

ADA Case Study

The impact of the ADA on Hull Truck Theatre



Image courtesy of Hull Truck Theatre

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Hull Truck Theatre

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Ruth Puckering

Director of Communications, Hull Truck Theatre



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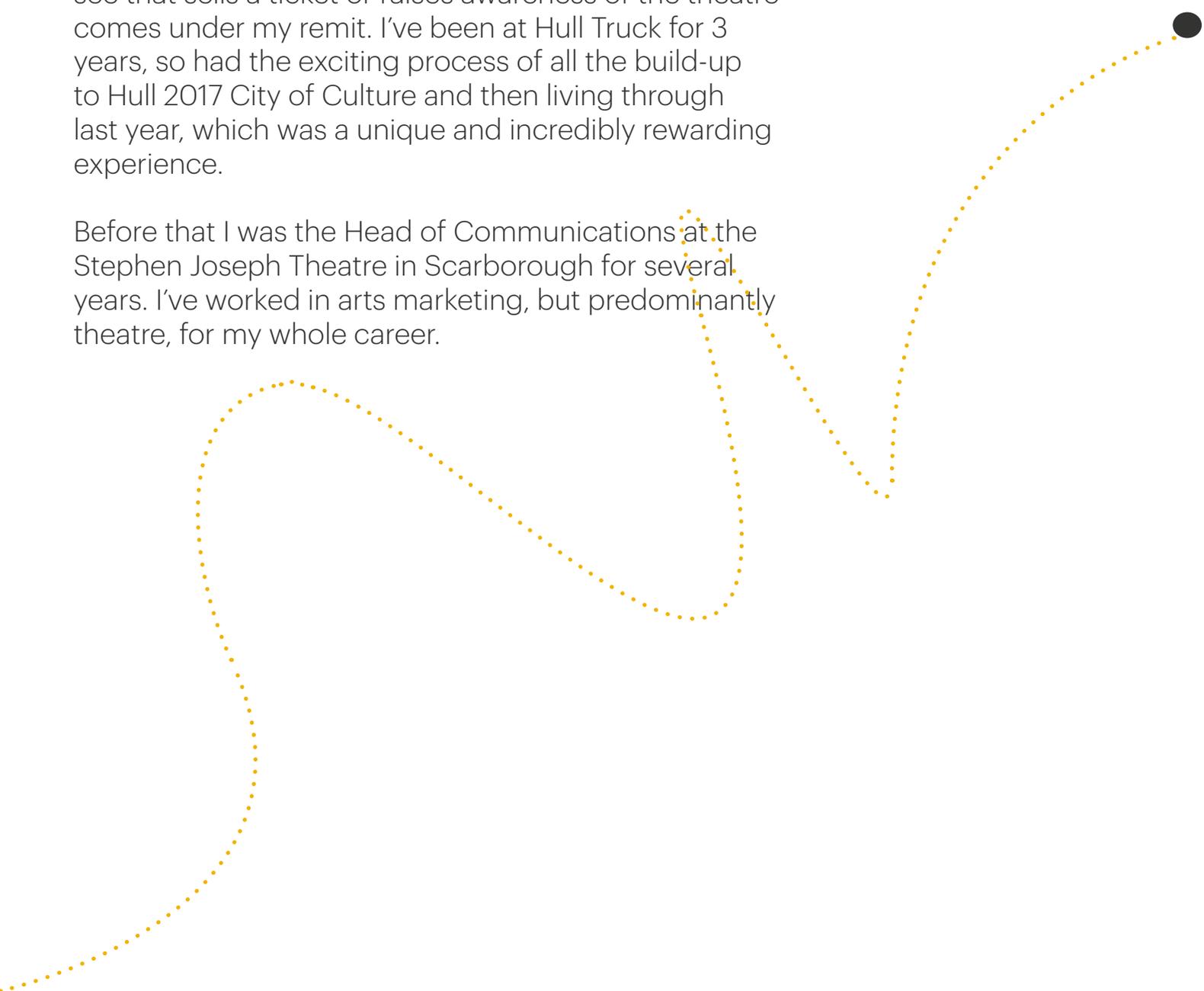
Introduction

