



Access at the Fringe

The Fringe is a big, busy, complex festival, founded over 75 years ago in the city of Edinburgh. It is the world's largest arts festival, and the third-largest ticketed event in the world. How does the Fringe Society make it a more accessible and inclusive place for D/deaf, disabled, and neurodivergent people?

We work in partnership with disabled-led organisations who help us identify the challenges; we listen to artists and audiences when they tell us something is not working; we support venues and artists to make their work and spaces more inclusive. Where possible we provide paid opportunities for D/deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists, for example in the creation of sensory resources, or through our year-round work with schools and community groups, and we work with young people with additional support needs to ensure they have the opportunity to experience this amazing festival.

Access bookings

The Fringe Society's access bookings service is for anyone who needs it. We remove as many barriers as we can that might prevent someone from booking and attending a show at the Fringe. Trained staff work on this team, and the service can be used to book specific access services – such as a hearing loop, or seating in relation to the location of a BSL interpreter – and extra assistance when at a venue, including help to avoid waiting in queues and busy environments. The access bookings service can also provide detailed access information on venues, make ticket bookings for wheelchair users, and give customers the option of booking complimentary personal assistance tickets.



Access bookings can be made in a variety of ways – by phone, email, WhatsApp or in person. We can support BSL users via the Contact Scotland BSL service.

We want to make booking a Fringe ticket a simple experience for everyone and are working on making booking online available for wheelchair users. In the meantime, we are proud to take bookings, including payment by secure link, via WhatsApp and email.

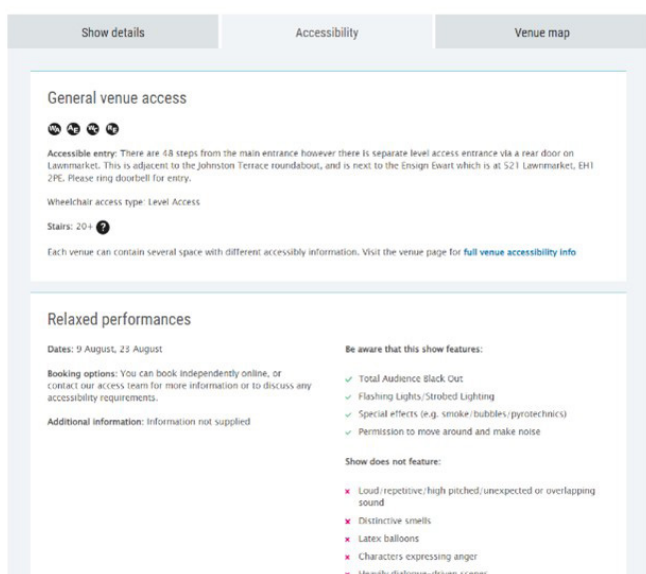
“I just wanted to send a message to say THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH for sorting out such incredible support for myself and PA! We saw so many incredible acts, as always!

You and your team really do make people’s experiences so much easier and less stressful! (as it can be quite a nightmare trying to negotiate new spaces that are particularly crowded)

Having not known that your team existed, I will definitely be singing your praises for the future!!”

(Access bookings customer, 2022)

Access information for shows and venues



The screenshot shows a website interface with three tabs: 'Show details', 'Accessibility', and 'Venue map'. The 'Accessibility' tab is active. It contains two main sections: 'General venue access' and 'Relaxed performances'. The 'General venue access' section includes icons for wheelchair access, hearing aid, and visual impairment, followed by text describing accessible entry points, wheelchair access type, and stairs. The 'Relaxed performances' section lists dates, booking options, and additional information, alongside a list of features to be aware of and features that are not included in the show.

Knowing if you can physically get into a Fringe show is fundamental to attending, so we collect access information for all Fringe venues and spaces at the point of venue registration. This includes checking and updating access information on more than 592 performance spaces, which is no mean feat! All the information we gather on venue and space access is available via the access bookings team and on edfringe.com. Customers can search for a show by accessibility and check detailed access information on each listing, finding out, for example, the number of steps to a particular space.

Venue Access Award

We work with Attitude is Everything, a disabled-led charity advising festivals and music venues on accessibility, on the Fringe Venue Access Award, which gives venues a step-by-step guide to making their spaces accessible to audiences and artists. We have worked with 34 venues since the programme launched in 2016. We redeveloped the award in 2023 to ensure that it gives the best advice possible, and to make it easier to use.

Accessible performances

Fringe artists will often make their work accessible to a wider audience by creating accessible performances. These can include BSL-interpreted, captioned, audio-described and relaxed performances, and may also include a touch tour. As this can require a lot of additional effort and cost for a Fringe artist, the Fringe Society does what it can to offer support. We work with Digital 4, the industry-leading theatre captioning and opera surtitle display company, to provide captioning equipment, support and training, along with access to free software to allow artists to create their own captioned performances. We also provide free access to audio description units. Our Artist Services team provides Fringe artists with advice on how to make their work accessible, and we provide artists with support in marketing their accessible shows – we list accessible performances on

our website, both on individual show listings and on a comprehensive listings page for accessible performances. We also work with Access Scottish Theatre to ensure Fringe companies can list their accessible work on this website as well.

Changing Places toilet hire

Each year the Fringe Society hires a Changing Places toilet, a larger-than-standard accessible toilet with additional equipment that can be used to help severely disabled people. This is made possible through partnership with the University of Edinburgh and Assembly Festival, who manage the installation and housekeeping of the facility throughout the festival.

Sensory backpacks



Photograph: David Monteith-Hodge

The Fringe can be an overwhelming place. Our extremely popular free sensory backpack scheme started in 2018 in response to suggestions from Fringe participants, and gives neurodivergent adults, young people and children access to a wide range of sensory tools which aim to make the festival more manageable.

