Changing perceptions of disability through sports, arts, and culture: what works and what challenges exist?

Lessons learnt from social sector organisations funded by Spirit of 2012

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Image from All Roads Lead to Alexander, a joint project between Caudwell Children and K'antu Ensemble

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Introduction

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As an independent trust set up to recreate the pride and positivity of the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic Games, creating inclusive communities that thrive and flourish through sports, arts, and volunteering is central to Spirit of 2012's funding strategy. This is why Spirit aims to achieve three main outcomes: increasing wellbeing, social cohesion, and changing perceptions of disability.

Despite the progress made by disability rights movement, academics, funders and practitioners in this space, a majority of Disabled people, carers, and general public who participated in the UK Disability Survey in 2021 still felt that public attitudes towards Disabled people continue to be unhelpful, and crucially needed improvement and greater awareness.[1] Across sectors (i.e., academia, policy, social sector), more could be done to better understand how disabilities are perceived in society.

Spirit of 2012 has accumulated a wealth of experience and knowledge by funding many projects that promote greater understanding and inclusion of Disabled people, may that be through training, joint participation between Disabled and non-Disabled participants, or other activities across arts, volunteering, and sports. This report aims to consolidate what Spirit-funded organisations (also referred to as grantees) have learnt over time about changing perceptions and attitudes towards disability – what has worked well, what has been challenging, and what nuances should be understood. The report also situates grantees' experience within the wider literature around changing perceptions of disability. It explores the research questions below:

- How does change in perception towards disability happen through sports, arts, and culture?
- How is it measured, and what approaches have been most effective, and for who?
- What are some of the good practices and what is needed in the future?

Methodology & limitations

This report draws on desktop research, seven interviews with Spirit's grantees across the arts, sports, and volunteering sectors, three interviews with practitioners / experts in the field of disability, and one field visit with a grantee. It also builds on ten survey responses collected from Spirit's grantees, and the review of project documents submitted by Spirit's grantees through an open call for evidence.

It is important to note that what is presented in the report captures a range of lived and learnt experience from a limited sample size, and is not an exhaustive representation of all grantees' experience. Furthermore, no one from the team that conducted the research identified as Disabled; future research would benefit from Disabled people's participation in conducting the research design and implementation.

Note that this paper is one of three thematic reports that Renaisi is publishing as part of our third-year evaluation of Spirit's work – the other two papers focus on wellbeing and social cohesion. A final evaluation will also be published at the end of the year to take stock of the impact and learning across disability perceptions, wellbeing, and social cohesion, and provide recommendations on where Spirit can further realise impact and influence wider sectors going forward.

The fieldwork involved visiting All Roads Lead to Alexander, a project run by the charity Caudwell Children, delivered by the music organisation K'antu Ensemble. The project involves music and art workshops celebrating Birmingham's diverse cultures, working with Disabled and non-Disabled children and young people aged 8-25, culminating in a performance to coincide with the Commonwealth Games. Through our fieldwork, we attended three music sessions (two delivered in two different schools and one in a community centre focused on Birmingham's South Asian community). We spoke to Disabled children and young people at the sessions, as well as members of the K'antu Ensemble project delivery team, Caudwell staff, teachers, teaching assistants, parents, volunteers and community partners. Although this visit is not necessarily representative of the wide range of grantees Spirit funds, this gave us greater insight into what some of Spirit's grantees' projects look like on the ground, and allowed us to see and hear about the outcomes for participants and the different people involved.

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[1] Allen, Rohan, Olsen. J, Soorenian, A, and Verlot, Marc. "UK Disability Survey research report, June 2021", September 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-disability-survey-research-report-june-2021/uk-disability-survey-research-report-june-2021#quantitative-insights

About Spirit-funded organisations

Spirit funds organisations that aim to change perceptions and attitudes towards disability across sports, arts and culture, and events. Altogether, funded projects tend to bring different groups of people together as equals and actively address barriers to participation. To support innovation in the space of changing perceptions of disability, Spirit had also regularly commission Challenge Funds – grant funding rounds specifically focused on inclusive practice. The development of Challenge Funds, and the decision about which grants to award, is overseen by a panel of experts, all of whom identify as Disabled.

Consequently, Spirit's portfolio of funded projects includes a range of different projects across sectors, scale/scope, and geographic locations in the UK. This included projects such as Get Out Get Active, which supported both Disabled and non-Disabled people to participate in sport and exercise together, Hull Volunteers, which supported Disabled people to volunteer alongside non-Disabled people during the Hull UK City of Culture 2017, and creative projects such as circus shows with Circus Aurora, and dance with Everybody Dance, to demonstrate the skill and creativity of Disabled participants.

Section 1: Perceptions of disability

The assumptions and information we have shape how we understand the world and how we act in it. This is why identifying these mental models of understanding, and challenging the assumptions behind them, are critical in fostering inclusive communities, reducing barriers to participation, and ensuring everyone can thrive.[2]

A common view amongst the general public is the **medical model of disability**, which takes a deficit approach and perceives disability as an individual medical problem to be cured, prevented or contained. For instance, the Disability Perception Gap Report (2018)[3] shows that 75% of people' some or most of the time, think of disabled people in general as needing to be cared for'. This model focuses on Disabled people's impairment as the reason why they cannot access certain goods or services or cannot participate fully in society.

In contrast, practitioners and organisations in the disability space (including Spirit and its grantees) are increasingly adopting and promoting the **social model of disability**, which understands disability as a social construct.[4] This model explains that the way society is structured - with institutional, physical, social, economic, and attitudinal barriers - creates exclusion. As per the social model, people are 'disabled' by the barriers operating in society that exclude or discriminate against them, yet it does not have to inevitably be this way. This is a strengths- or asset-based approach, which focuses on the value and potential of all people regardless of their personal circumstances, and calls for society to re-organise itself to enable participation and inclusion of Disabled people.

While there are many ways to understand disability,[5] another approach that is emerging from some grantees is the **radical model of disability**. This model frames disability as a natural and necessary part of human diversity.[6] Intersectionality is at the heart of this model, which emphasises that disability is connected to all forms of marginalisation, and that intersections of identity and experience within the disability movement matter. This is a less researched and discussed model, but will be explored further in the report.

Language used in this report

Language around disability evolves constantly, and we acknowledge that different people may have personal preferences around the language that should be used.