Ruth Puckering and Hull Truck Theatre

I'm Ruth Puckering, the Director of Communications at Hull Truck Theatre. Hull Truck Theatre produce ambitious and culturally relevant theatre. Productions are presented both in our main auditorium and studio theatres as well as in the local community and on tour, alongside a vibrant engagement and learning programme. The theatre also presents a varied programme of work by visiting companies, including music, comedy, film and more.

The communications team has responsibility for all forms of marketing, box office, PR, press, advertising, community engagement etc. - anything that you can see that sells a ticket or raises awareness of the theatre comes under my remit. I've been at Hull Truck for 3 years, so had the exciting process of all the build-up to Hull 2017 City of Culture and then living through last year, which was a unique and incredibly rewarding experience.

Before that I was the Head of Communications at the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough for several years. I've worked in arts marketing, but predominantly theatre, for my whole career.



Why I applied for the Audience Diversity Academy

It was 2016 and we had identified two important aims: to increase the diversity of our audiences and to better monitor audience diversity.

The Audience Diversity Academy came along at the perfect time for me and for the organisation to address these challenges.

It helped that the course was entirely online. It was such a busy year preparing for 2017 that I think had there been lots of travel or contact hours away from the theatre, I would have struggled to manage it but the fact you could just move into a quiet room and do the training on-line was excellent.



Starting the journey

Quite quickly after joining, I was assigned Rachel Grosman as my Mentor. Rachel is the Ensemble Director of dog & pony dc, a theatre company based in Washington. A huge benefit of the online programme is that you can have mentors that are anywhere in the world.

It was great to have Rachel asking me some very basic questions like 'How is diversity perceived within your organisation?' I wasn't able to answer that question in a way that I felt was honest, I didn't want to be a lone spokesperson for the entire staff team. So rather than plunging right in and looking at audiences we took a step back to benchmark where the organisation was at that moment in time.

The first steps

I set up and ran a series of small focus groups with all of the Hull Truck team. They were cross department and cross level, in groups of 4 or 5 at a time, over about a 3 month period.

Working with Rachel, I designed them to be quite playful, very informal short sessions. Using drawing and writing as a method for recording what people were saying, I asked broad questions:

- 'How do you perceive diversity?'
- 'What does diversify to mean to you?'
- 'How do you see diversity at Hull Truck Theatre?'

