

The story of  
**CULTURAL \* SH/FT**

A journey towards disability equality



A partnership between ARC, Stockton Arts Centre and Little Cog, a disabled-led theatre company



**ARC**  
Stockton Arts Centre

little cog

**"Our culture is so much richer if everyone's stories have the space to be told"**

Vici Wreford-Sinnott



## Introduction

---

This is the story of Cultural Shift, and how ARC, Little Cog and the disabled artists, participants and audiences we worked with changed perceptions about disability and created new opportunities for disabled people.

We discovered new ways of working together with disabled artists and audiences in a large arts venue, making disability equality at ARC a reality, not a slogan.



Cultural Shift was a Spirit of 2012 funded artistic project.

Our shared goals were for ARC to become a cultural centre where disabled people from Stockton and beyond could feel at home, and for Little Cog to become a leading voice in artistic and cultural change in the region. We wanted to share the amazing work disabled people create, as professional artists and community participants, and to increase accessibility for disabled audiences. We also wanted to better understand the barriers and obstacles that prevent change happening.

We have learned so much, including about ourselves. Our journey to equality for disabled artists, participants and audiences is well underway and we can all feel the amazing difference.

By sharing our learning, and how we were empowered by so many people to change, we hope others will find their inspiration to make their own cultural shift.

# Our Cultural Shift

## How we made the Cultural Shift

It was essential to ARC and Little Cog that artistic values and practice led the way. Co-design and co-production come to us naturally in our work to effect social change and develop artistic work. But this was about exploring and changing ourselves, and our organisations. Everything we did, we did together.

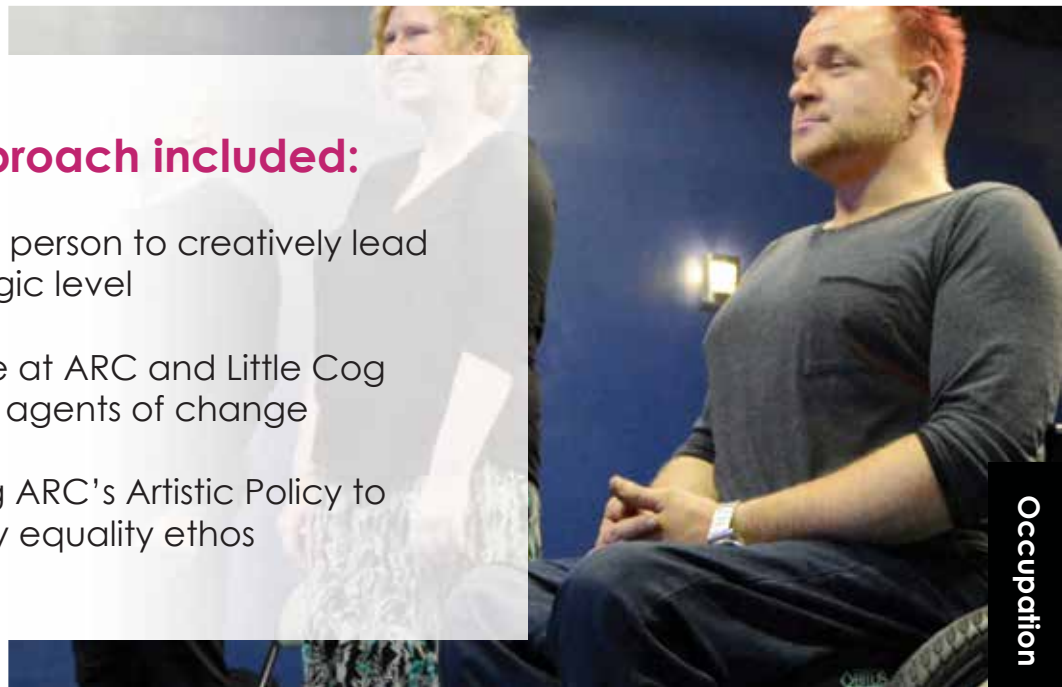
Cultural Shift developed strong foundations before seeking funds. ARC and Little Cog grew a project idea that built into a vision of a three-year programme with three strands of dynamic arts activity.

