critic and activist and Aliya Gulamani, Junior Commissioning Editor, Unbound for participants to watch in their own time;
- An **insight session on finding and applying for funding** with Jamie Hale and Ruth Harrison;
- A **sharing event** with readings by the Retreat participants.

A **Welcome Pack** was created for participants and also for guest artists. Both packs contained information on: timings, duration and description of each session, access provisions in place, participants (biog, image with image description, pronouns), guest artists (biog, image with image description, pronouns).

As part of the Retreat, **two focus groups** were run on Sunday 1 August 2022 led by external facilitator, poet and disability rights activist Daniel Sluman. The questions addressed were:

- 1) What do deaf and disabled writers, producers and audiences need to access literature events and what are the barriers to progressing as a writer;
- 2) What had been the experience of Retreat participants of the access provisions we had put in place

These focus groups formed part of the *Access to Literature* research and helped to establish the themes explored in the *Access to Literature* Report.

Access provisions

The following access provisions were put in place for the Retreat. These were shared in advance with Retreat participants, guest artists and the BSL interpreters.

A named contact in advance of and during the Retreat, available by email, text and voice notes.

Session breaks:

20-minute breaks after every 60 minutes of a session.

5-minute breaks within every 30 minutes of a 60-minute session.

Retreat materials: All facilitators and guest artists were asked to provide copies of their workshop plans including any texts they would be using, and guest readers were asked to provide a copy of the text they would be reading from. They were asked to flag any content warnings. We created online folders with the materials for the workshops and readings which were shared prior to the Retreat for pre-reading

Relaxed format: Participants were free to take breaks whenever they needed, they didn't need to let the hosts/ guest artists know, could just disappear when needed and when they were ready re-join the session.

BSL interpreters and auto-captioning: The Retreat was BSL interpreted by Amy Hayward, Michelle Wood and Jemima Hoadley and tips provided from Remark on working in a space with BSL interpreters:

- Make sure you are clearly visible in your camera

- Speak clearly and normally
- If you are asking a Deaf participant something, speak to them, not the interpreter
- Make sure only one person is speaking at a time

All sessions were auto-captioned.

Participants and guest writers were asked to self-describe when introducing themselves.

Image description: All presenters were asked to describe any images used in their session.

Content warnings: We were clear that we could not guarantee a trigger-free space, and while we requested that people put content notes on anything likely to trigger, we did not know in advance what people would be bringing to the space.

Recordings: Recordings of sessions were made available to participants if they were unable to attend a session.

Impact learnings

“Really wonderful to be part of a group. I feel lucky to be in a group with kind and caring people. It has been great.” Retreat participant

Writers said they wanted:

- More opportunities to get to know one another, including a ‘meet and greet’ session, chances to learn from one another’s creative practice and how others manage access barriers. Practically they suggested more small groups and breakout rooms.
- Advance documentation which included a sheet on what would be covered in each session, with a traffic light system for intensity and any triggering content, advance sights of any images and text to consider, and all exercises written out and available in advance.
- Workshop facilitators to flag any potential triggering content and for convenors to have a plan in place to manage any required aftercare.
- To be told explicitly that it was OK for them to work with their cameras off.
- An acknowledgement that meeting some access needs may conflict with someone else’s access needs. For example, short breaks were difficult for some writers to get going again while others found long breaks inaccessible.
- Provide both social and structured opportunities for participants to connect and learn from each other.

- Build in sufficient time to ensure access provisions can be put in place, for example, participant arranging for a carer, and be clear on the format that information needs to be received from guest artists so it is accessible for all participants.

As a whole, people really enjoyed the Retreat and the possibilities it offered them - especially where it was their first time taking part in disability-led spaces, and a sense that you're "not alone".

"I didn't have to explain how pain, fatigue, brain fog affected my creative output. Opportunity to network with range of excellent writers - energising! Wide variety of genres, writing exercises, people - diversity in action and celebrated!" Retreat participant

Understanding the issues faced by participants allows us to consider what makes events, and the literature sector and publishing industry, more accessible to deaf and disabled writers overall - because even in a space where access was centred, there were still significant barriers faced by some of the attendees.

Retreat participants agreed that the most effective way to design accessible writing development opportunities was to do so alongside deaf and disabled writers. They called for greater co-design and more co-production.

Reflections

Writers attending had very different levels of experience in each of the genres (poetry, fiction and scriptwriting). The structure expected the whole group to work on one genre per day, and for some writers this gave them room to grow and stretch, whereas for others, they felt unable to work and develop in the areas they most wanted to. This issue arose from the fact that this is the *only* accessible online retreat for deaf and disabled writers, and that it cannot provide everything for everyone who wants to attend it.

Documentation in advance

"The agenda came out too late for rearrange of times with my carers. Although I had the dates it would have been good to be able to work around session times." Retreat participant

The documentation we provided in advance was often inadequate (e.g. due to font, text provided as images, non-working links) - an issue which arose partially from capacity, and partially from an unawareness of issues we have now worked to resolve. Writers identified that they would benefit from documentation for the Retreat containing a sheet on what would be covered in each session, with a traffic light system for intensity, any trigger or content notes, any images or text to consider, and all exercises written out and available.

The expectation that facilitators and readers would provide their own trigger warnings relied on an assumption that as deaf and disabled people they would be aware of what was needed - and this wasn't then put in place, leading to difficult levels of intensity and upsetting material being addressed. There was a lack of support and aftercare which was challenging for participants.

Expectations of output and engagement

"I use a voice-activated computer. The sessions were great but 3 exercise in an hour is just not realistic for me. I could not keep up. I cannot work at that speed." Retreat participant

The exercises were also often too ambitious for the time allowed or relied on people being able to produce work at a specific and unrealistic pace. This left some participants behind, while others felt unable to start the work as they felt it could not be finished. Providing these in advance, with simpler or quicker versions would have made them more accessible. People also felt that there was an implicit pressure to be engaged, working, with camera on at all times, and would have benefited from reassurance that this was not required.

Conflicting barriers

In some areas barriers conflicted - especially around breaks. For some writers, short breaks were challenging in terms of starting and stopping, and longer breaks were inaccessible, whilst others needed longer breaks in order to take part. For smaller events, a degree of co-production around people's needs often allows for the events to be more accessible.

Contact and connection

Whilst obligatory socialising is often inaccessible, attendees wanted more space and opportunity to get to know one another in a variety of ways. Creating managed spaces for these types of connection is valuable, and participants discussed a 'meet and greet' session, but also opportunities for them to learn from one another's creative practice and how others manage similar access barriers, as well as more use of small groups and breakout rooms in which discussion could take place.

Planning and processes

From a project management perspective, more time needed to be given both in how long the call out for participants was open for through to the length of time between selection of the Retreat participants and the start of the Retreat itself. This would have allowed for access provisions to be put in place for the participants as well as participants making their own arrangements to ensure the Retreat was accessible for them (e.g. arranging for a carer).

In terms of processes, we should have given clear guidance to guest artists on how we needed their workshop plans/ reading texts and trigger warnings to be provided (e.g.: in word, 12 pt font and 1.5 line spaced) so that these would be able to be formatted to be accessible for the Retreat participants.

“Thank you for a very enjoyable and unique experience. I know that I am only beginning to see the benefits in terms of my own writing. To be part of this network is a real opportunity that I intend making the most of. I appreciated the skills, experience and variety of people we had access to.” Retreat participant

