

Embedding IDEA at large-scale performances

Background

At [Calderdale Music](#), we're committed to providing access to a musical community in which everyone feels they belong. Staff are appointed based on values and ability, with regular and high-quality training opportunities which raise awareness of IDEA practices. We take steps to provide an environment in which everyone is treated with respect and dignity, and without discrimination. Our journey to embed inclusive practice is ongoing.

2023 saw us engage in a pilot Big Sing project called Voices Together. The aim was to bring as many young people as possible together to sing at a local theatre. We especially wanted to create a positive experience for pupils with access needs. We took part in [Youth Music's](#) IDEA project in 2023, and used learning around youth voice, strategy development, and partnership scoping to create a highly inclusive event.

Consultation to plan the event

In preparation for the event, we thought about those we were targeting, their needs and barriers. For example, pupil premium students and pupils from Special Schools. We had many conversations and encouraged feedback. We listened with respect and transparency, to pupils, schools and families. It was important for us to know what was important to them, so we could support their needs. We discovered that many of the young people attending had not been to the theatre before, let alone performed there! We soon understood the enormity and value in creating this project. We aimed to host an event that they would never forget.

We held focus groups with young people to ensure that they were heard and their voices were acted upon. They told us they wanted upbeat songs, opportunities for movement, and a live band.

The preparation

Four songs were chosen for everyone to sing together. Through consultation, we agreed this was an accessible number of songs to learn in the time available. The songs displayed a range of artists from varying backgrounds, with a message of friendship and togetherness. Schools could also sing their own song on the stage, where they could express their own individuality.

Teaching tracks of the songs were sent out to the schools, alongside [a video demonstrating the songs in British Sign Language](#) (BSL). Our partnership work and close links with [Music and the Deaf](#) and [Access The Arts](#) helped us in the production of

these. The videos offered pupils an alternative way of accessing the event, especially for those who prefer to sing with their hands. They were well received by schools and pupils.

Before the event, we sent a video walk-through and photos of the venue to support pupils who are anxious about new environments and uncertainty. Feedback told us this was useful and appreciated. Schools received a visit from one of our team, where they could find out more about what to expect on the day, receive technical singing support. This also meant they could recognise us as a friendly face when they arrived at the theatre.

The event

The venue was the [Victoria Theatre](#), centrally located in the heart of Calderdale.

Physical access was aided by:

- Ramp access to the stage.
- Access for Disabled people to the building and bathroom facilities.
- Dedicated break out spaces for those needing time away from the main stage.

Thanks to staff training in awareness of IDEA principles, Calderdale Music staff were better able to engage and support the young people involved. People told us they were approachable and understanding, with faultless consideration for the young people's needs. Access the Arts joined us for the event, and provided BSL interpretation to guide and support the young people.

After the event, video footage of each choir was sent to their school so they could share and celebrate their achievements.

The feedback

It was important to us to collect feedback about the event, to know what went well and where we could improve. Here is a sample of the feedback we received:

- "The thought that went into including everyone was wonderful".
- "I wasn't sure how our children would react being in unfamiliar surroundings and with so many new faces, noises etc., but the team had really thought about our needs".
- "The breakout spaces were a God send and we used these quite a bit with one of our children. You also allowed us to move around as much as we needed (i.e. leave the stage when the loud bangs were about to happen). Even our placing on the stage and in the auditorium was carefully considered and made the day very smooth running for us all".

- “I know our wheelchair user couldn't make it in the end but the fact that you had a ramp ready was wonderful and didn't go unnoticed, so thank you”.
- “It was lovely for children from all schools to be able to come together to sing as a big choir and to also have the opportunity to perform individually if desired. It was lovely to have the opportunity to learn the signing for the big songs too.”
- “Very inclusive and arrangements were made in case one of our pupils needed to be in his wheelchair on the day.”
- “All children regardless of ability absolutely loved the rehearsals and event.”
- “I really appreciate all of the hard work and effort that you have all put into organising this event – it really felt like you cared about every child, in every choir, so thank you very much!”
- “Loved the signing and the fact it was free for schools.”
- “It's been a wonderful experience, and the children were absolutely loving life. It's certainly something they won't forget in a hurry.”

What next?

Whilst we were thrilled at the feedback and success of the event, our reflection also helps us to strive for further improvement. Voices Together will be returning in 2024 and will include:

- Training for schools in inclusive singing approaches.
- Ticket cost remissions for families in low income circumstances.

Transport and geographical barriers remain an issue in Calderdale and our next steps will be to look at how we can overcome this by having additional performance venues that still offer the same industry quality standard experience, but in more accessible locations.

We also wish to develop opportunities for young people to experience the event from the production side, developing skills in music tech and production.

Being part of the IDEA project has helped us to hone the areas that help us to embed inclusive practice within our organisation but also make projects and events such as these all the more successful for the young people, their families and communities.