In this report, we have used language aligned with the social model of disability, which means we will use identity-first language (Disabled person) rather than person-first language (person with a disability), as the latter locates the disability in the person rather than society.[7] We have tried to ensure our language is guided by the wishes of Disabled people and their lived experience, and by good practice by using the language of leading Disability organisations (e.g. Mencap for people with learning disabilities). Our reference to disabilities will include a range of impairments, including physical, sensory and cognitive impairments, learning disabilities, learning difficulties (including neurodivergence) and mental health. We distinguish between 'impairment', the physical, sensory or cognitive difference, and 'disability', the societal barriers excluding people with impairments. We will also follow disability-led organisations' practice of capitalising 'Disabled people' as a political description of the shared, disabling experience that people with impairments face in society.[8]

As this report focuses on changing perceptions of disability, there may be times when we refer to harmful, negative perceptions to demonstrate how perceptions have changed. It is important to share these perceptions in order to deconstruct them, but at the same time it is essential to highlight their

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[2] It is important to note that these categories of mental models are a way to characterise different perceptions of disability, but may not be the terminology that the general public – including many Disabled people – would use.

[3] The Disability Perception Gap Report, Scope, May 2018, page 10 https://www.scope.org.uk/campaigns/disability-perception-gap/

[4] For more on the social model of disability: https://www.drakemusic.org/blog/nim-ralph/understanding-disability-part-5-the-social-model/

[5] Types of mental models around disability: https://www.Disabled-world.com/definitions/disability-models.php

[6] For more on the radical model of disability: https://www.drakemusic.org/blog/nim-ralph/understanding-disability-part-6-the-radical-model/

[7] For more on language following the social model: https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language

[8] https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language

harmful nature. We have highlighted these perceptions as harmful and have kept this to a minimum to avoid unnecessarily re-stating harmful stereotypes and perceptions.

We also recognise the wide variety of experiences and needs that people with a range of impairments have, as well as the many intersecting aspects of their identity and lived experience. Therefore, we have tried to avoid generalising, see the person not the disability, and focus on the nuances whilst still drawing out common themes in experiences.

How the medical model manifests as negative perceptions

The widespread application of the medical model in society is often linked to prejudice and exclusion towards Disabled people. For instance, the medical model can lead to **ableism**, defined as discrimination in favour of non-Disabled people[9]. From Spirit grantees' experience and based on desk research, there are several types of negative perceptions of disability that stem from the medical model:

1. **Narrow understanding of disabilities**: public understanding and awareness of disability is still limited. Research shows that when the general public think about disabilities, they tend to think of Disabled people as wheelchair users and have a limited understanding beyond that.[10] In particular, there is limited understanding of 'hidden' disabilities (e.g., neurodiversity and sensory disabilities) compared to visible ones (e.g. physical disabilities), and a widening disability perception gap between Disabled and non-Disabled people where non-Disabled people underestimate the prevalence of disabilities and occurrence of disability prejudices.[11]
2. **Assuming low capabilities of Disabled people**: Research shows that 32% of people said that some or most of the time, they think Disabled people are not as productive as non-Disabled people.[12] This is noticeable in the self-perceptions of some Disabled people (i.e., low self-esteem and confidence, self-limiting beliefs) as well as in non-Disabled people's perceptions.[13]
3. **Assuming Disabled people need to be cared for:** A 2018 survey showed that 75% of people think Disabled people need to be cared for some or most of the time.[14] This also includes perceptions that Disabled people cannot live a productive and fulfilling life, and that they are constantly sick or in pain.
4. **Disabled people perceived as 'different' or 'abnormal'**: A survey showed that 13% of the UK public hardly ever or never think of Disabled people as the same as everyone else.[15] The 'othering' of Disabled people can lead to fear of Disabled people, and discomfort in seeing Disabled people in positions of power / influence or in close relationships to themselves.[16]
5. **Patronising views of Disabled people:** Some negative perceptions may appear benign and well-meaning but are nevertheless discriminatory and patronising. For example, believing that Disabled people are brave, courageous, heroic and inspiring for living with their disability, or that they should be pitied.

> *"We have a polarised narrative of Disabled people. We have this narrative of Disabled people who are work shy, don't contribute, are a burden to the taxpayer, all these kinds of things. And then at the very other end, you've got this extreme idea of… these high achieving Paralympian type individuals. What's severely lacking is that narrative about the everyday person, and I put myself in that category… I have a family life, I work, I enjoy my work, I come to work, and I just do ordinary things… that's the majority of who we all are."*
> *– Stakeholder Interview*

Negative perceptions of disability manifest differently across impairments, sectors, and cultures. For example, historically, sports have been criticised for persistently perpetuating the medical model, and have been viewed as 'contested sites of power and privilege for Disabled people, historically perpetuating ableist norms of

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[9] Scope, https://www.scope.org.uk/about-us/disablism/
[10] The Disability Perception Gap Report, Scope, May 2018
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] "Self-esteem and self-image in people with disabilities", March 2021, Sunrise Medical, https://www.sunrisemedical.co.uk/blog/self-esteem-with-disabilities
[14] The Disability Perception Gap Report, Scope, May 2018.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Staniland, Luke. Public perceptions of Disabled People: evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey 2009, Office for Disability Issues HM Government, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325989/ppdp.pdf

capability, inclusion and exclusion'.[17] Especially in competitive sports where there is an emphasis on physical ability to compete fairly, non-Disabled and Disabled people are separated, and within para-sports, Disabled people are further classified by medically differentiated impairment types.[18]

There are ongoing debates about the sport sector using the medical model of disability, especially in major sporting events like the Commonwealth Games and Olympics and Paralympics Games. In discussing the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, there are calls for 'thinking big' on what it means to be inclusive of para athletes.[19] This goes beyond achieving equal proportions of para athletes and non-para athletes, and towards running mixed relay events where there is scope to do so, like triathlon, athletics, and cycling.[20]

Comparatively, non-competitive and grassroots sports, volunteering and arts activities tend to have more opportunities for joint participation and inclusion of Disabled people with non-Disabled people, although more is needed across all sectors and projects to rethink the scope of joint participation between Disabled and non-Disabled people, and propagate inclusive practices to shift perceptions of disability.

> *"So, we use the social model of disability looking at the systemic and structural barriers, whereas within sport, there's often a medical categorisation and we look at the Paralympics, for example, which defines people by missing limbs or what they can or can't do, rather than locating the barriers within society."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Consequences of negative perceptions on Disabled people

Disabled people are still frequently excluded from social situations. Parents, carers, project or school staff can sometimes act as 'gatekeepers', assuming Disabled people are not capable of participating and barring them from activities. Similarly, some Disabled people who have self-limiting perceptions or have had negative experiences before, could withdraw themselves from society.[21] Exclusion can also extend to employment; one representative of a Spirit-funded organisation for instance, thought that employers may be more willing to accommodate certain types of disabilities.

