



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# What Makes a Person Accessible? Exploring the Characteristics of ‘Accessible People’ From the Perspective of Adults With Learning Disabilities

Melissa L. Kirby<sup>1</sup>  | Karen Burland<sup>1</sup>  | Freya Bailes<sup>1</sup>  | Charlie Barker<sup>2</sup> | Tracey Anne Barrett<sup>2</sup> | John Bartle<sup>2</sup> | Leanne Hazelgrave<sup>2</sup> | Liam Hirst<sup>2</sup> | Joanne Hepworth<sup>2</sup> | Ella Schofield<sup>2</sup> | Janine Waterman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Leeds, Leeds, UK | <sup>2</sup>Purple Patch Arts, Leeds, UK

**Correspondence:** Melissa L. Kirby ([m.kirby@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:m.kirby@leeds.ac.uk); [mlkirby@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:mlkirby@hotmail.co.uk))

**Received:** 14 July 2025 | **Revised:** 15 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 18 December 2025

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Previous research has investigated the factors that promote or reduce accessibility for people with learning disabilities. However, the role of people in facilitating accessible spaces, experiences and services and the characteristics on individuals that make them ‘accessible’ has been under-considered.

**Methods:** The present study reports on the findings from a participatory action doctoral research project. Seven people with learning disabilities were recruited and trained as co-researchers on the project. Co-researchers investigated the concept of ‘Accessible People’ via group discussion, drawings and poetry.

**Findings:** People were considered to positively or negatively influence accessibility in a range of contexts. Thematic analyses revealed 10 characteristics of Accessible People. Characteristics included interpersonal qualities (such as being open-minded, friendly and welcoming and helpful and supportive) and competency-based qualities (including knowledge of learning disabilities and being easy to communicate with).

**Conclusions:** Accessible people were reported to play a crucial role in supporting the accessibility of spaces, activities and experiences. Embodiment of the characteristics of accessible people may enhance accessibility for people with learning disabilities in a variety of contexts.

## 1 | Introduction

It is acknowledged that people with learning disabilities experience inequalities and social exclusion, often due to inaccessible spaces, services and experiences (Gray and Kerridge 2023; Seale and Nind 2009; Russell 2022). There are many different factors that contribute to whether something may be considered as ‘accessible’ or ‘inaccessible’. Physical and environmental barriers, such as inaccessible places, spaces and transport, are perhaps the most obvious barriers to disabled people’s inclusion in wider society. However, varied barriers, including economic and cultural barriers (Oliver 2004), stigma and attitudinal barriers (Anaby et al. 2013), and organisational barriers, such as disabling policies and practices (Ahmad 2012), may also impact accessibility.

Nind and Seale (2009) note that people with a learning disability may experience additional accessibility challenges when compared to other disabled people, such as challenges relating to information processing, memory and communication (Chew et al. 2009). Nind and Seale (2009) explored the concept of access with people with learning disabilities, through a series of seminars with people with learning disabilities, support staff, researchers and professionals. Findings from this study were used to propose a multidimensional model of access, which encompasses seven aspects that both promote and may be achieved through accessible experiences. These are physical access, access to knowledge and information, power (including the ability to influence and maintain access), relationships and communication, advocacy and the ability to choose,

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2026 The Author(s). *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

## Summary

- This research is about how people can help make things more accessible.
- Seven people with learning disabilities were trained as researchers for this project.
- These researchers with learning disabilities are called the Purple Research Group. The Purple Research Group worked with the University Researcher.
- Researchers used group discussion and arts-based activities, including drawing and poetry to help everyone to share their views and experiences.
- We found that people can make things more or less accessible.
- ‘Accessible people’ helped to reduce barriers and were trusted to share information about what helped.
- We found 10 characteristics of ‘accessible people’. People who have these features make the world a more inclusive and accessible place.

participation in varied activities, and quality of life (p. 277). While these factors may all facilitate or reduce accessibility, a common influence across all aspects of accessibility is people.

People play an important role in supporting people with learning disabilities to live fulfilling lives (Haigh et al. 2013). The decisions, actions, motivations and attitudes of people towards those with learning disabilities have the potential to both positively and negatively influence accessibility for this community (Nario-Redmond et al. 2019). Nind and Seale (2009) note that the attitudes of others, particularly disabling perspectives of the capabilities of people with learning disabilities, was commonly reported as a barrier to access. Negative attitudes, discrimination and misconceptions around the capabilities of adults with learning disabilities can have long-term negative consequences, such as lower psychological wellbeing (Ali et al. 2012), reduced opportunities for choice (Pelleboer-Gunnink et al. 2021) and social isolation (Mencap 2019). Additionally, Reeve (2006) notes that experiences of direct psycho-emotional disablism, which include the negative words and actions of others, may not only impact the immediate perceived accessibility of a space or service but can also have long-term negative repercussions for people with learning disabilities. For example, negative prior experiences with people, alongside the perceived unpredictability of the behaviour of others, may prevent disabled people's engagement with activities or services in the future, due to anxiety around how people will respond. Negative experiences with others may therefore negatively impact disabled people's wellbeing, sense of self and social participation as much as a lack of physical access (Reeve 2006).