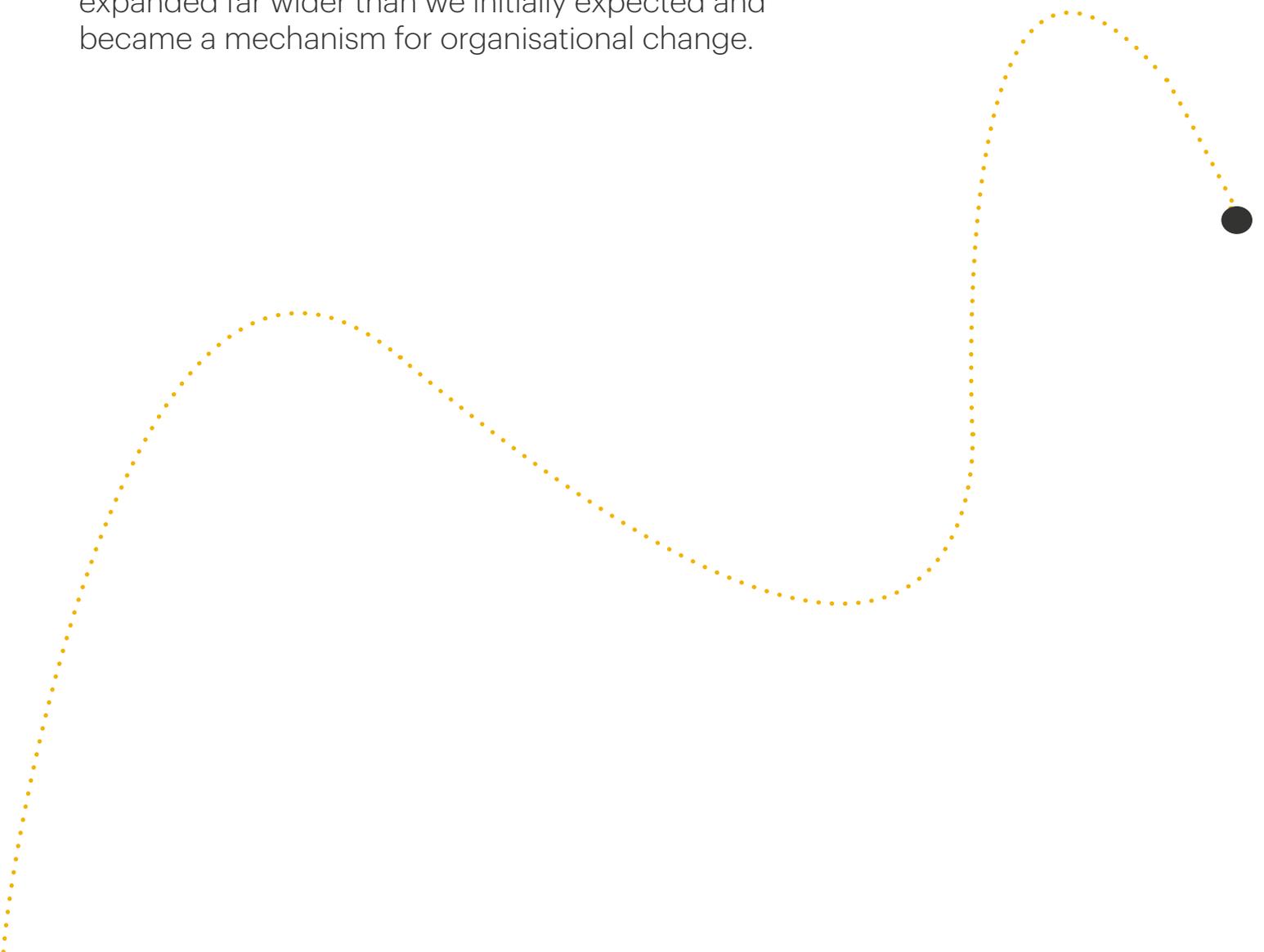
These questions allowed people to talk about their own personal reflections on diversity .

One of the themes that emerged was there was a broad understanding of diversity and that many people think about diversity in terms of themselves, so people would talk about ethnicity or sexuality, gender or socio economic status, and what they picked up on was very much led by their own experience. That seems obvious but actually it was a strong reminder of how very personal diversity is as an issue.

The other interesting thing that came out of those sessions was that a lot of people reported back how pleased they were to be asked. People kept saying 'It was great to be asked my opinion on that. I don't always feel that I have had the opportunity to express my opinion.'

Everybody's voice was equally important in the sessions and it turned out to be a great way for the theatre to get feedback and learn from the entire staff team.

What started as an audience-focused piece of work expanded far wider than we initially expected and became a mechanism for organisational change.



Forming the Inclusion Action Group

From those early focus groups we have formed what we now call the Inclusion Action Group (IAG), members of which continue to be from all levels and departments and represent the diversity of the organisation.

At first it was called the Creative Case Group, which had meaning to those of us who are in the Strategic Management Team or are used to Arts Council terminology, but for other staff members they had no idea what the Creative Case was or meant.

It made us think about the language we use with our staff and how we could be more open and accessible in the way we talk about things. We were conscious of the need to create an environment where everybody feels confident to question things they don't understand or don't agree with. The group felt that 'Inclusion Action Group' best reflected its intention, and the word Action showed our commitment to it not just being a talking shop.

