Gig Buddies Devoted & Disgruntled (A Bit Of A Do) Report

People with learning disabilities have as much of a right to go out to socialise, party and have a good night out as the rest of us. Yet there are longstanding and pervasive boundaries that stop this from happening. Or at least makes it far more difficult than it should be.

At Gig Buddies and Club Soda we are continually fighting these barriers to try to create an accessible and inclusive social scene in Croydon. However, there is only so much we can do without systemic change in local venues and organisations. Adjustments need to happen across the board. It should not be left down to projects like ours or people with learning disabilities having to advocate for themselves.

On November 25th 2021 we invited local learning disability organisations, local venues and representatives from Croydon Council to get to the bottom of what needs to be done to shake up the status quo in Croydon's social scene.

We asked the question:

How can we make Croydon's Social Scene truly accessible?

The sessions put forward by the group were:
- What places are good at accessibility? What can entertainment venues adopt and learn from them?
- Can accessibility be a priority for developers?
- Why does it feel like the big mainstream venues don't care?
- What feels like enough info to be welcoming but not too much it feels overwhelming?
- How do you get the word about Gig Buddies to the right people? For example male volunteers and people who live in residential homes
- How can organisational structures take into account everyone's access needs?
- Why can't I go clubbing during the day?
- How to encourage places of worship to be inclusive social spheres.
- Who's responsible - do they know?
- Reasonable adjustments.
- How can we support the residential homes /care staff to stay up late?
- Stability! Space and money.
- Where are the deaf discos ?

As these sessions were called and attended, it became clear that the discussions would not be kept contained to the session heading. The enthusiasm in the room meant groups felt inspired and provoked to cover a wide range of topics within each session. This meant that the points recorded often deviated from the original session heading. This certainly speaks to the **urgency and necessity** of the discussion question.

We have organised the report into topics of discussion that recurred or seemed prominent. Some of these are original session headings, others encompass multiple discussion points.

Some points are potential solutions, some are further questions that need answers.

1. <u>Stability, Space and Money</u>

True accessibility needs space, stability and money to flourish. Organisations who work toward accessibility often have to seek funding themselves, with tightly regulated and temporary space to home their projects, which in turn limits what they can achieve.

<u>Restrictions vs Freedom</u>

Opening hours, rules, under landlords thumb, is independence necessary for creative freedom and rebellion? Do you need your own space? There are so many rules and regulations in place in rented spaces. Making adjustments to spaces is hard if you don't know how long you will be there or the landlord puts restrictions in place.

<u>Independence</u>

How can independence help with financial stability and accessibility, fundraising? Does it help to be part of a wider network?

<u>How to get people on board?</u>

Get powerful people in one space! Networking at its best, but how to make this change actually happen and have people follow through. Ambassadors? Trustees? Give people a title and they are more likely to invest time and effort and MONEY.

<u>Use mainstream artists</u>

Collab with a band/musician/mainstream club - build it into riders of musicians that so many accessible tickets are made available, that venues change accessibility regulations.

2. <u>Support Staff and Venues adapting</u>

We identified numerous reasonable adjustments that could happen within venues and within support services to push toward true access.

<u>A warm welcome</u>

Security at venues can make socialising difficult. How friendly are the staff? Biggest thing is communication between managers and staff. Staff in the know provide the best support. Warm welcome provides instant security and faith in a venue. Some of the best venues may not be listed as accessible, but when the staff are incredibly nice and accommodating - it is half the battle.

<u>Staff training</u>

Compulsory training in venues for supporting people with learning disabilities in their premises. Savvy provided training to Fairfield staff and security on how to provide accessible, inclusive service to their members for shows.

<u>Technology and Accessibility</u>

Use of technology to access a venue makes it inaccessible. Card only - this blocks off a huge amount of people with learning disabilities who receive weekly cash. **Should support**

services catch up with the times? They could allocate debit cards. Introduce new systems of working to catch up with the 21st century.

Supporting the Support
Support services and venues both seem to have defences up. Some support staff are overworked and underpaid. We need to be able to get to the point of a proper conversation where we can show that the services we (projects like Gig Buddies) provide actually limit the amount of work they need to do to hit their person centered quotas.

What venues should be doing themselves
Assign access champions in venues. Be open to making mistakes. Developers should consult groups of people with learning disabilities at the point of conception - have a central group. People always take action after something happens. Accessibility needs to be proactive.