In contrast, positive interactions with others may support accessible experiences. Indeed, the World Health Organization (2011) suggests that one of the most common facilitators of accessibility is inclusive attitudes. Similarly, Nind and Seale (2009) suggest that 'interpersonal mediation', through 'helpful people who are flexible, who listen, who communicate openly' (p. 278), can facilitate access for people with learning disabilities

in a variety of contexts. Previous research examining the qualities of others who are most valued by people with learning disabilities has focused on the characteristics of professional care staff. Clarkson et al. (2009) explored what people learning disabilities considered to be the most important characteristics of care staff. Their findings demonstrated that participants with a learning disability placed greatest importance on the interpersonal qualities of staff, such as being understanding, willing to help and honest. Similarly, Dodevska and Vassos (2013) investigated which qualities were valued in residential care workers in Australia, from the perspectives of people with learning disabilities and managers of accommodation services. Interviews revealed that people with learning disabilities were more likely to value interpersonal qualities, such as being helpful, spending time with residents and being supportive, over skills/knowledge (e.g., communication skills, knowledge of legislation, computer skills and respecting privacy). Interestingly, managers were more likely to value skills/knowledge over interpersonal skills, highlighting the difference in perspective of people with learning disabilities on the qualities that matter most in the individuals they encounter. Indeed, Davies and Matuska (2018) noted that previous research exploring skills and qualities in those who regularly interact with people with learning disabilities focuses on staff views. Their questionnaire study, co-produced with people with learning disabilities, found that qualities such as 'ability and willingness to listen', 'happy and positive attitude', 'good communication skills' and the skills to support people with learning disabilities to share their views were most valued. These studies provide useful insights into the valued characteristics of those who provide care for people with learning disabilities.

Literature concerning participatory and co-produced research also highlights the characteristics of people who support relationships. Previous research reports characteristics such as communicating openly and with empathy (Pinto et al. 2008), being willing to learn (Estacio et al. 2017) and being friendly (Pinto 2009). While these papers demonstrate the importance of personal qualities, they do not account for the specific accessibility challenges experienced by people with learning disabilities (Nind and Seale 2009). Guidance developed in collaboration with people with learning disabilities has largely been undertaken by organisations and networks supporting this community. BILD (2023) *Working Together Charter* advises those engaging in co-production to ensure people with learning disabilities feel listened to, emotionally supported and valued. Similarly, the Listen, Include, Respect (n.d) highlights the importance of good support, communication and information for organisations aiming to support inclusive participation. These resources provide useful guidance on adaptations that support the inclusion of people with learning disabilities in these spaces. However, people are rarely considered as 'accessible' or 'inaccessible' in themselves. Instead, previous literature involving people with learning disabilities focuses on things that people can *do* to aid accessibility and/or engagement, as opposed to things that people can *be*. The consideration of people as both aiding accessibility and being accessible has been underexplored from the perspective of people with learning disabilities. The present study aims to share the characteristics of 'accessible' people in the everyday lives of people with learning disabilities.

## 1.1 | Project Background and Approach

The present study was part of a doctoral research project undertaken by the first author, which explored the outcomes of arts-based learning for people with learning disabilities who attend Purple Patch Arts. Purple Patch Arts are a Yorkshire-based charity that provides creative learning experiences for adults with learning disabilities. The project utilised a Participatory Action Research Approach, whereby through a cyclical process of planning, action and review, people with lived experience are involved in all stages of the research, often filling the role of researchers (Selener 1992; McIntyre 2007; Kindon et al. 2007). Seven adults with learning disabilities (now known as the Purple Research Group; PRG), who attended Purple Patch Arts, were recruited and trained as researchers for this project. Prospective co-researchers were contacted by Purple Patch Arts and invited to watch five interactive videos about the project. These videos shared information about what research is, and provided an opportunity for prospective co-researchers to try out some of the activities they may undertake as a researcher (see Kirby 2023). Videos were designed for this study, using the website PowToon. After watching the videos, co-researchers completed an online easy read consent form, with support from Purple Patch Arts. In line with previous research, the small number of co-researchers recruited for this study was chosen to enable the collection of in-depth information, while catering to the individual needs of the PRG (De Castro et al. 2023).

The PRG made key decisions about the project, including selecting research questions, choosing research methods, collecting and analysing data and disseminating their findings (Kirby 2023; Kirby et al. 2024). The group was supported by the first author (henceforth referred to as the university researcher; UR), one parent (Janine) and one carer (Jo). The study was organised into three 'cycles' of research, with each cycle corresponding to a theme that was chosen by the PRG. Chosen themes were: People (Cycle 1), Arts and Variety (Cycle 2) and Accessibility and Support (Cycle 3). Each cycle lasted between 11 and 13 weeks and addressed multiple research questions chosen by the PRG, relating to the corresponding theme. The PRG met fortnightly on Zoom, over a period of 12 months to conduct the research. The project utilised arts-based, creative and adapted methods to aid the inclusion of the PRG throughout the project (for further details, see Kirby 2023). This project was reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the Arts, Humanities and Cultures Ethics Committee (Ethics ref: FAHC19-078).