The IAG started looking at access and inclusion across our organisation, whether that was the physical space or audiences or our recruitment process. We went back to our original Equality Action Plan (EAP), and asked ourselves

- where are we against the plan
- are we on track against the timelines
- is the plan still fit for purpose
- do we want to change anything?

The broad answer was that, whilst we had made good progress, there was still a lot to change and more ideas to be developed.

We held an all staff development day and one of the agenda items was facilitated by the IAG who explained the purpose of the group and what we wanted to achieve. The IAG chose to focus on two aspects of the EAP: recruitment and audiences. The entire staff team broke into two groups to talk about those two subjects, about how we might be more inclusive and how we might better monitor our progress in those areas.

Important changes

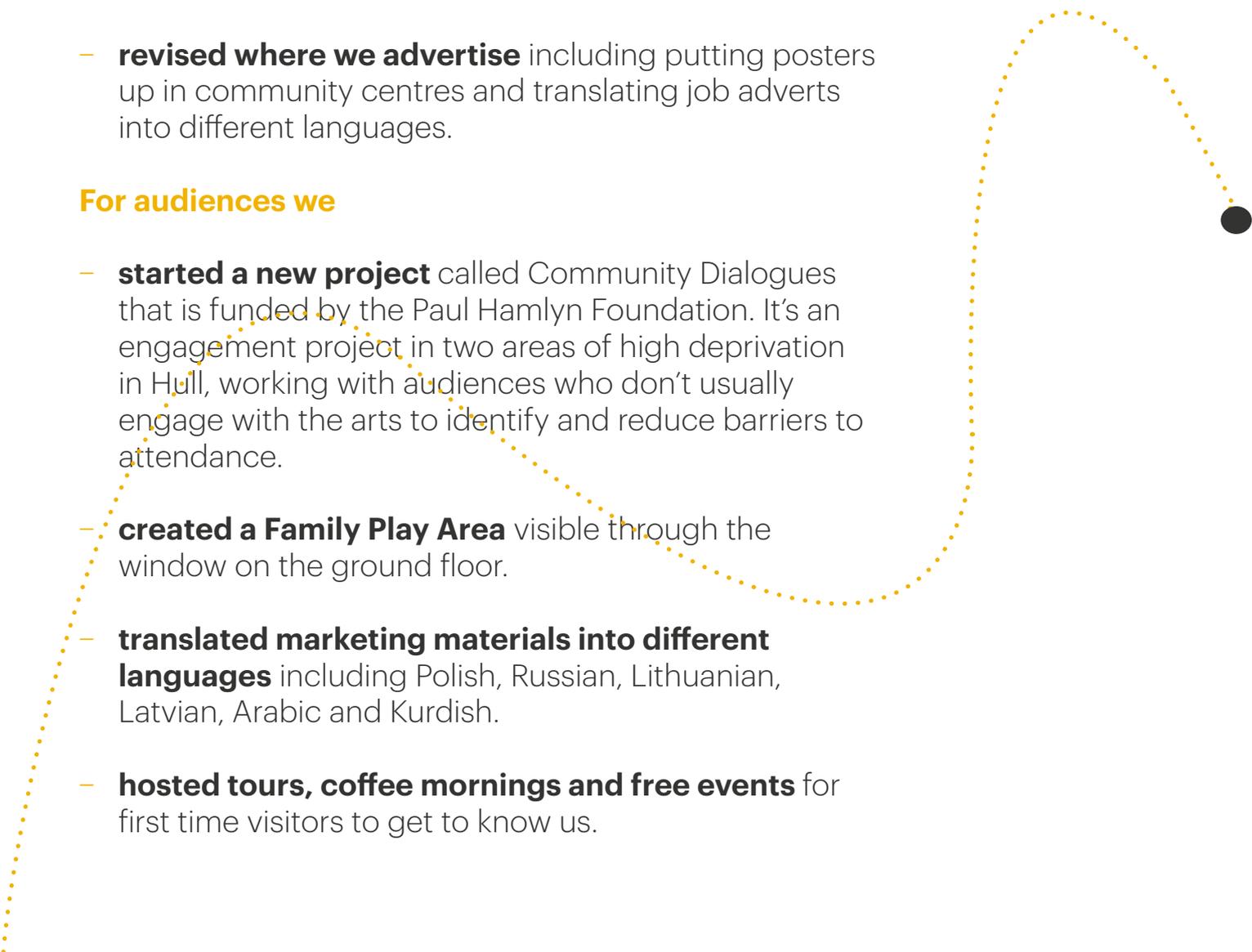
What began as my solo experience on the Audience Diversity Agency, an online audience focussed course, had bloomed into a new organisational working group.