3. Accessible Dating
An unexpected outcome of the session was the prevalence of sex and relationships in our discussions. Sex and relationships are a big part of socialising and nightlife, therefore should be included in the conversation about making Croydon's social scene more accessible.

Sex & Relationships
How can support staff / carers be educated on sex and relationships, sexuality, dating, etc. This feeds into making socialising accessible because it is something that naturally occurs when out socialising. People need to feel comfortable and confident in how to hold conversations and navigate relationships.

Gig Buddies X Dating
Agency, referrals? Collaborative project? Workshops? Gig Buddies X Nickels Support speed dating, an event that isn't so formal. A music event with a bar, so that there is an activity to do as well. Provide a safe space for people to explore dating.

Where to Date?
People need a safe, non judgemental space. Some find it difficult to talk to parents and carers about this. Support section in Leisure Link- where are accessible venues to go on a date? Where is accomodating? What are the local dating services? Accessible rooms in hotels often have single beds in them - disabled people have partners too.

4. How do we encourage good accessibility?
We recognised our own role in the primary steps towards true accessibility. Understanding, open and positive conversation was highlighted as key.

Is it possible?
Can any venue actually achieve this 100% or is it down to effort made and reasonable adjustments? Access clash. How do we navigate this? Many may have ambition but not be able to fulfill it due to restrictions / resources.

Compromise?
Should we burn bridges with the only venues available to us in Croydon because they are not fully accessible - we have to compromise when we shouldn't have to. Access should be a constant conversation not defensive. We cannot improve infrastructure, but must be willing to make adjustments. When ringing venues about access we need to ask specific questions - is the toilet accessible could just mean it is open.

Incentive
The Borough of Croydon could be used as the accessible cultural destination. Accessibility awards? Rather than slating bad venues, praise good ones? Create incentive? Should we have to create incentive or should it be legislation? What does the legislation say?

5. The Clubbing Norm
Gig Buddies originated from the fight for the right to Stay Up Late. We discussed the norms of night clubbing and whether mainstream clubbing can be accessible for people with learning disabilities.

Clubbing in the day
Some daytime events but who knows about them? Who are they for? Where are they? Would also be good for older people and people with families. Taxis to get home safe late at night cost a lot of money.

How do we integrate?
Is there a way to access these places without the pressure of crowds/drug+alcohol culture/security? Like a sensory walk through. We can create our own spaces for accessible events but why should learning disability events be sectioned off from mainstream society? How can we integrate into mainstream spaces and events in a way that feels safe and supported?

6. Code of Access
It became clear that on occasions, each of our experiences had been different with different venues and events. This did come as a shock in some instances. We identified that inorder to move forward, we need to work together.

Different experiences
We all have different experiences with venues and organisations. Can we have a centralised document that rates the Croydon venues by scale by each partner organisation and lists good and bad experiences. Does this become part of the Leisure Link project?

Unionise!
Get together with similar organisations and create a union to provide solidarity for legitimate issues. Open Letters to venues / organisations / Croydon Council signed by all partner organisations.

Conclusion

So did we answer the question:

'How can we make Croydon's Social Scene truly accessible?'

We made a strong start. We also found a few more questions that need answering.

The most prominent and exciting outcome of the session was the productivity and energy that occurs when we work together. Through sharing personal experiences of different venues, events and organisations, we realised the importance of collaboration in the work towards changing the landscape of our Borough's social scene.

Unsurprisingly for many of the solutions we found, funding is essential. In addition, the commitment from those who hold the financial power and influence in Croydon's social scene is vital - both to engage with these conversations proactively and also consult those who the changes are crucial for, directly.

However engaging and exciting the ideas that came out of the event were, many people in the room approached the subject from a shared viewpoint and experience. We can adopt a unionised approach, but we cannot effectively move forward without the representation from key venues, partners and council representatives.

As a collective we represent a group of likeminded people striving for the same thing, but we do not represent key decision makers. We can only get so far working together, pooling resources and collaborating. Accessibility and inclusion should be at the conception of social development and decision making. This has to be a two sided conversation for real change to happen.

How can we make Croydon's Social Scene truly accessible? We have to work together and push for accessibility to be placed at the forefront of how we operate as a community. With power in numbers, we can hold those with power and influence accountable and make Croydon a truly accessible cultural hub.