This paper reports on findings from the third cycle of research, which explored accessibility and support within the Purple Patch Arts lifelong learning programme and in everyday life. The term 'accessible people' was first discussed during an analysis session in Cycle 2, as the PRG considered which 'group' (theme) the word 'accessible' belonged to. Having never considered the idea that people could be assessed as accessible or inaccessible, the UR initially misunderstood what the group was saying. However, after discussing this idea further, co-researchers identified that people could be described as both accessible or not accessible, depending on their characteristics, behaviours and attitudes:

*UR: so, if we say something is accessible, what do we mean?*

*John: it's positive and it's there to be used, um like a train, accessible, or a bus is available for us to use*

*UR: yeah, so it might mean that everybody can use it?*

*John: yeah*

*Tracey: it can go underneath independent*

*UR: what have we got, independent...*

*Tracey: three*

*UR: group three, yeah, so... do we think, can a person be accessible?*

*John: oh, it depends on the person*

*UR: or is it a place that be accessible or not accessible?*

*Tracey: the place and the person*

*UR: hmm, so it might be that, what does an accessible place look like, or what might it be like?*

*John: it's easy to access, you can access it and come and go as you please*

*[...]*

*UR: so, what about an accessible person, what does that look like, or what are they like?*

*John: usually easy going*

*UR: mhm, yeah*

*John: and can adapt*

On the basis of this discussion, the PRG chose to investigate the concept of 'accessible people' and their role in promoting accessibility in everyday life.

## 1.2 | Procedure

Co-researchers chose to reflect on their experiences of accessible people in an online research session, which lasted approximately 1 h. The group's research question 'what makes a person accessible?', aimed to identify the characteristics of accessible people and explore the impact of accessible and inaccessible people in their lives. The UR supported these conversations through a series of prompt questions, including:



**FIGURE 1** | Leanne's drawing of an accessible person. [Color figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

- What does it mean if someone is 'accessible' or 'inaccessible'?
- What does an accessible person do? Say? Think? and feel?
- How does an accessible person act? Make you feel? Communicate?
- Do we know any accessible people? How do we know they are accessible?

Prompt questions encouraged co-researchers to reflect on their own experiences with accessible people and create a profile of characteristics associated with accessible people. During this session, two co-researchers also chose to draw their ideas around accessible people (see Figure 1). While this research session was specifically designed to understand the PRG's perceptions of and experiences with accessible people, the group also shared their views on this topic throughout Cycle 3 of the project, which consisted of 18 Zoom sessions, each lasting 1 h.

### 1.3 | Analysis

In line with participatory approaches to research, data from Cycle 3 were analysed collaboratively with the PRG. At this stage in the research, co-researchers were more experienced in analysis, having analysed data in two previous cycles. The present paper reports on the findings of one research question in Cycle 3; however, this cycle addressed four additional research questions which are not reported here.

Analyses took place in person at the Purple Patch Arts office during an in-person research day, which lasted 5 h. Due to the range of data collected, the group used a creative visual mapping exercise to explore the varied data collected in this cycle.

After a process of familiarisation with all of the data collected in Cycle 3, the group worked together to cut, stick, arrange and annotate data from Cycle 3 on a large piece of paper, which sought to demonstrate connections between the varied data types. Co-researchers were supported to identify important/interesting aspects of each other's work. This involved highlighting extracts of discussions and/or images of accessible people drawn by the group. Physical space and groupings on the page were used to represent the relationships between identified themes and ideas. Similarly, annotations provided context on these themes and their relationships, including the PRG's experiences and feelings associated with each theme. Co-researchers also named and described identified groups/themes. This mapping exercise is comparable to thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling 2001). This qualitative analytical approach, similar to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), is based on a process of generating codes and themes at different levels of abstraction, usually from textual data. In Thematic Network Analysis, these themes are used to create 'web-like illustrations that summarize the main themes constituting a piece of text' (Attride-Stirling 2001, 386), thus producing a visual map of the themes identified and the relationships between them.

Additionally, research sessions from all three cycles of research were transcribed verbatim and analysed by the UR using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The PRG was not involved in the analysis of research session transcripts due to the amount of data and time restrictions of doctoral research. The results of these analyses were combined with the PRG's collaborative analyses. In relation to the question 'what makes a person "accessible"?', 10 characteristics were identified. These are presented below, alongside results concerning the PRG's experiences with accessible and inaccessible people more generally.

## 2 | Results and Discussion

The following sections outline the results from Cycle 3 of the project that directly relate to the concept of accessible people.