Some key changes we made in the two areas discussed at the staff development day were:

For recruitment we

- **changed the information we send out**, so that documents contain only information directly relevant to the role, and the language we use is clear, simple and unintimidating.
- **reduced the formal application process** and ran interactive focus group sessions for customer facing roles.
- **defined what qualifications we actually need** for people to be able for people to deliver specific roles, and take into account lived experience.
- **revised where we advertise** including putting posters up in community centres and translating job adverts into different languages.

For audiences we

- **started a new project** called Community Dialogues that is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. It's an engagement project in two areas of high deprivation in Hull, working with audiences who don't usually engage with the arts to identify and reduce barriers to attendance.
 - **created a Family Play Area** visible through the window on the ground floor.
 - **translated marketing materials into different languages** including Polish, Russian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Arabic and Kurdish.
 - **hosted tours, coffee mornings and free events** for first time visitors to get to know us.
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The benefits of the IAG and the ADA

The creation of the IAG has given the theatre a confident forum in which to challenge, question and self-analyse. It's made diversity and inclusion a topic for positive discussion.

Everybody contributes at an equal level within the group, but the fact that both Mark Babych (Artistic Director) and Janthi Mills-Ward (Executive Director) are part of it means that it has senior buy-in and decision-making power, which is crucial for it to deliver the 'Action' of its title.

The IAG has become a central part of the organisation and its members have presented to the Board about its work and plans. This was an excellent opportunity for some staff members who have not attended a Board meeting to have their voices heard at this level.

The work of the IAG has fed into the company's artistic policy. The group has talked about some crucial questions, such as how we represent a modern Britain on our stages.

From the small seed of the ADA, the subject of inclusion has become part of all aspects of our work and discussions that take place across the theatre.

Throughout the programme I was supported and guided by my fantastic mentor, Rachel Grosman. It was so important to have someone, outside of the organisation, asking questions that you sometimes you either haven't thought of, or are avoiding, when you're in the midst of it all.

She was challenging but in a supportive, questioning way, pushing me by asking, 'Why are you going to do it like that? Why don't you make it more fun?' or 'How can you make it more accessible?'

The Future

The timing of the ADA meant that our subsequent work has fed into the new business plan that we recently completed as part of our ACE NPO status for 2018-22. Our new Equalities Action Plan 2018-22 was written by the IAG. That it is fully embedded as a shared commitment across the organisation is more effective than if the responsibility for inclusion rested with one individual or department. The IAG itself is flexible to allow for staff changes and the continued introduction of new voices, and I am confident and excited about its future.