## Our strategic approach included:

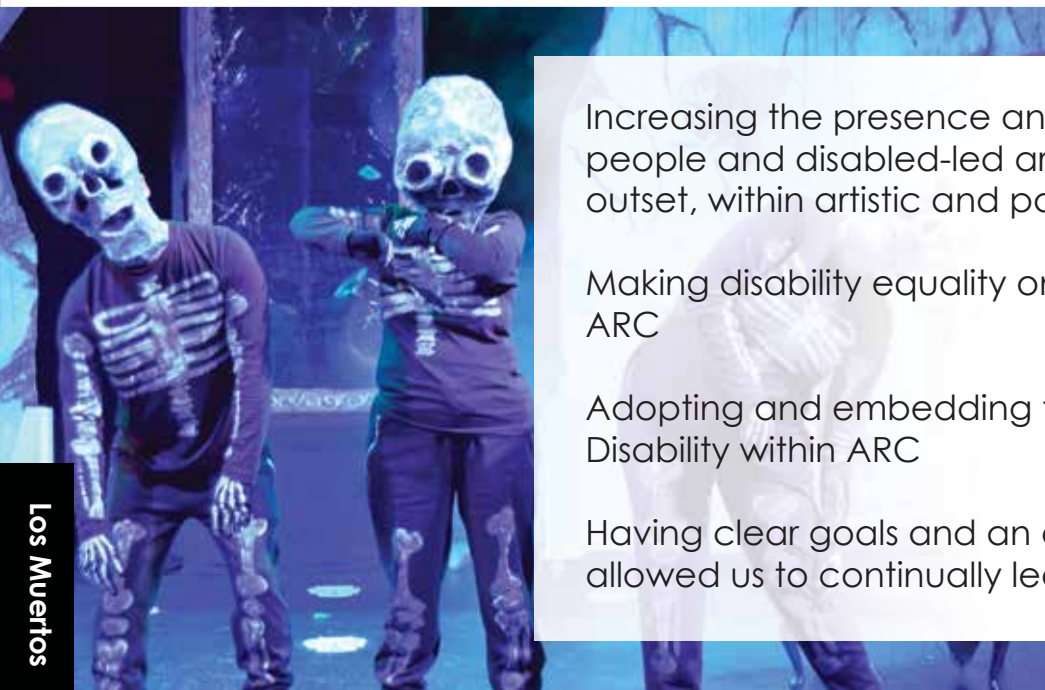
Appointing a disabled person to creatively lead the project at a strategic level

Ensuring that everyone at ARC and Little Cog understood they were agents of change

Exploring and rewriting ARC's Artistic Policy to incorporate a disability equality ethos



Occupation




Los Muertos

Increasing the presence and visibility of disabled people and disabled-led arts at ARC from the outset, within artistic and participatory programmes

Making disability equality one of the core values at ARC

Adopting and embedding the Social Model of Disability within ARC

Having clear goals and an agile approach that allowed us to continually learn, reflect and change



Three core strands of activity:  
**Creative Practice & Participation,**  
**Strategic Shift,** and **Dissemination**  
**and Sharing**

Disabled people were at the core of the project and the project was at the core of ARC. The project started by training all staff in disability equality to expose the construction of contemporary notions of disability.

“ ARC is learning and adapting to an equality model: running parallel is the primary focus to improve, increase and expand opportunities for disabled people in the arts. The primary focus is not necessarily to ‘mainstream’ those artists but to give them platforms from which to expand on their own terms. ”

Annabel Turpin, Chief Executive, ARC

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 ARC and others to see what impact creating a more equality driven arts environment could have.

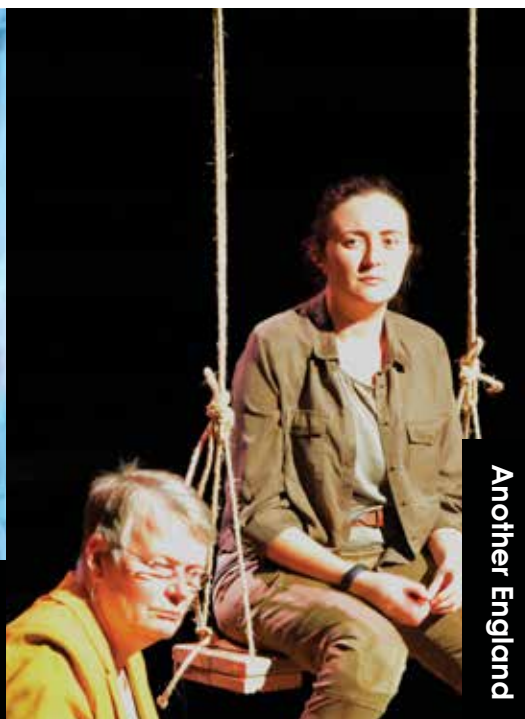
# Our journey of change

Our three strands of activity produced a range of outputs, building momentum for change and then helping embed it into both ARC and Little Cog's practice.

We started with creative practice and then moved outwards. Activity started early, the number of disabled people in the building increased and instantly new concepts and ideas were reverberating around the building.