> *"People find it easy to employ some Disabled people where the access needs are not significantly complex, or where the individual manages their own access. Whereas if it's an organisational or systems-based change that is needed to employ somebody, I think people are still very reluctant to actually change what they do in order to have a Disabled person fit."*
> *– Grantee interview*

The exclusion of Disabled people leads to a persistent employment gap between Disabled and non-Disabled people, with Disabled people statistically underrepresented in almost every field. For example, while 21% of working age adults are Disabled,[22] only 4.2% of theatre staff, 8% of dance industry staff, 1.8% of music industry staff, and 5% media industry staff identify as Disabled.[23]

Interviewees have also observed that service delivery organisations, governments, and policy makers often use the medical model, thus providing segregated services between Disabled and non-Disabled people. Several interviewees felt that this prevented re-designing existing systems in favour of more inclusion.

> *"We don't have inclusive education as an absolute right… So you grow up thinking, it's a them and us, there's the non-Disabled group […], and then there's this Disabled group. And so that it kind of persists because we keep doing the same thing over again."*
> *– Stakeholder interview*

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[17] Hughes, B. (2012) "Civilising Modernity and the Ontological Invalidation of Disabled People," in Goodley, D., Hughes, B., and Davis, L. (eds.) Disability and Social Theory: New Developments and Directions. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 17–32.

[18] "Classification in Para Athletics", Paralympic website, https://www.paralympic.org/athletics/classification

[19] Shalala, Amanda. "What should the future of para sport look like at the Commonwealth Games?", 6 August 2022, ABC News. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-06/future-of-para-sport-at-commonwealth-games/101307486

[20] Ibid.

[21] "Medical Model", Devon County Council, https://www.devon.gov.uk/equality/communities/disability/medical-model

[22] "Disability facts and figures", Scope, https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures/

[23] "Making a Shift Report: Disabled people and the Arts and Cultural Sector Workforce in England: Understanding trends, barriers, and opportunities", Arts Council England in conjunction with ewgroup, 2017, https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/ACE206%20MAKING%20A%20SHIFT%20Report%20FINAL.pdf

Disabled people are also five percentage points more likely to be in poverty than non-Disabled people (26% compared with 21%).[24] People with a learning disability also suffer disproportionate health inequalities, having worse physical and mental health, much lower life expectancies, and far more barriers to accessing good quality healthcare.[25] A Spirit grantee working directly with Black and minoritised communities also explained that Disabled people from under-represented ethnicities faced compounded barriers, such as language, digital poverty, higher likelihood of living in areas of high deprivation, and more barriers to access services and information around disability.

A lack of understanding and persistent othering of Disabled people could also manifest in violent and malignant behaviours. According to Stop Hate UK, over 9,200 disability hate crimes were reported to the police across England and Wales in the year 2020 / 2021.[26] This includes verbal and physical abuse, threatening behaviour (verbal threats, attacks on assistance animals), offensive name-calling or being refused service by businesses. There have also been instances of false-befriending of Disabled people who are perceived to be vulnerable, for the purpose of taking advantage of those with learning disabilities or mental health conditions.

Given how widespread negative perceptions of disability are, and given how serious their consequences can be on Disabled people's lives, challenging those perceptions is crucial. Yet what mechanisms can truly improve perceptions and attitudes towards disability in society? While Spirit of 2012 recognises that these issues will not be solved solely through events, arts, culture and volunteering, they can make a contribution. The following section presents the lessons learnt by Spirit grantees and from wider literature.

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[24] “Inequalities in poverty”, 19 April 2021, The Health Foundation, https://health.org.uk/evidence-hub/money-and-resources/poverty/inequalities-in-who-is-in-poverty#:~:text=Disabled%20people%20are%205%20percentage,13%25%20of%20couples%20without%20children

[25] “Health inequalities”, mencap, https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/health/health-inequalities

[26] “About hate crime: disability hate crime”, Stop hate UK, https://www.stophateuk.org/about-hate-crime/disability-hate-crime/

Section 2: Mechanisms and barriers to change

Spirit has a diverse portfolio of grantees tackling change in perceptions of disability and impairment. Although it is difficult to capture and quantify how perceptions of disability have changed, below are some of the main mechanisms and barriers to changing perceptions that are drawn from Spirit grantee's experience and from wider literature.

Mechanism 1: Positive representation

This mechanism is prevalent amongst Spirit grantees and across cultural, sports, and volunteering sectors, and includes positive representation of Disabled people to the wider public (e.g., media coverage, case studies, stories, imagery, and spotlighting Disabled people), increasing the visibility of Disabled people, and giving more platforms for Disabled people to take part in cultural and sporting life as leaders, volunteers and participants. This specifically ties into Spirit's interest in harnessing the legacy of the London 2012 Paralympic Games and exploring how positive representation of disability could change perceptions. Examples from grantee projects include Cultural Shift and Making Routes running exhibitions showcasing the work of disabled artists in galleries or public spaces, and Disabled volunteers contributing in Hull UK City of Culture 2017 events.

These activities have been particularly effective in changing perceptions of disability when showing **joint representation of Disabled and non-Disabled people, and representation of Disabled role models.** One grantee found that using imagery showing ordinary Disabled and non-Disabled people exercising together in promotional materials helped break down segregation, and helped Disabled people gain the confidence that they could participate in sports. Similarly, another grantee shared about the positive long-term legacy of London 2012; showing Olympians and Paralympians in equal proportions and winning medals, encouraged young Disabled people to participate in sports. While presenting Paralympians' achievements is effective in encouraging Disabled people to participate in sports and challenging perceptions about Disabled people's capabilities, it is nevertheless important that broadcasters balances this with representation of ordinary Disabled people to increase public awareness around the diversity of Disabled people's experiences.

For Disabled people, **performance to a wider audience** was also a crucial factor in boosting confidence and self-belief in their abilities. It was important for many Disabled participants to perform in front of their families or the general public, and take pride in the work they had done.

> *"When we did do the school performances, their confidence just shot up. They felt empowered, they felt centre stage. And that's what we really wanted to give them a platform and say, look, although we have disabilities, and although we have complex needs, we can still perform, and we still deserve a platform."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Such performances contributed to challenging the perceptions of the wider public. They demonstrated the value and quality of inclusive performances or events. Grantees have also felt that increasing the visibility of Disabled people indirectly, where the public sees Disabled volunteers, or see Disabled people playing sports in public spaces, have particularly helped normalise positive images of Disabled people.