People can choose from a variety of sensory support tools by using [an online form to pre-order what they need](#) for either home delivery or pick-up from the Fringe Box Office; drop-in collection is also available. There are 12 sensory resources to choose from, with all

items free to keep and take home apart from ear defenders. There are also five different bag options to choose from, including drawstring bags, backpacks and chest bags. We aim to make the sensory support scheme specific to each user's access needs and offer agency to individuals to choose their own support tools, rather being given a bag of generic resources which may not suit their needs.

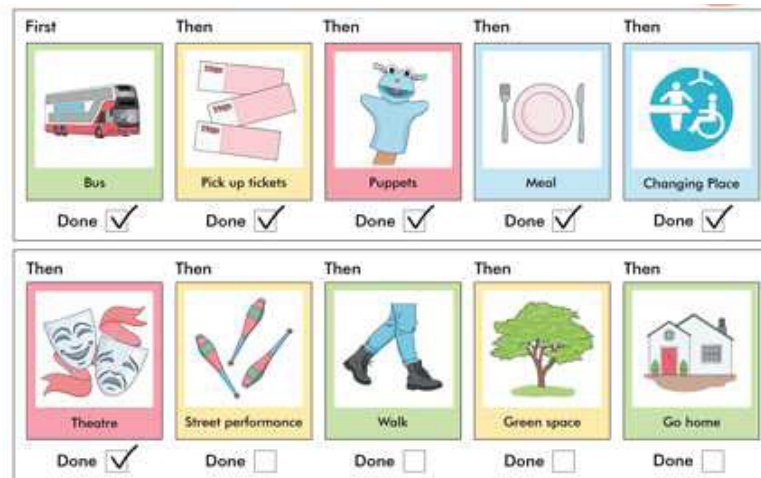
“We were very impressed with all the items in the pack and quality of them also. All items will be of great ongoing use to my little boy. The sunglasses have been a hit in this sunny weather! While visiting the Fringe he was able to use many of the items provided which made for a much more stress-free experience.

We would again just like to thank all for being able to access this resource and being allowed to keep the items for future use. This resource helped us lots and we think all involved have done a wonderful job!!”

(Sensory backpack user, 2022)

Sensory support resources

As part of the development of the sensory backpack project we are creating a bank of sensory support resources. The nature of the Fringe, with multiple venues and show options, makes developing a one-size-fits-all social story incredibly difficult. Instead, we are focusing on creating resources that users can adapt to suit their own needs.



The [Fringe visual timetable](#) is a tool designed to help people plan and construct their day so they can see a clear start and end. This is a strategy used by many people, particularly neurodivergent people and families, to manage anxiety in new or unfamiliar plans or routines. The timetable was designed by a neurodivergent artist to relate specifically to the Fringe environment and consists of 35 illustrated tiles which focus on transitions and genres of shows, as well as factoring in important rest and pause times.

Ready-made visual timetables can be collected alongside the sensory resources or downloaded from [edfringe.com](#) in both colour and black and white, to be constructed at home. This means audiences can become familiar with the resource and their schedule in advance of the festival. The visual timetable also includes five blank tiles, giving people the option to create their own illustrations if needed.

Soundscapes

[Drake Music Scotland](#) is Scotland's leading organisation creating music-making opportunities for disabled adults and children and those with additional support needs. We are collaborating with them to create an audio bank of online, downloadable resources that will support neurodivergent audiences to enjoy the Fringe. Recordings of soundscapes will focus on transitions throughout the festival, different sensory environments and spaces or key moments which neurodivergent people identify as needing more preparation for attending in-person festival events.



Photograph: David Monteith-Hodge

Support for artists

In April 2023, the newly launched Keep it Fringe fund distributed bursaries of £2,000 to 50 artists and companies bringing work to this year's Fringe. The intention behind the fund is to level the playing field for artists, providing the opportunity to reap the rewards of all the Fringe has to offer. 30% of the overall applicants to the fund identified as being disabled or having a health condition, and 48% of the successful applicants identified as disabled or having a health condition.

Keep it Fringe was supported by the Fleabag for Charity fund and donations to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society through individual donors and partnership with Edinburgh Gin.

Mental health support

The Fringe Society is partnering with Health in Mind and the Scottish Association for Mental Health to provide mental health support to Fringe artists throughout August. Health in Mind is one of Scotland's best-known and trusted mental health charities; they will be based at the Fringe Central: Artist Hub during the festival, offering one-to-one support for artists, workshops and targeted resources on [Fringe Connect](#), our digital platform for Fringe artists and arts industry.

The Scottish Association for Mental Health is sending their Wellbeing on Wheels bus to the Fringe this August. The bus was parked near St Giles' Cathedral for a weekend, offering mental health support to Fringe street performers and members of the public.

Training

With more than 300 venues taking part, staffing is a complicated aspect of the Fringe. To support as many workers as possible, we have developed an online training tool outlining everyone's responsibilities under the 2010 Equality Act. We make this available free of charge to Fringe venues and ensure that all Fringe Society staff complete this training before the start of the festival. We also work with Birds of Paradise, a disabled-led theater company who deliver in-person disability equality training for all permanent and seasonal staff at the Fringe Society.

BSL street events

The free street performances on the Royal Mile are world famous, and act as a gateway to the festival that's open to everyone. We work with local charity Deaf Action to provide BSL interpretation at the street events on selected days during the Fringe.



Photograph: David Monteith-Hodge

If you've been inspired by any of these ideas and think you can help the Fringe Society achieve any or all of our development goals, we would love to hear from you. For more information, email support.us@edfringe.com or call +44 (0)131 226 0036.