Butterfly



Another England



Lighthouse

**Artistic work** was central: **Butterfly**, **Another England** and **Lighthouse** created opportunities for professional co-productions highlighting accessible practices, developed Vici's artistic practice, created work for disabled actors, showcased access approaches and put the narratives and socio-political context of disabled people on stage.

**IMPACT** Three new disabled-led productions

“ Cultural Shift has completely changed my life, my practice and my view of myself - I know that sounds sensational but it really has! Lots of doors have opened, I've had conversations with people I wouldn't have dreamt of. It has made me more ambitious – and made me want more ”

Vici Wreford-Sinnott, Creative Lead, Cultural Shift



Cultural Shift Conviva  
Photo credit: Nick Wesson

**Training** was core to building the confidence of staff, to empower them to think about equality rather than disability. Disability Equality Training was key to interrogating cultural norms around disability and to place the Social Model of Disability into the practicalities of the workplace. 166 people attended training throughout the project.

“ We are genuinely being challenged to rethink and change the way we work with disabled people. New language, new approaches and gaining a new knowledge of disability that helps us understand why we need to do things a certain way, rather than just changing because we want to tick boxes.”

Annabel Turpin, Chief Executive, ARC



**Full Circle, our resident learning disabled group**, co-devised three productions with Little Cog reaching over 500 audience members.

## IMPACT

Arts Council funding was secured so that Little Cog and ARC could support Full Circle to establish themselves as an independent theatre company. They have moved from being day care participants to professionally aspiring actors in possession of a clear visual and performance language of their own, and a resident company at ARC.

“ I'd come here every day if I could ”

Full Circle Company Member

“ I am an actor now ”

Full Circle Company Member





ARC's programming staff developed their knowledge of disabled artists and companies, to include more disabled led work in the programme. Staff are now proactive and confident in providing parity of service for disabled people.

## IMPACT

2,449 audience members saw disability-led work; BSL interpreted theatre and comedy performances were introduced; and subtitled and audio described films into the cinema programme

“ Audiences with access requirements find it easier to book appropriate seating as our staff are more aware of access around the building. We have improved our booking system so customers don't have to explain their requirements when booking each time ”


Alan, Customer Services Manager, ARC







Arctic Piranha

 Disabled artists including Pauline Heath, Rowan James, gobscore and Paul Wilshaw came to ARC to develop work and their practice as artists.

## IMPACT

33 artists were supported by Cultural Shift, which created a space and a platform that for the first time was designed around the disabled artist, mitigating barriers and focusing on the art.

“ Gave me the confidence to go freelance ”

Pauline Heath, Cultural Shift Supported Artist

“ I learnt more about myself, first time as lead artist - confidence extended a lot more. ”

Paul Wilshaw, Cultural Shift Supported Artist



Cultural Shift **Participation** covered workshops, training and mentoring, exhibitions, flash mobs, presentations and co-created Arctic Piranha club nights. Hundreds of young disabled people were provided with the opportunity to explore their creativity, their place in the world and what their futures may bring.

## IMPACT

ARC is now a frequently visited, welcoming place for a network of people with increased ownership of this cultural space. Arctic Piranha is an established brand with regular nights attracting 50+ people – unique social events for disabled people. 395 people participated across the project.



I think it's helped me to see that I wanted to live independently and I could live independently cos I think as a disabled person you are always going to have people telling you you can't do something. I want younger disabled people see our work so that they know they can do it too



Emily, Cultural Shift Participant



**Cultural Shift Conviva, a disabled-led symposium event** saw people from arts organisations and the disability arts sector attending a full day symposium that involved disabled artists and practitioners talking about the context of disabled-led practice and the work to be done in wider cultural contexts.

## IMPACT

# The spread of Cultural Shift has started!



Cultural Shift Conviva  
Photo credit: Nick Wesson

“ Provocations that were actually provocative, scratch performances that genuinely left you wanting more, insightful breakout sessions and cake.... This didn't feel like just another disability arts conference. It had a distinctively Northern flavour with some new voices. ”

Joe Turnbull, Assistant Editor, Disability Arts Online

“ A refreshing day full of difference. A celebration of an ending, but it feels like the start of something ”

Aidan Moesby, Conviva Contributor

## Our Cultural Shift – what's different now?

The cultural environment at ARC has changed fundamentally in the last three years. As an organisation and as individuals, everyone feels more confident. Little Cog has been empowered to develop a strategic role in leading change. The model we developed has attracted national and international attention. Disabled people are more present as audiences, participants and staff at ARC. It is now possible to witness an exchange at the bar in BSL or book a ticket to work by a disabled artist as a matter of course. Disabled people are visible throughout the operation and programming of the building.