However, since shifting perceptions requires explicitly identifying Disabled participants, this mechanism has been particularly **challenging for people with 'hidden' disabilities** like learning disabilities or neurodivergence. Where artwork or a film was being exhibited, some grantees have also wondered whether to highlight that the work being showcased was by Disabled artists, and whether that mattered.

> *"I think it's a tricky one, isn't it? Because on the one hand, yes of course, because that helps in that kind of mission of perception training... You could also argue, well, why should we say that the film is being made by Disabled people? Why is that relevant? It's a good film full stop... We still haven't answered that question. But I think that's the debate. That's still very much live."*
> *– Grantee interview*

A possible solution could be to recognise when disability is incidental to the story, integrated into the story, or core to the narrative or storyline.[27] Being critical about **where disabilities fit in the message** or narrative can help define what information is meaningful to share. It is also crucial to ensure that the **Disabled artist**

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[27] "Disability Code of Portrayal", July 2022, Channel 4, https://assets-corporate.channel4.com/_flysystem/s3/documents/2022-07/Channel4_Disability%20Code%20of%20Portrayal_July2022.pdf

or participant's wishes are respected and centred. Not taking this approach could risk working in a way that feels uncomfortable, patronising, or harmful for Disabled people. It is a balance that projects have not always got right for everyone, as one organisation working in the disability space shared how they wrestled with this at the early stages of their project:

> *"We were paraded like a group of Disabled artists who were given this wonderful chance to do a project for Disabled people."*
> *– Participant, Project report*

A grantee also noted the challenge of **not having control over the intentions of the audience** or **how they interpret a performance or exhibition.** While the goal may be to show an empowering and positive image of Disabled people, one grantee from a disability arts organisation reflected that certain audience members may anyway hold harmful stereotypes towards Disabled people when attending a performance (e.g., assuming low capabilities or having patronising views of Disabled people). Furthermore, while showcasing is important in changing the perceptions of non-Disabled people, it was critical that Disabled people did not feel like they had to perform to change perceptions or prove themselves.

Mechanism 2: Inclusive participation

Many Spirit grantees bring together non-Disabled and Disabled people to participate together in activities such as sports, music sessions, and volunteering (i.e., inclusive participation). This approach has also been used by other organisations aiming to challenge stereotypes and division between different groups of people. For example, intergenerational programmes engaging volunteers of different ages in various activities can increase contact and understanding across different age groups, create meaningful relationships, and foster emotional and social growth.[28] Similarly, cross-cultural social activities have also been shown to improve positive feelings and social closeness with members of another group.[29]

The most effective way these activities shift perceptions is by creating opportunities for Disabled and non-Disabled participants to **form connections and friendships** by **working towards a common goal**. These connections can help to dispel harmful assumptions as well as helping Disabled people feel a sense of belonging and being valued. This aligns with an asset-based approach and the radical model of disability. Existing research has also shown that the more an opportunity supports long-term meaningful engagement between non-Disabled and Disabled participants, the more changes in perceptions are likely to occur and be sustained.[30]

> *"That's what the activities address: [Disabled, and non-Disabled] people are exposed to positive experiences. And we have stories now of ladies that are [now] going on holiday with each other."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Inclusive participation also **enables Disabled and non-Disabled family members to take part in activities together,** such as parents and children, or siblings, rather than having to find separate groups to attend. Grantees found that this changed perceptions and the dynamic between family members, highlighting what possibilities exist for them to have fun and learn together.

> *"After seeing me in action [playing wheelchair basketball], my eight-year-old son wanted to have a go. He absolutely loves it; and would give up all his other activities in a heartbeat just to play wheelchair basketball with me. That is the beauty of the programme; it encourages families to be active together. It has really helped to change my son's perceptions of disabled people too"*
> *– Grantee report*

While inclusive participation can be effective to challenge negative perceptions about capabilities, there are limitations with inclusive participation approaches. Grantees reflected that there were **challenges with bringing people with radically different ability levels to participate together**, as activities that may be challenging for some participants might be considered easy or less engaging for others. Therefore, the benefits of bringing Disabled and non-Disabled participants together have to be balanced with running sessions tailored to the abilities of participants. For instance, one grantee sought to take an inclusive approach

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[28] Giraudeau, C., & Bailly, N. (2019). Intergenerational programs: What can school-age children and older people expect from them? A systematic review. *European journal of ageing*, *16*(3), 363–376. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-018-00497-4

[29] Bao, Y., Zhao, Y., Xiao, Z., Liang, F., Wang, W., & Li, B. (2020). Fusion of "you and me": Cultural mixing promotes intergroup psychological compatibility. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 51*(5), 353-369.

[30] The Disability Perception Gap Report, Scope, p.18

by running additional music sessions for Disabled children with more complex needs to improve their skills and confidence before bringing them together with non-Disabled children.

> *"It's difficult if you've got mainstream kids… for them to sit for a whole hour doing an activity which is repetitive it needs to be for the ability level. It would be very, very challenging to keep them engaged... Already within a Disabled group, there is a massive difference [in ability] between the kids. So what we've done is we've worked with them separately, and rehearsed together, and then done the show."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Mechanism 3: Education, training and raising awareness

Another mechanism to change perceptions of disability is education, training and raising awareness. This can target organisations' staff, volunteers, people in positions of power, and other people that are involved with project operations or come into contact with Disabled people (i.e., media representation for Paralympic games). Some specific examples from grantees include mandatory equality, diversity and disability awareness training, creating a safe space for employees to learn without judgement, creating a language guide for staff around disabilities, and publishing a toolkit on making venues accessible.

Education, training and awareness raising activities can generate a **better understanding of intersectionality**. For example, including disability in equality and diversity training as just one of many intersecting identities encourages participants to be accepting to everyone regardless of their background, and to think about people holistically. Such activities can also help **identify practically what barriers exist for Disabled people, how to remove them, and provide guidance on good practice**. For instance, toolkits for venues demonstrate that it can be easy to make places and activities accessible, reinforcing the social model. It also overcomes the assumption that accessibility is an optional and expensive use of budget, as opposed to something essential and value-additive.

> *"That's one of the things we've kind of said to other venues… you have a budget to run your organisations every year and it's up to you how you spend that money… People think it's expensive… I don't understand why people get very, very nervous when there is a cost to making buildings wheelchair accessible. But there are lots and lots of things you can do that don't cost anything to make your building more accessible and welcoming."*
> *– Grantee interview*

One grantee also encouraged use of an **access rider** (a document that details an individual's access requirements, including what might be needed and when, to enable others to know how best to support someone) to raise awareness and normalise thinking about access needs. This reformulates medical conceptions of disability towards the social model, moving the focus from the impairment to the needs that any person can have.