### 2.1 | Experiences With Accessible and Inaccessible People

People were reported to both positively and negatively influence the PRG's experiences of accessibility, both within Purple Patch Arts' programmes and in the outside world ('it's people really sometimes isn't it'—John). This is demonstrated by the fact that accessible and inaccessible people were discussed in connection with a range of other aspects of access identified by the group, including physical access, transport, information, activities and resources. Inaccessible people had the potential to influence and often outweigh facilitators of accessibility. For example, John's example of an accessible bus with an inaccessible driver meant that buses (despite being physically, economically and informationally accessible to him) were inaccessible: 'It was the actual bus driver[...] sometimes the bus driver will say the ramp wasn't working. I don't know if it was working or whether they decided to just not bother putting you on the bus'. In this example, inaccessible people prevented John from accessing

public transport, thus reducing his access to other activities and services. Similarly, Ella's negative experience with a taxi driver resulted in her being removed from the taxi on her way to college:

*Ella: You know when I had \*cab company\* they were awful to me when I was having them for college*

*UR: Oh really, they weren't very nice?*

*Ella: No. One morning this one taxi driver told me to get out of his taxi*

Co-researchers also shared varying experiences with others in the public. In particular, Tracey and John, noted differences in the way in which John was treated as a wheelchair user ('when I go out with John to places, they talk to me rather than John'—Tracey). John shared his experiences of receiving negative reactions from members of the public, who often made assumptions about him prior to speaking to him: 'I have had a few people that's gone by and cringed and I didn't know what they were on about [...] but once I started to talk, people were like, my brain's like him'. Tracey and John's experiences are in keeping with Reeve (2006) discussions of direct psycho-emotional disablism, which includes negative remarks, prejudice and attention (or indeed, lack of attention/avoidance of disabled people) that adults with learning disabilities may experience from others.

Co-researchers' negative interactions with people (particularly nondisabled people) were often perceived as a lack of understanding about learning disabilities. During Cycle 3, members of the group discussed how a lack of understanding from others and misconceptions surrounding the capabilities of people with learning disabilities often resulted in people underestimating them ('there's always bits, that people don't recognise, don't realise [...] "Can you do that? oh really?" And you're really surprised sometimes'—John). Additionally, a lack of understanding from others meant that co-researchers were not always provided with the support that they needed to access daily activities: 'I go in a shop sometimes, the customers doesn't, the staff doesn't understand I need time to, I need time to ask them questions [...] sometimes they rush me' (Ella). During Cycle 3, Tracey and Ella shared their desire for others to learn more about them and their experiences as disabled people and therefore increase understanding and awareness of learning disabilities:

*Ella: my disability, they just have to ask*

*UR: you just have to ask? Yeah*

*Tracey: this is what I put [...] 'ask me if you need to know something'*

While people were often considered as a barrier to accessibility, co-researchers often relied on others to access various activities and services, as Janine noted: 'there's barriers and you have to wait for someone to open the barriers'. Indeed, Liam discussed reliance on others when travelling, noting that: 'if you book for a train, for someone to meet you, to do the ramp and that, and

they don't turn up, then what do you do?'. This highlights the important role that people play in the lives of adults with learning disabilities, and the potential for others to reduce or increase accessibility in everyday life. The present study therefore supports pre-existing literature which suggests that inclusive attitudes are crucial to facilitate accessible experiences (Nind and Seale 2009; Seale and Nind 2009).

## 2.2 | Characteristics of Accessible People

Co-researchers identified 10 characteristics of accessible people. These characteristics represent the shared values and behaviours of those identified who facilitated accessibility in the PRG's lives. The following sections summarise each of these characteristics and provide examples from the present study of how these facilitated accessible experiences.

### 2.2.1 | Helpful and Supportive

Accessible people were considered to be willing to help others. For example, by providing information and/or practical support, such as opening doors (e.g., 'If I see someone struggling to get up the ramp, like a Purple Patch Arts member, maybe I will help them'—Ella). Co-researchers suggested that an accessible person might say things like 'I can help you any time' (John) and 'I can find that out' (Charlie). Accessible people were supportive of co-researchers and filled official (e.g., carers and parent) and unofficial (e.g., mentor and friend) support roles in the PRG's lives. However, as noted in the characteristic 'respectful', accessible people did not make assumptions about the support needed or desired by people with a learning disability, which enabled co-researchers to reach their potential, experience challenge and meet their goals ('no-one telling you what you can and can't do'—Liam).

### 2.2.2 | Accommodating

Accessible people were described as accommodating ('Somebody who can accommodate you'—John). John described how an accommodating approach to support meant having a good attitude and being flexible to the needs of the individual you are working with: 'If they're accommodating, they've got to have a good personal, well, like a good attitude, otherwise if you're not gonna say "I'll do it later mate", ah, that means you're not really bothered'—John.

### 2.2.3 | Person-Centered

A person-centred approach to interacting with others was a key characteristic of accessible people. Co-researchers stated that accessible people focused on them as individuals and were interested in finding out more about the people they met. For example, Leanne suggested that accessible people might ask 'about your personality' and 'find out what you like, have in common' (Leanne). Accessible people also directed their questions to, and communicated directly with, people with learning disabilities, instead of addressing any accompanying nondisabled people (e.g., a parent or carer). Accessible people took a person-centred approach to support. For example, by treating people as individuals as opposed to focusing solely on their disability. John described an accessible person as someone 'who

doesn't mind, they're not bothered, they don't... basically, Melissa, for me, it's somebody who doesn't see the chair and just sees me and just let me do thing things I normally did'. This approach to support is in line with previous research concerning Active Support (Mansell and Beadle-Brown 2012), which promotes a shift in mentality from 'caring for' to 'working with'.