By adopting the Social Model of Disability ARC was empowered to create new approaches to equality, to operations and to programming. Previous concerns about use of language around disability and disabled people are a thing of the past. Increased accessibility continues to be a priority. Little Cog has continued to develop understanding of how the social model extends into artistic practice.



**It's part of us rather than us being part of it - it's embedded**

Chloe Lawrence, Programmes Manager, ARC

The work ARC programmes is informed by clear policy - for instance ARC'S consciousness around negative disability stereotypes and tropes now informs its programming of films and theatre. The impact of programming is understood as **“people have seen really brilliant work and had their own perceptions challenged by the work they have seen.”** - Annabel Turpin, Chief Executive, ARC

Disabled-led arts will always have a space at ARC and we will continue to support the cultivation of an understanding of a disability-led arts context on a wider scale. Little Cog will continue to share the Cultural Shift model and advocate for disabled-led space in all arts venues.



## | What next?

The disabled-led arts movement in the North East of England must be carried forward and ARC will support this. Little Cog as a disabled-led organisation has enhanced experience, expertise and status. And Cultural Shift continues - the new **Cultural Shift platform** will have **“both an artistic and strategic role supporting and promoting disabled-led arts, including the development of a disabled artists and companies consortium, an audience outreach programme and a series of artistic disabled-led commissions”** - Vici Wreford-Sinnott, Creative Lead, Cultural Shift.

Disabled artists and companies require a permanent place in culture, locally and nationally.



# I Our Learning

One of the main cornerstones of change is the ability to develop a disability equality ethos within an organisation. This comes from disability equality training which must be delivered by an experienced disabled practitioner, and introduces organisations to what they must do to introduce equal working practices. It also creates an understanding of the cultural and historical context within which negative perceptions of disability have been developed and perpetuated in the arts. This is essential to knowing what consideration needs to be given to artistic content of work programmed and delivered across the organisation.

All together now **“It’s a journey - make sure everyone gets on board”**

Don’t be afraid **“Reduce the fear about talking to disabled people about access requirements – it’s a useful conversation to have rather than one to pretend not to need to have.”**

Get the knowledge – **“essential to have strong, knowledgeable leadership”**

Early bumps to be expected **“Early on, the challenge of it not being seen as a [add on] project needed to be cracked”**

Team effort to move forward **“Diversification of voices is really important so don’t rely on just one person”** to make change happen – everyone is an agent of change



**Can I Start Again Please**  
Photo credit: Matthew Andrews



**Laurence Clark – Independence**  
Photo credit: Tony Knox



\*all quotes by ARC Staff

Don't expect ALL disabled people to know the tenets of disability equality **"involve trained professionals"**

**Be clear about setting expectations.**

Don't be overwhelmed by budgets as a large budget may not mean more impact.

Get informed **"I was new to learning about disability arts as a historic movement and what is currently going on. I did not want to be out there looking ignorant and undermining the project"**

**"Understand why you are showing the work you are showing"**

Change practices **"We used to wait to take seats out for wheelchair users, now they are permanently out"**

Change thinking **"It's the people in the organisation that need to change. We shouldn't be looking at the people who are not coming - we are not trying to change their behavior, but looking at what we need to change, to encourage them to come."**

Be honest **"People know when things are tokenistic"**

Take your time **"The team have learned that it's okay to plan out a longer term aim and that it is impossible to do everything at once."**

Get it on paper **"Policy and plans can really empower and enable the rest of the organisation in the right way - then underpinned by practice and procedure"**

Keep confident **"This project has increased my faith it is possible and not difficult - the more people we can tell how not difficult it is the better"**

## If you do 3 things...

1

Train everyone so you start the journey together

2

Put a clear and comprehensive plan in place - do not make it an add on project

3

Employ a disabled person, or 2 or 3... in permanent positions

All images by Black Robin unless otherwise credited.

We would like to thank our funders Spirit of 2012  
for making Cultural Shift possible.

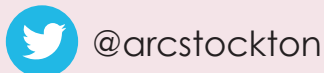


with support from



## Stay in touch

**ARC**  
[arconline.co.uk](http://arconline.co.uk)



**Little Cog**  
[viciwreford-sinnott.com](http://viciwreford-sinnott.com)



More information on the Cultural Shift Programme and Full Circle  
[arconline.co.uk/cultural-shift](http://arconline.co.uk/cultural-shift) [arconline.co.uk/full-circle](http://arconline.co.uk/full-circle)

If you require this report in alternative formats please contact Chloe  
Lawrence on [chloe.lawrence@arconline.co.uk](mailto:chloe.lawrence@arconline.co.uk) or **01642 665400**