> *"We often encourage everybody, certainly within the staff, to create, an access rider set which clearly articulates the access requirements in an unemotional and positively focused way to avoid difficult and embarrassing situations, and also to be able to just hand over a sheet of paper rather than constantly regurgitate your story. And that also means that people can write it in a practical way, rather than an emotional way, in a way that talks about solutions and access rather than about medical conditions or trauma."*
> *– Grantee interview*

However, there may be issues with **turnover** when trained staff leave, leading to institutional knowledge being lost, and having to start changing perceptions all over again with new staff. However, this could be overcome by creating language guides and running mandatory training so new employees can be up to speed quickly, or hiring staff specifically for their experience on the topic of disability and familiarity with the social model.

Moreover, **understanding of disability and the diversity of impairments and conditions is still inadequate**, with overall low confidence around how to appropriately ask and make adjustments. Organisations generally have more confidence around removing barriers related to physical disabilities, but are more hesitant with invisible disabilities linked to mental health and neurodivergence.[31] One Spirit grantee also felt that there was generally little acknowledgement of the role of intersecting identities, or that people could have more than one disability. These issues can be overcome by having robust training mechanisms in place, building up institutional confidence to ask about people's needs in a sensitive way, and ensuring people are comfortable sharing their needs.

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[31] "Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People", p.32

> *"We have a member of staff with a hearing impairment, who also has anxiety… they didn't feel able to tell us that as they just told us they were deaf… it was like 'I'm not really allowed to have two impairments.' Of course you are, you're allowed to have as many as you have. But I think working in a Disabled-led environment, in a place that centres access and care really enables people to be their full selves [can overcome these challenges]."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Mechanism 4: Co-production with Disabled people

Co-production involves including Disabled people in the design and delivery of projects, which have challenged parents, carers, staff and volunteers' perceptions of Disabled people and their capabilities. Specific examples across grantees include an audit led by autistic people on leisure centres to see what would make them more accessible, a planning group led by people with Learning Disabilities to run a night club event for people with Learning Disabilities, hiring a Disabled director to lead on coordinating the arts events, increasing numbers of members of staff who identify as Disabled, and using steering groups of Disabled artists to design art projects.

This has contributed to perception change by ensuring that a diverse range of Disabled people's **ideas, opinions, and lived experiences influenced decision-making**. For example, the Making Routes project saw disabled artists have responsibility over the aesthetic and narratives of the activities and artwork. This changed perceptions within grantee organisations around how activities should be developed and led, and how organisations were coordinated, leading to longer-term change in institutional power structures towards embedding Disabled perspectives.

> *"We were not attempting an exercise in mainstreaming or inclusion because this suggests Disabled people must be included in a normative culture. Instead we needed to make space for Disabled culture. To be effective, Disabled people needed to be leading, creating, instigating and contributing. This was not about empowering Disabled people, but about empowering [our organisation] and others to see what impact creating a more equality-driven arts environment could have."*
> *– Grantee report*

Disabled participants who were part of co-production processes with Grantees also reported **increased confidence**, as they felt empowered to give their opinion lead others. For example, some participants on the Dance Syndrome project took on the responsibility to lead dance sessions, leading to improvements in confidence.

Moreover, grantees have shown that increasing the **visibility of Disabled people in positions of decision-making** (i.e., voicing their opinions or leading sessions) could contribute to improving the perception of Disabled people's capabilities. For example, ARC Stockton's planning group involved people with learning disabilities to organise nightclub evenings, which challenged prevalent views amongst parents, carers and staff around Disabled people's agency and leadership by demonstrating that they could arrange their own events and could go out independently. Disabled children also contributed and worked with staff on the All Roads Lead to Alexander project suggest inputs to their music sessions, take initiative in activities, and help each other.

Co-production mechanisms also **encourage discussion and understanding of intersectional experiences,** reinforcing the radical model of disability. Involving Disabled people in a meaningful, rather than tokenistic way, raises awareness around the multiple and intersecting identities people may have alongside disability. For example, many grantees found conversations were raised around experiences of individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ or ethnic minorities, as well as issues relating to regional differences, age, or class backgrounds. In turn, this can make services better and more adaptive to individual needs.

> *"We know that 25% of the people who applied for funding to us were Disabled artists who had had lived experience of homelessness, which [we] were really shocked by. And so that means that we shifted how we pay people to be much more individually responsive rather than formulaic. We made sure that every time there's something online, you can also access it or access some element of it without a computer. We felt we were becoming very heavily digitally based, rather than recognising that not everybody had that digital access."*
> *– Grantee interview*

However, current **processes to facilitate co-production are lacking within some organisations**, and often not considered a priority. Interviewees also reflected that there is also a tendency to generalise Disabled experiences, where organisations **assume that consulting one group of Disabled people means capturing the opinion of the whole spectrum of disability**. As such, co-production could easily become a simple tick-box exercise. It is therefore important that an intersectional and flexible approach is taken, as discussed above. Equally, across most sectors, there is a **persistent lack of Disabled-led organisations** (run by and for Disabled people); most organisations for Disabled people are still led by non-Disabled people.[32] Only 1% of the UK's national portfolio of arts organisations is made up of disability-led organisations.[33] Spirit of 2012 does not currently collect demographic data on the leadership teams of their grantees, which funders including Spirit could do more of to encourage greater inclusion of Disabled people in leadership. More work is therefore needed to fully establish co-production as an effective mechanism across sectors, and ensure Disabled people have a voice and power to influence the things that affect them most.

Mechanism 5: Employment

Spirit grantees have also sought to create development opportunities for Disabled participants, either having pathways for progression within their organisations, or helping them to secure employment in other organisations. Although this has been more challenging for grantees to do through their projects, it has been an especially effective way to change perceptions of disability.

Inclusion of Disabled people in the workforce **uses a combination of the above mechanisms**, including supporting Disabled people to challenge perceptions, increasing non-Disabled people's experience and understanding of disabilities, and overall manifesting a more asset-based approach in celebrating diversity and difference. The **workplace is a powerful amplifying platform** for these mechanisms because it is an opportunity for long-term, meaningful engagement between non-Disabled people and Disabled people.