#### 2.2.4 | *Open-Minded*

Accessible people were considered to be open-minded in their opinions and approach to support ('They're up for anything, that would be an accessible person'—John). Co-researchers compared the open-mindedness of accessible people and inaccessible people, noting that the latter were less flexible in their thinking and resistant to change: 'non-accessible people are people who are stuck in their own way'—John.

#### 2.2.5 | *Trustworthy and Authentic*<sup>1</sup>

Accessible people were considered by the PRG to be authentic and genuine: 'They don't pretend to be anyone but themselves. Just like us'—Leanne. By being open and genuine, accessible people built trust with people with learning disabilities, which facilitated meaningful relationships: 'Trust is important and rewarding' (Quote from a poem about accessibility, which was co-written by the PRG). Accessible people demonstrated that they were trustworthy and authentic by ensuring their words and actions aligned, being themselves, sharing parts of their lives with others and being consistent in the lives of people with learning disabilities.

The trustworthiness of others influenced the perceived accessibility of other experiences, as information regarding accessibility was more valued when shared by a trusted person. The perceived trustworthiness of an individual and/or organisation therefore influenced the perceived trustworthiness of the information that was shared. This was often due to co-researchers' past experiences of being told inaccurate information and/or their expectations of accessibility contrasting to the realities of accessibility.

#### 2.2.6 | *Friendly and Welcoming*

Co-researchers valued individuals who fostered a welcoming environment, particularly at Purple Patch Arts. Ella shared that accessible people might 'Welcome other people into the group'.

Accessible people created a welcoming atmosphere by being friendly and kind to everyone, talking to participants ('she welcomes us, says good morning'—Ella) and 'being approachable' (John). This was discussed in contrast to the PRG's experiences of inaccessible environments and people that made them feel unwelcome and excluded: 'I used to keep to myself, that's what I did in school, just kept to my, just to myself' (Ella).

#### 2.2.7 | *Respectful*

Accessible people were respectful of the PRG's physical, emotional and social boundaries ('I didn't feel I was forced'—John). They were reported to balance providing support when it was needed with facilitating autonomy and respect ('privacy when we want and need it'—Quote from a poem about accessibility, which was co-written by the PRG). While accessible people

were there to help, they supported co-researchers to make the final decisions around their needs and preferences.

#### 2.2.8 | *Understanding/Knowledge of Learning Disabilities*

Non-disabled people were generally considered to have a lack of understanding and awareness about learning disabilities ('the people who don't have a disability, they don't know how, how hard it is'—Leanne). Ella shared her desire for greater understanding from others in order to tackle misconceptions about the differences between those with learning disabilities and those without learning disabilities: 'I want other people to know what it's like with me having a learning difficulty [...] I do the same as other people'. Increasing understanding of learning disabilities was therefore considered by co-researchers to be an important aspect of tackling negative attitudes, stereotyping and behaviours from others. In contrast to this perceived lack of understanding from others, accessible people were considered to be understanding and have a good knowledge of learning disabilities and the access needs of others ('[accessible people] know what it's like for me, for people, for people like me'—Ella). Purple Patch Arts Staff were considered to have a good understanding of co-researchers' needs and lived experiences, particularly when compared to people outside of Purple Patch Arts: 'I have told the Purple Patch programme leader loads of times about when I go to shops, [...] and he understands' (Ella).

It is worth noting that the majority of staff at Purple Patch Arts do not identify as disabled and therefore may not have a first-hand understanding of disability. Despite this, they were accepted by co-researchers as a trusted part of their community. Leanne noted that 'Purple Patch understands how hard it is, so they know where we're coming from'. Previous research suggests that understanding and awareness of learning disability facilitates trust between people with learning disabilities and non-disabled people (Howard et al. 2015). This may be due to the fact that negative interactions with others (including bullying and stigma) are often related to a lack of understanding and negative attitudes (Scior and Werner 2015). Understanding of others was also considered to be related to people's ability to be empathetic, which was identified as an important trait of accessible people.

#### 2.2.9 | *Easy to Communicate With*

Accessible people were considered to be easy to communicate with, because they were approachable, reassuring and adapted their communication to meet the needs and preferences of co-researchers: 'communicating with others [...] communicate it means, um, signing, um, Makaton, body language, all sorts' (Tracey). By using varied approaches to communication, accessible people supported co-researchers to share their views and preferences (e.g., by asking 'what do you like?'—Charlie), thus getting to know co-researchers as individuals. This is in keeping with previous research which identifies open communication as a key characteristic of those who facilitate access for people with learning disabilities (Nind and Seale 2009).