Recommendations

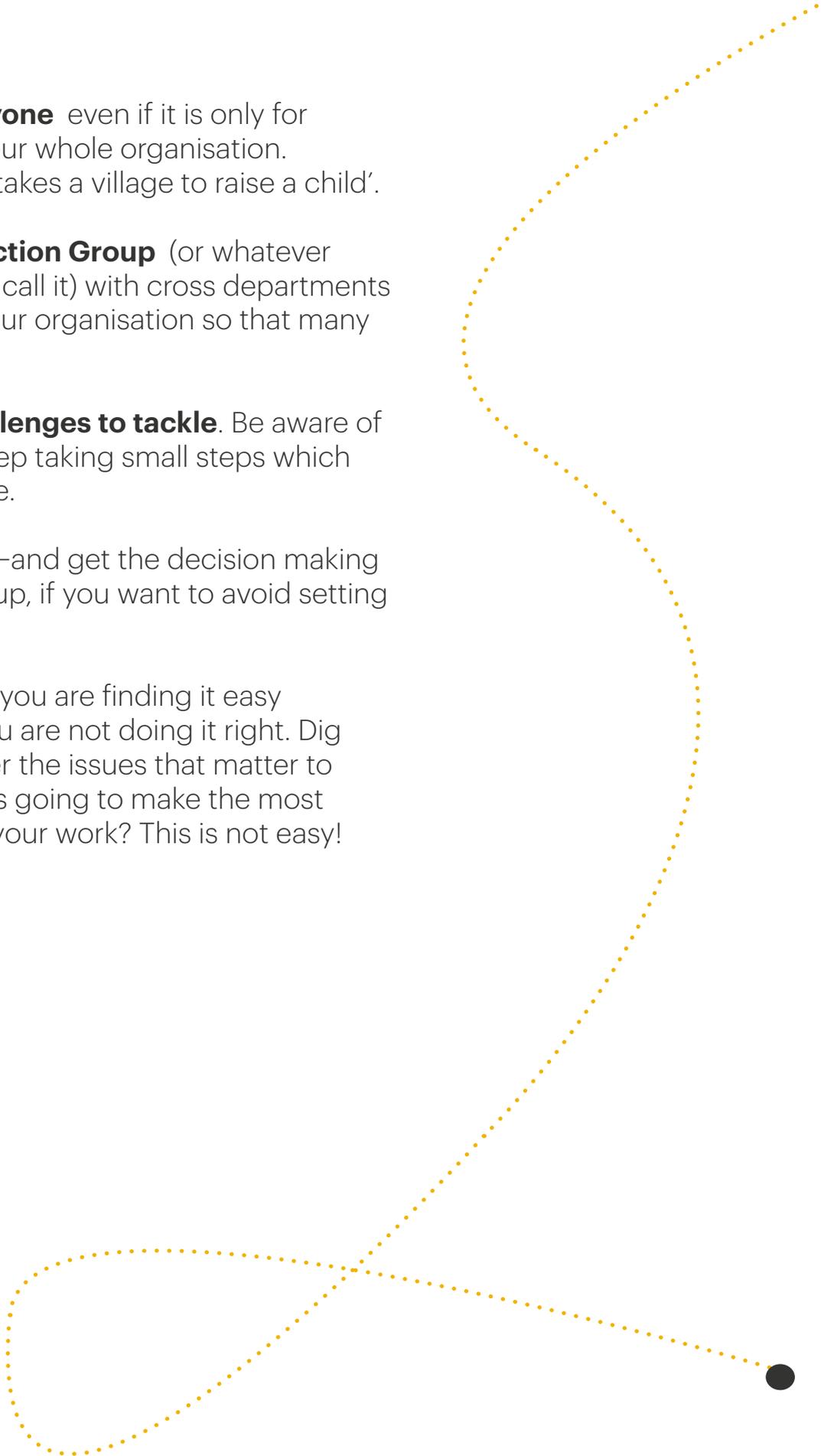
Start by talking to everyone even if it is only for 15 minutes, try include your whole organisation. Remember the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child'.

Set up your Inclusion Action Group (or whatever your group all decides to call it) with cross departments and across all levels of your organisation so that many voices are heard.

Identify one or two challenges to tackle. Be aware of the bigger picture but keep taking small steps which can make a big difference.

Get senior level buy in —and get the decision making people sitting on the group, if you want to avoid setting up a talking shop.

Agree that it is tough. If you are finding it easy consider that perhaps you are not doing it right. Dig deeper and try to uncover the issues that matter to your organisation. What is going to make the most difference to diversity in your work? This is not easy!





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