> *"A good example would be [a production company], and four of our filmmakers worked as loggers for them. And it was clear, we had a really, really good debrief conversation afterwards… this is an organisation that is already in a really good place when it comes to perception of Disabled people. I thought that was really interesting how by the engagement of our members with that organisation, you saw in the follow up conversations that there was a clear shift in perceptions."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Disabled people nevertheless experience challenges around employment. Firstly, several grantees felt that there was an overall **hesitancy on the part of non-Disabled employers due to concerns over the difficulty and cost of meeting needs**, especially where the candidate may have 'hidden' disabilities like mental health and neurodivergence which is seen as more complex.

> *"There's a constant assumption that [Disabled employees'] requirements will be so expensive or complicated or difficult that people won't be able to work with them… and also an assumption that people will need vast levels of training, in order to be able to work with you – I can't work with a Disabled person, because I haven't had training."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Interviewees also raised structural / systemic issues stemming from poor educational support for Disabled people. Since only Disabled people with most acute support needs qualify for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC) in schools, and otherwise have little educational support provided, this can manifest in worse educational outcomes for Disabled people, impacting their employment options. Compounded with challenges in accessing work experience, Disabled people face more barriers in accessing employment.

Since employers are not legally required to keep records of their number of Disabled employees and any differences in pay between Disabled and non-Disabled staff, there is also an overall lack of data on disability and employment, and a lack of infrastructure to keep organisations accountable and monitor the equitable treatment of Disabled people in the workplace.

Mechanism 6: Challenging self-limiting beliefs

The medical model of disability can influence the way Disabled people see themselves from a perspective of lack (deficit approach), leading to low confidence and self-esteem about what they can do and achieve. Many Spirit-funded projects consequently aim to challenge self-limiting beliefs of Disabled people by increasing their confidence through a combination of the above mechanisms and skills development. This included a range of hard skills related to arts and sports, and soft skills around communication and concentration. For

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[32] Braye, Stuart & Dixon, Kevin & Gibbons, Tom. (2014). "The 2012 Paralympics and perceptions of disability in the UK". from The Impact of the London 2012 Olympic & Paralympic Games: Diminishing Contrasts, Increasing Varieties. Edition 1, Chapter 2. Palgrave Pivot.

[33] Penty, Sabrina. "Why is there a lack of disability representation in the arts?", 26 January 2020, https://theboar.org/2020/01/disability-arts/

example, Discover the Song and Everybody Dance focused on playing instruments and dancing respectively, while Viewfinder sought to prepare participants for a career in filmmaking.

Skills development was helpful to tackle self-limiting beliefs held by Disabled people themselves as it helped push the boundaries of what they believed they were capable of and gave them the confidence to try and do new things.

> *"The level of skills acquired across all of the centres that we worked with was fantastic, and all of our participants rose to the challenge of learning new skills that many 'non-Disabled' individuals are not able to do. [Quoting a parent]: "[The participant] loved telling me that he had learnt to spin plates. I didn't believe him at first as I'd had a go and found it really difficult! The look of pride when he spun the plate in the performance was something to behold."*
> *– Grantee report*

Not only was learning or practicing new skills helpful; having the opportunity to **take on responsibilities and have ownership** also significantly boosted the confidence and self-esteem of participants. In one grantee's project involving Disabled volunteers, Disabled participants who felt they were using existing skills to help others or a cause also often changed their own perspective on disability. For example, research showed that Disabled people volunteer more frequently than non-Disabled people and for more hours, and Disabled volunteers generally value the skills, responsibility, and opportunity to help others through volunteering.[34]

Projects that continuously involved Disabled people in the design and deliver project activities (**co-production**) were also particularly effective in incrementally improving their confidence and self-belief. It was consequently important that **staff and facilitators consistently and continuously created safe spaces** for Disabled participants to try new things, access opportunities and encouragement to get involved – especially when participants might not have felt they could do it at the start.

> *"You can see the difference week on week with [participants]. They've grown in confidence and are getting more and more involved… they've got more and more confident in terms of leading each other. It's been a great experience for them."*
> *- Grantee interview*

Cross-cutting mechanisms

In addition to the different mechanisms that Spirit grantees employed to change perceptions of disability, two **cross-cutting themes** emerged:

- Firstly, some grantees have not only sought to increase understanding of Disabled people and their lived experiences, but have also **celebrated disability alongside other intersectional differences**, following the radical model of disability. For example, some grantees have promoted inclusive participation across non-Disabled and Disabled people, while also celebrating cultural diversity (e.g., performing folk music from different cultures with non-Disabled and Disabled groups). Some grantees also worked closely with other community groups, such as LGBTQ+ organisations and Black and minoritised groups, to ensure that within disability arts, a range of diverse life experiences were represented. This approach also allowed organisations to adopt a more person-centred approach to understanding lived experience and holistically understand intersectionality altogether.
- **Collaboration and partnership between organisations** were also critical to change perceptions of disabilities across different sectors and people. For example, some Spirit grantees partnered with organisations who had disability expertise and with local community organisations to leverage each other's strengths, networks, and resources to better engage and deliver meaningful programmes with and for Disabled people. This includes reaching Disabled people and their families who are harder to reach in formal networks and services, and supporting Disabled people with more complex needs. By working in partnership, these organisations were able to not only reach but also involve Disabled people in decision-making to shape and deliver activities, impacting their own lives, and building resilience through strong relationships.

Barriers to changing perceptions

There were also common barriers that grantees faced when changing perceptions of disability.

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[34] Donahue, Kim. Goodall, C., Jochum, V., and Kamerāde, D. "Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People". A report for Spirit of 2012., p.14 https://spiritof2012.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/SPR010-Inclusive-volunteering-report_AW.pdf

At project level, **parents, carers or staff's limiting perceptions of what Disabled people could do**, and their – often well-intentioned but potentially paternalistic - desire to protect Disabled people from harm, was a barrier for some grantees to even get a chance to work with Disabled participants. Educating and raising awareness among such people acting as 'gatekeepers' were seen as critical for these projects, and grantees sought to use role models / advocates to help overcome this barrier.

Some grantees also reflected that there were **cultural differences in terms of how disability was understood**; a grantee reflected for instance that some of the families they worked with saw disabilities as stemming from wrongdoings in a past life. This also highlights that **not all organisations are comfortable or ready** to navigate cultural differences or work inclusively across intersectional differences. For example, some organisations did not have the culture or know-how to cultivate an environment where staff could be open and acknowledge bias, whether unconscious or not.

Some projects also had a limited reach in terms of whose perceptions were changed. For example, projects involving performance or exhibitions mostly reached Disabled participants' family or friends – whose perceptions were changed through other and longer-term approaches. For the wider public who may not have interacted deeply with Disabled people, however, one-off visibility and awareness may hardly challenge deeply seated assumptions and mental models. This is why projects that shift perceptions of disability outside of Disabled people's immediate spheres are also key.