#### 2.2.10 | *Reassuring*

Accessible people provided co-researchers with reassurance, particularly in times of stress. For example, Ella shared how the

programme leader at Purple Patch Arts reassured her that others in the programme would like her:

*Ella: I said to \*Programme Leader\*, I'm not sure if they would like me or not. That's what I thought, really*

*UR: Mhm, and what did \*Programme Leader\* say?*

*Ella: He said, I bet they will like you [...]that was good of \*Programme Leader\* to... reassuring me*

By reassuring others, accessible people supported co-researchers to feel happier and more confident, particularly when trying new things for the first time. Co-researchers also took it upon themselves to reassure others who were new to Purple Patch Arts ('if we get new people when we're back, I might have to reassure them'—Ella), demonstrating that the characteristics of accessible people identified in staff were modelled by participants.

### 2.3 | Accessible People in Everyday Life

Co-researchers shared varied examples of people that they knew in their everyday lives who embodied the characteristics of accessible people outlined above. Examples included their peers (e.g., other participants at Purple Patch Arts and friends), members of the emergency services, organisations (such as Citizens Advice and Purple Patch Arts) and Purple Patch staff. Leanne's visualisation of an accessible person (see Figure 1) included a drawing of her programme leader at Purple Patch Arts, surrounded by the characteristics of this individual that she felt made them accessible. This highlights the importance of ensuring that those working with people with learning disabilities align with the characteristics of accessible people, to ensure that services and experiences are as accessible and inclusive as possible. Since the completion of this project, Purple Patch Arts have developed training in how to be an accessible person, utilising the 10 principles identified above. At the time of writing, this training has been piloted with the British Library. It is hoped that this research and subsequent training will support individuals working across a range of contexts to develop and prioritise these qualities. Indeed, a greater understanding of the qualities of accessible people may influence hiring practices within organisations that support adults with learning disabilities.

### 2.4 | Accessible People in a Research Context

While not a specific aim of this project, the PRG also discussed the characteristics of accessible people within a research context. As participatory approaches to research become increasingly popular, it is important to understand the characteristics of what makes an 'accessible researcher', to ensure that research is a positive, inclusive and accessible experience for people with learning disabilities. Mayan and Daum (2016) note that the personal qualities of URs can support the crucial development of relationships in participatory research and may also impact co-researchers' and community partners' willingness to collaborate and/or share their experiences. Indeed, Pinto

(2009) investigation of collaboration in public health research community-based organisations identified characteristics of researchers which made them preferable to work with, making assessments based on their 'expertise, availability and social skills' (p. 942). The PRG's reflections revealed that the attributes of the university researcher were crucial in supporting effective and accessible research experiences. Personal characteristics that were identified as supporting the present study overlapped considerably with the characteristics of accessible people, including being friendly, open-minded, transparent and patient. In keeping with previous research exploring effective research collaborations with people with learning disabilities (Mannion et al. 2025), taking time to get to know co-researchers, and in turn facilitate opportunities for members of the PRG to get to know each other, supported the development of trust. This was key to maintaining accessible research experiences, as it facilitated a shared understanding within the group, thus reducing barriers relating to co-researchers' negative perceptions of non-disabled people. As Tracey discussed: 'I've never seen a "normal" person with no disability, like yourself, more interested in working with disability people. I think I've got more understanding, understanding of you, than I have of another 'normal' person, does that make sense?' The PRG's description of accessible people therefore provide additional guidance concerning the attributes of URs, which may support inclusive research environments. It may also be important to consider how these characteristics relate to the attributes and values of a partner organisation in the project. In the present study, alignment of the UR's values and attributes with Purple Patch Arts staff was key to effective teamwork. This confirms the significance of early conversations with potential partner organisations to ensure that the values of URs and community partners are aligned. Additionally, in line with the characteristic 'understanding of learning disabilities', it is crucial for URs to build time into the research design to get to know the communities/individuals they are working with and to develop reciprocal understanding with co-researchers.

## 3 | Conclusions

Accessible people played a crucial role in supporting the accessibility of spaces, activities and experiences. While the idea that people can influence accessibility is noted in previous research (Nind and Seale 2009), the present study is the first of its kind to specifically explore the concept of 'accessible people' and the characteristics of these individuals from the perspective of people with learning disabilities. This project therefore demonstrates the benefits of participatory approaches to research in identifying and exploring topics of importance to underrepresented groups.

The present study suggests that accessible people have the potential to influence accessibility across a range of contexts, spaces, and services in the lives of people with learning disabilities. In keeping with previous research, the present study suggests that interpersonal qualities were highly valued by people with learning disabilities and were identified as core features of 'accessible people' (Clarkson et al. 2009; Dodevska and Vassos 2013; Nind and Seale 2009). However, in contrast to previous research that suggests that interpersonal qualities were valued over knowledge/skills (Dodevska and Vassos 2013),

'accessible people' were valued for both their interpersonal qualities and their knowledge of learning disability/professional skillset. This may be because a combination of both is required to dismantle inaccessible practices and promote accessible experiences. Of note is the group's perception that accessible people had a good understanding of, and/or willingness to understand, people with learning disabilities. This was also noted as an important characteristic in researchers who collaborate with people with learning disabilities. This may be particularly important as many members of the PRG reported experiencing stigma and social exclusion, which they perceived to be due to a lack of understanding from others. Non-disabled people, including non-disabled researchers, must therefore be aware that they may be seen as individuals with whom people with learning disabilities have previously had negative experiences. Time and the development of trust by consistently embodying the characteristics of accessible people are crucial to support accessibility for people with learning disabilities in the long term.