Organisations also found it challenging to support Disabled people if they **chose not to disclose their condition (especially for those with 'hidden' disabilities) or did not identify as being disabled**. This could be due to the Disabled person's fear of being treated differently if they disclosed their disability, or because the disability was not core to how the person saw themselves. A potential solution is for organisations to adopt a radical model approach, and encourage all participants, staff, and volunteers to introduce themselves – including their background, interests and preferences, alongside their access needs. This encourages a more intersectional and person-centred approach to seeing a person as a whole, rather than singling out disabilities.

Challenges also arose from the wider context, including the **impact of Covid-19**, with individual freedoms being prioritised over protecting vulnerable people.

> *"60% of people who died [from COVID-19] [35]being Disabled people, there's a shocking statistic, which is still hardly registering in the real world, or there's an assumption within the general public that it's okay, if you've got underlying conditions, that you're just cannon fodder."*
> *– Grantee interview*

There was also an **overall lack of lived experience understanding and voices in decision-making**, where policy makers and organisational leadership tend to be white, non-Disabled people. This contributes to compounding, cyclic exclusionary practices and policies that make invisible the diversity of Disabled people's experiences.

> *"If you have a poor educational experience, poor education outcomes, you're going to struggle to be in those positions of influence and standing, academically or in other ways. And so it's not a surprise that Disabled people don't find themselves in those roles. And what the data does show is if a Disabled person has a good education, through high school, and then university or whatever path they choose, that the gap often narrows in terms of employment outcomes. But the employment gap is around 28 and a half percent.[36] And it's been like that for the last while, pretty much my whole life hasn't really shifted."*
> *– Stakeholder interview*

This knock-on effect is felt across the system, including grantees who are delivering projects on the ground. There is a persistent representation of Disabled people in media from a medical model (focusing on the Disability and not the person, and showing Disability from a deficit approach) and limited representation of ordinary Disabled people (Disabled people accounted for 6.5% of on screen contributions, but less than 3% are from somebody the audience would perceive as Disabled).[37] In addition to this, a grantee talked about

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[35] "6 out of 10 people who have died from COVID-19 are disabled," 11 February 2021, https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/news/6-out-of-10-people-who-have-died-from-covid-19-are-disabled

[36] Employment gap for Disabled people was 28.4% in 2021: DWP, "The employment of disabled people 2021," updated 11 February 2022 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2021

[37] The Disability Perception Gap Report, Scope, May 2018

the historic precedent of Disabled people excluded from industries, and how difficult it can be to overcome certain long-standing assumptions.

> *“It’s about historic precedence. Really, it’s kind of like, if Disabled people haven’t worked in industry, it’s quite hard to overturn that. Because there is an assumption somewhere that if they haven’t, it's because they can’t.”*
> *– Grantee interview*

An organisation may be more or less successful at changing perceptions of disability, depending on the type of mechanisms used and the barriers that may stand in the way. Relatedly, this calls for another question: how might one know that perceptions towards disability have effectively and durably improved? How can that be measured reliably? The next section explores some of the challenges and good practices Spirit-funded organisations have experienced around measuring change in perceptions of disability.

Section 3: Measuring change in perceptions of disability

Having a strong focus on learning, Spirit encourages all grantees to include data collection and measurement of project outcomes. However, recognising the diverse conditions of Disabled participants and the need for flexibility and tailoring, Spirit does not require grantees to use a specific method of data collection for participants (especially for whom it is not suitable), nor does Spirit have mandatory questions. Instead, grantees set their own plans for how they want to measure perceptions of disability for their projects.

Spirit's grantees have been measuring the change in perceptions of disability by using standard evaluation activities, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups, case studies, audience soundbites or vox pops, and referencing national or existing research and statistics[38]. These have been completed with participants (Disabled and non-Disabled), participants' parents or carers, the general public, audience members, delivery staff and volunteers. They have also used some anecdotal evidence and observations due to some of the challenges with using traditional methods. Most grantees used these evaluation activities at regular intervals over a period of weeks or months to measure how perceptions changed.

Challenges grantees faced in measuring change in perceptions of disability

Spirit grantees have faced diverse challenges with evaluating the impact of their projects. Some were not specifically related to measuring change in perceptions of disability, but rather linked to challenges with monitoring, evaluation and learning across the charity sector in general. Those generic challenges are not covered here. Below are instead some of the main challenges that occurred when measuring change in perceptions of disability.

Some grantees found that **participants found evaluation activities onerous and complex**. Although grantees have set their own plans for measuring change in perceptions, they found that the complexities of the topic of changing perceptions made some questions difficult to understand and respond to for some participants, leading to an uncomfortable situation of asking non-Disabled parents or carers of participants to speak on behalf of the Disabled person. In addition, the time and resourcing needed for organisations to adapt and ensure data collection methods were suitable for all participants could be onerous.

Sensitivities around language are also challenging, with no one-size-fits-all approach. Some projects found that many of their participants did not understand the word 'disability,' or did not identify as Disabled, and hence made questions on perceptions of disability difficult to ask. One grantee used 'people like me' instead of 'Disabled people,' but some participants found this unnecessarily euphemistic and vague. One grantee workshopped the language of some questions with participants, breaking down the meanings of the words, to make them more appropriate. However, due to capacity this could not happen regularly or for all questions.

> *"There is something there I think about perceptions of disability and having the right not to identify oneself as having a disability. But also, what are the reasons behind that? And whether that's a problem, or whether that's an empowering thing is something that we're still trying to get to the bottom of."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Several projects were also **concerned about the accuracy of people's self-reporting** on perceptions of disability. In particular, there was concern that social desirability bias – where respondents are tempted to give answers that other people would approve of – might have led individuals to report more positive views of disability than was the case.

> *"It's very difficult to ask somebody whether they are less ableist than they were before…because then people have to admit that they had a problem with their perceptions in the first place. And I think a lot of people are understandably quite nervous about saying that."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Good practices for measuring change in perceptions

Good practices from grantees involved **greater participation of Disabled people in the design and implementation of the evaluation process**. Involving participants in the evaluation process enabled

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[38] For example, the Understanding UK Households longitudinal study data (https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/)

grantees to foreground participant feedback and experience and avoid having non-Disabled people speak on behalf of Disabled people where possible.