While this research did not specifically set out to explore the characteristics of accessible people in a research context, the present study suggests that the principles of accessible people may provide useful guidance for the desired attributes of researchers working with this community. As participatory and co-produced approaches to research become increasingly popular (Dedding et al. 2021; Pettican et al. 2023), it is essential that researchers and their institutions consider the qualities of the individuals conducting this type of research, and whether they embody the characteristics that are valued by the communities they work with. This may be particularly important when sharing information about accessibility in research with people with learning disabilities, since information about accessibility was more likely to be trusted when shared by a person that the group considered to be 'accessible'. Collaboration with trusted individuals and organisations may therefore support people with learning disabilities' engagement with research. Further research and guidance on the role of accessible people in a research context is needed to ensure that participatory research is indeed inclusive.

The participatory approach and in-depth nature of this doctoral project meant that only seven people with learning disabilities were involved as co-researchers. Additionally, since the research was undertaken during the pandemic, it was not possible to recruit people with learning disabilities outside of the PRG to share their perspectives on accessible people. While the present study provides a detailed overview of accessible people from this group's perspective, this may not be representative of the views of the broader learning disability community. Future research should explore the concept and characteristics of accessible people with a larger group of people with learning disabilities, across a range of locations, to ensure these experiences reflect the diversity of the wider community. Future research could also consider whether the characteristics identified in the present study may apply to other contexts, including when working with other communities who experience inequalities and exclusion.

The PRG's reflections on the impact of accessible and inaccessible people in their lives serve as a powerful reminder of the impact of attitudes and our shared responsibility for accessibility. While significant challenges to accessibility

remain, the present research suggests that people can (and should) have a notable and long-term positive impact on the way in which people with learning disabilities experience the world. Increased understanding of and uptake of the qualities of accessible people will support a more inclusive society, with benefits to all.

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Sam Waterman for her invaluable contributions to this project, alongside Purple Patch Arts. This research was funded by the Leeds Doctoral Scholarship.

### Ethics Statement

The present study gained ethical approval from the Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee (Ethics ref: FAHC19-078). All co-researchers gave consent to take part in the project, and to be named co-authors on research outputs from this project.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>This characteristic was initially named 'authentic' but has since been revised, in consultation with the PRG, to 'trustworthy and authentic' to reflect the fact that these characteristics are intertwined. Trustworthiness was integral to the group's assessment of an individual's authenticity, and vice versa, authenticity reinforced the trustworthiness of the individuals the PRG encountered who were considered to be accessible.

### References

- Ahmad, W. 2012. "Barriers of Inclusive Education for Children With Intellectual Disability." *Indian Streams Research Journal* 2, no. 2: 1–4.
- Ali, A., A. Hassiotis, A. Strydom, and M. King. 2012. "Self Stigma in Family Carers: A Systematic Review." *Research in Developmental Disabilities* 33, no. 6: 2122–2140. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2012.06.013>.
- Anaby, D., C. Hand, L. Bradley, et al. 2013. "The Effect of the Environment on Participation of Children and Youth With Disabilities: A 313 Scoping Review." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 35, no. 19: 1589–1598.
- Attride-Stirling, J. 2001. "Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 1, no. 3: 385–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>.
- BILD. 2023. "Working Together Checker." Working Together Charter. [Bild-Working-Together-Checker.pdf](https://www.bild-uk.org/working-together-checker.pdf).
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2: 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.
- De Castro, M. G. C., A. Palazuelos, A. Corona, et al. 2023. "'Please Send Me the Link for Tomorrow, María' Human-Rights Based Participatory Research With People With Learning Disabilities via Zoom." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 51, no. 2: 260–268. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12511>.
- Chew, K. L., T. Iacono, and J. Tracy. 2009. "Overcoming Communication Barriers: Working With Patients With Intellectual Disabilities." *Australian Family Physician* 38, no. (1/2): 10–14.
- Clarkson, R., G. H. Murphy, J. B. Coldwell, and D. L. Dawson. 2009. "What Characteristics Do Service Users With Intellectual Disability



- Value in Direct Support Staff Within Residential Forensic Services?" *Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability* 34, no. 4: 283–289.
- Davies, J., and G. Matuska. 2018. "Workforce Development: Perspectives From People With Learning Disabilities." *Tizard Learning Disability Review* 23, no. 4: 165–172.
- Dedding, C., N. S. Goedhart, J. E. Broerse, and T. A. Abma. 2021. "Exploring the Boundaries of 'Good' participatory Action Research in Times of Increasing Popularity: Dealing With Constraints in Local Policy for Digital Inclusion." *Educational Action Research* 29, no. 1: 20–36.
- Dodevska, G. A., and M. V. Vassos. 2013. "What Qualities Are Valued in Residential Direct Care Workers From the Perspective of People With An Intellectual Disability and Managers of Accommodation Services?" *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 57, no. 7: 601–615.
- Estacio, E., M. Oliver, B. Downing, J. Kurth, and J. Protheroe. 2017. "Effective Partnership in Community-Based Health Promotion: Lessons From the Health Literacy Partnership." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 14, no. 12: 1550.
- Gray, B., and T. Kerridge. 2023. "Lived Experience Research in Learning Disabilities: The Understanding Inequalities Project From a Service User's Perspective." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 51, no. 4: 479–488.
- Haigh, A., D. Lee, C. Shaw, et al. 2013. "What Things Make People With a Learning Disability Happy and Satisfied With Their Lives: An Inclusive Research Project." *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities* 26, no. 1: 26–33.
- Howard, R., E. Phipps, J. Clabour, and K. Rayner. 2015. "I'd Trust Them If They Understood Learning Disabilities" Support Needs of People With Learning Disabilities in the Criminal Justice System." *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities and Offending Behaviour* 6, no. 1: 4–14. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JIDOB-05-2015-0011>.
- Kindon, S., R. Pain, and M. Kesby. 2007. *Participatory Action Research Approaches and Methods: Connecting People, Participation and Place*. Routledge.
- Kirby, M. L. 2023. "Exploring the Outcomes of Engagement With Arts-Based Learning for Adults With Learning Disabilities: A Participatory Action Research Project." Doctoral diss., University of Leeds.
- Kirby, M. L., J. Bartle, A. T. Barrett, et al. 2024. "The Purple Patch." <https://thepurplepatchcomic.wixsite.com/research/read-the-comic>.
- Listen, Include, Respect. n.d. "International Guidance for Inclusive Participation." Accessed December 8, 2025. <https://www.listenincluderespect.com/how-to-guides>.
- Mannion, J., L. B. Vincent, D. D. Kroeger, et al. 2025. "Researching Together: Researchers With and Without Disabilities Engage Across National and Interdisciplinary Boundaries." *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 53: 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bld.12634>.
- Mansell, J., and J. Beadle-Brown. 2012. *Active Support: Enabling and Empowering People With Intellectual Disabilities*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Mayan, M. J., and C. H. Daum. 2016. "Worth the Risk? Muddled Relationships in Community-Based Participatory Research." *Qualitative Health Research* 26 1: 69–76.
- McIntyre, A. 2007. *Participatory Action Research*. Sage Publications.
- Mencap. 2019. "New Research From Mencap Shows Bullying of People With a Learning Disability Leading to Social Isolation." <https://www.mencap.org.uk/press-release/new-research-mencap-shows-bullying-people-learning-disability-leading-social>.
- Nario-Redmond, M. R., A. A. Kemerling, and A. Silverman. 2019. "Hostile, Benevolent, and Ambivalent Ableism: Contemporary Manifestations." *Journal of Social Issues* 75, no. 3: 726–756. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12337>.
- Nind, M., and J. Seale. 2009. "Concepts of Access for People With Learning Difficulties: Towards a Shared Understanding." *Disability & Society* 24, no. 3: 273–287.
- Oliver, M. 2004. "The Social Model in Action: If I Had a Hammer." In *Implementing the Social Model of Disability: Theory and Research*, edited by C. Barnes and G. Mercer, 18–31. The Disability Press.
- Pelleboer-Gunnink, H. A., J. van Weeghel, and P. J. C. M. Embregts. 2021. "Public Stigmatisation of People With Intellectual Disabilities: A Mixed-Method Population Survey Into Stereotypes and Their Relationship With Familiarity and Discrimination." *Disability and Rehabilitation* 43, no. 4: 489–497. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2019.1630678>.
- Pettican, A., B. Goodman, W. Bryant, et al. 2023. "Doing Together: Reflections on Facilitating the Co-Production of Participatory Action Research With Marginalised Populations." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 15, no. 2: 202–219.
- Pinto, R. M. 2009. "Community Perspectives on Factors That Influence Collaboration in Public Health Research." *Health Education & Behavior* 36: 930–947.
- Pinto, R. M., M. M. McKay, and C. Escobar. 2008. "'You've Gotta Know the Community': Minority Women Make Recommendations About Community-Focused Health Research." *Women & Health* 47, no. 1: 83–104. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v47n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J013v47n01_05).
- Reeve, D. 2006. "Towards a Psychology of Disability: The Emotional Effects of Living in a Disabling Society." In *Disability and Psychology: Critical Introductions and Reflections*, edited by D. Goodley and R. Lawthom, 94–107. Palgrave.
- Russell, A. M. 2022. "Breaking the Cycle of Inequalities for People With a Learning Disability." *British Journal of General Practice* 72, no. 724: 510–511.
- Scior, K., and S. Werner. 2015. *Changing Attitudes to Learning Disability*. Mencap.
- Seale, J., and M. Nind. 2009. *Understanding and Promoting Access for People With Learning Difficulties*. Routledge.
- Selener, J. D. 1992. *Participatory Action Research and Social Change: Approaches and Critique*. Cornell University.
- World Health Organization. 2011. *World Report on Disability*.