> *"There's very little research by and with Disabled people about us. So whatever happens, whatever research that might take place, it's absolutely important that at the heart of it, are Disabled people as academics, or working with academics, to make sure that it's done in that way."*
> *– Stakeholder interview*

Involving a diverse range of Disabled people from the outset helped projects use more **inclusive language and formats** that participants could engage with. Good practices include adopting an intersectional approach where disabilities were not singled out (e.g., asked alongside demographic information), and using language that is respectful of Disabled people's preferences and context (e.g., if a Disabled person does not identify as Disabled or chooses to use medical language to describe their impairment). In addition, grantees offered different ways for Disabled participants to engage, including options of British sign language interpreters, visual, oral, easy-read, or interactive formats. Being flexible rather than sticking to traditional methodologies and asking people if they have any access requirements to tailor participation is very important.

It is also critical that grantees **avoid singling out and only collecting information from participants that are more able to express themselves** through traditional evaluation methods. This ensures information is representative of the diversity of experiences, and that everybody can have their voice heard. In doing this, grantees who involved participants in the design of evaluation tools **developed more tailored and creative ways to collect information, and increased participants' willingness to be involved in the evaluation.** For example, staff on the Making Routes project met with participants early in delivery to co-design an evaluation approach that used creative methods that felt part of project activities, and encouraged a safe environment for reflection and learning. Other grantees have used the 'Most Significant Change' method to gather data in a way that felt like a conversation to the participant,[39] and also used games, diaries, visual tools such as smiley faces, and interactive exercises such as standing in different parts of the room to express how they are feeling. Some embedded evaluation activities within their activities so that it felt like a part of their theatre games or workshops.

> *"We are employing three professional artists to go into three groups that have been identified by the team as having a good representation of the overall participant groups within them. And the artists will be going into their workshops and helping to capture what a lot of people were describing as that in the moment experiences, which are very hard to capture through the surveys and the reflection groups… [it's] going to be far more engaging, particularly those who have complex needs. And it will also be a way of creatively documenting what's happening within these workshop spaces."*
> *– Grantee interview*

Although measuring change in perceptions of non-Disabled people is challenging, **using anonymous self-completion forms** can help counter 'social desirability' bias by making it easier for people to answer honestly. Another way to counter this is by **using more neutral language**. For example, one grantee used language around 'to what extent has *the project* has changed perceptions,' rather than 'how have *your* perceptions changed' to make the survey less targeted at an individual, and meant people were more open to answer honestly. **Measuring changes in perception by change in behaviour** is another good practice, as it is more easily observable than perception change, and feels more tangible and less personal compared to measuring beliefs (for example, using questions like "I hesitate to engage with Disabled people" rather than "I think Disabled people are different to non-Disabled people").

In addition, grantees have also looked at more quantifiable ways of determining wider changes in perceptions in the sector or industry. For example, looking at the number of Disabled people's enrolment in courses or employment in certain sectors, or employment in part-time / full-time jobs.

> *"We use things like, do you earn more money than you're earning last year? You know, very practical things that show us that somebody is now more connected with the industry, getting more money for within the industry, those things because we can demonstrate that the perception of the industry has shifted, if it is employing more [Disabled people]."*
> *– Grantee interview*

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[39] MSC is a qualitative participatory form of monitoring and evaluation, involving collecting significant change (SC) stories. The most significant of these stories are then selected by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. It helps to explain how and when change happens. https://mande.co.uk/special-issues/most-significant-change-msc/

Conclusion and recommendations

The medical model of disability – which perceives disability as an individual medical problem to be cured, prevented or contained – is common in society. This helps explains why perceptions towards disabilities can be narrow, disempowering or even harmful amongst the general public. Those negative perceptions can have tangible and serious consequences on Disabled people's lives – from socio-economic exclusion to hate crimes. And this is why **changing perceptions towards disability remains crucial.**

Yet how can perceptions towards disability be changed in our society? What mechanisms can truly improve perceptions and attitudes towards Disabled people? Spirit of 2012 has aimed to achieve that goal by funding and supporting a range of social sector organisations working across the sports, arts and culture, and events sectors. From their collective experience, several mechanisms proved effective in improving certain negative perceptions of disability. They include, for instance, the positive representation and increasing the visibility of Disabled people (e.g., through performances to a wide audience, or the joint representation of Disabled and non-Disabled people together); inclusive participation in sport, music, volunteering and employment; co-production in the design and delivery of projects, services and strategies aimed at Disabled people; education, training and raising awareness amongst staff, volunteers, people in positions of power, and skills development for Disabled people. Across the board, it is also vital to understand disability alongside other intersectional differences (such as race and ethnicity, sex and gender, etc.) and to promote cross-sector collaboration.

Those mechanisms are not a silver bullet, though, and various challenges and nuances exist to creating more accurate and positive perceptions of disability. Performances including Disabled people for instance, may not change perceptions of the wider public if audiences are limited to families and friends. And they may struggle to shine a light on hidden disabilities. When art is produced by a Disabled artist, it is also not always appropriate to label it as such. The benefits of staff training can also be undone by staff turnover. And parents, carers and professionals may hold onto certain well-meaning yet paternalistic stereotypes themselves, while organisations may not be equipped to work inclusively across intersectional differences.

As such, an organisation may be more or less successful at changing perceptions of disability, depending on the type of mechanisms used and the barriers that may stand in the way. **Yet how might one know that perceptions towards disability have effectively and durably improved?** While grantees faced some common challenges around measuring change – such as the complexity of measuring soft outcomes, sensitivities around language or concerns about the accuracy of self-reported data – some good practices also merit consideration for future evaluations. For instance, the participation of Disabled people in the design and implementation of the evaluation can help counter those challenges. Similarly, collecting data through more tailored and creative methods, without singling out participants who are more able to express themselves, or measuring changes in perception through change in behaviour, are other good practices.

Going forward, insights from this research call for further action, as **more needs to be done** to continue challenging negative perceptions and attitudes towards disability in society:

- Funders should continue (or start) **championing organisations that aim to improve disability perception** amongst parents, carers, professionals, the wider public and Disabled people themselves – especially those which are **Disabled-led** organisation, and / or champion meaningful **co-production** with Disabled people.
- All organisations in the social sector, from charities to funders, should **challenge themselves to understand all people holistically**. In practice, this means educating themselves and others about the full diversity of disabilities, and making decisions based on a nuanced understanding of the particular needs of the Disabled people they serve. Disabilities should also be understood alongside intersectional lenses of difference including gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and more.
- Whenever possible, social sector actors should **facilitate meaningful interactions between Disabled and non-Disabled people** amongst their staff, participants and wider audiences.
- All organisations in the social sector should also support **greater representation of Disabled people** throughout their work – especially the 'common' people having regular day-to-day lives.

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