

OPEN FLOOR: INCLUSIVE DANCE CONVERSATIONS

SUMMARY

In October 2025, Luail hosted a series of in-person Open Floor conversations with practitioners who have lived experience of professional dance-making, participation, and advisory work in inclusive dance practice. These gatherings were an opportunity for Luail to develop a deeper understanding of inclusive dance practice on the island of Ireland, to inform and strengthen its EDI policy, and to focus its energies within its artistic programme and company operations going forward with the aim to increase visibility and promote diverse bodies.

Through these talks, we learned about some of the challenges, successes, and what the participants felt was missing within the inclusive dance community. The Open Floor initiative will allow Luail to engage with a wider representation of makers, artists, and audiences; supporting its mission to lead a future that transforms how dance is made, known, and experienced, and its vision for dance to be celebrated by everybody on the island of Ireland.



TIMELINE OF EVENTS

- **August 2025** – Inclusive Dance Conversation, Irish World Academy, University of Limerick
- **5 October 2025** – Open Floor Belfast, University of Atypical, Belfast
- **21 October 2025** – Open Floor Cork, Dance Cork at the Firkin Crane, Cork
- **23 October 2025** – Open Floor Dublin, Project Arts Centre, Dublin

ORGANISATION AND FACILITATION

The Open Floor conversations in October 2025 were organised by Cindy Cummings, in collaboration with Luail's Public Engagement Manager, Niamh Mongey. All sessions were facilitated by Cindy Cummings.

The Belfast conversation at the University of Atypical was delivered through Luail's partnership with and organised by Nicola Curry, Artistic Director of Maiden Voyage Dance.

Preceding these conversations, Cindy Cummings also participated in a day-long Inclusive Dance conversation in August 2025 at the Irish World Academy, University of Limerick, organised and hosted by Dr. Jenny Roche. The Academy is a partner organisation of Luail. This event engaged local stakeholders, dance faculty, and students, and was part of preparatory work toward the

development of a new Inclusive Dance module at the University of Limerick.

Across all three *Open Floor* conversations — in Belfast, Cork and Dublin — participants shared their individual artistic contexts and lived experiences of working within inclusive dance. While each conversation reflected local conditions and perspectives, common challenges emerged for dance makers and performers.

Key issues identified included a lack of visibility, limited resources, and insufficient opportunities to connect with each other and the wider dance sector. The conversations were guided by Cindy Cummings and structured around three core themes: **language, access, and capacity**, providing a shared framework for discussion and reflection across all locations.

PARTICIPANTS

- **Bobbi Byrne** – Dancer / Maker
- **Cindy Cummings** – Dancer / Maker
- **Niamh Mongey** – Luail
- **Liz Roche** – Luail
- **Sheena Kelly** – University of Atypical
- **Helen Hall** – Dancer/ Maker
- **Linda Fearon** – Dancer/ Maker
- **Talia McDowell** – Talia McDowell Dance
- **SoSo Ní Cheallaigh** – Multi-disciplinary artist
- **Nicola Curry** – Maiden Voyage Dance
- **Nuala McGreevey** – Maiden Voyage Dance
- **Maeve Kelleher** – Dancer / Teacher
- **Carmel McKenna** – All Irish Dance
- **Iona Pegler** – Inclusive Dance Cork
- **Kate Wilson** – Undercurrent
- **Susie Lambe** – Artist
- **Laura Sarah Dowdall** – Dancer / Maker
- **Vivian Brodie Hayes** – Luail Dance Deputy, Director Spring Moves
- **Louisa Sloan** – Inclusive Dance Cork
- **Mo Harte** – Access Consultant

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THE FINDINGS

This section outlines the key findings that emerged from the Open Floor conversations held in Belfast, Cork and Dublin in October 2025. Participants shared lived experiences of working within inclusive dance practices, highlighting common challenges and identifying areas for development across the sector. The discussions were structured around three thematic areas: language, access and capacity building.

1. LANGUAGE

Participants described language as an evolving and ongoing process that requires continual reflection, adaptation and responsiveness to the community it serves. There was strong agreement that openness, clarity and a willingness to learn are essential when navigating language in inclusive dance contexts.

Key concerns and challenges identified:

- The need to work with language on a case by-case basis, recognising that preferences and identities differ across individuals and contexts.
- The term inclusive was widely described as creating a sense of safety for makers dance artists.
- A shared desire to move away from medicalised terminology.
- Many participants expressed feelings of isolation and imposter syndrome, often linked to language and to not identifying as a "dancer" due to limited access to professional training or visibility for non-normative or "untrained" bodies.
- The impact and use of ableist language was discussed.
- Participants without disabilities expressed fear of causing offence, with agreement that asking respectful questions about preferred language is helpful and necessary.

- Ongoing questions around what constitutes a "professional dancer" and whether this definition can be expanded or reframed.
- Mixed responses to terms such as disabled dance artist or disabled performance artist, with some noting difficulties when language shifts in mainstream contexts.
- Terms such as seated dancer, chair dancer or wheelchair dancer are used by some.

2. ACCESS

Access was discussed as a holistic, embedded practice rather than an add-on or after-thought. Participants emphasised the importance of considering access from both the artist's and the audience's perspectives.

Key concerns and challenges identified:

- Access needs vary depending on context, space and individuals, and cannot be standardised.
- Inclusive work requires more time, with timelines shifting depending on the needs of the project and participants.
- Touring inclusively in Ireland presents significant challenges, requiring additional time, resources and planning.
- Recognition that there is no such thing as a fully accessible space.

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- In Northern Ireland, funding for inclusive dance work is often lower than for theatre, dance or music and is frequently categorised as participatory rather than professional practice.
- A need to address social narratives and access barriers in backstage areas for artists, crew and audiences.
- Strong interest in training opportunities for producers working inclusively.
- Emphasis on equity: understanding what different bodies need in different spaces.
- The importance of embedding access across spaces, productions and programming from the outset.
- The need for flexibility around "crip time", caring responsibilities and financial pressures.
- A call to celebrate the specific qualities of different bodies, rather than focusing solely on representation or presence.
- The importance of creating spaces where different bodies can make work that responds to individual needs.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS

Participants proposed the following actions to address the challenges identified:

3. CAPACITY BUILDING

Participants agreed that inclusive dance practice cannot happen in isolation. While time is a critical factor, resourcing and structural support are essential to building sustainable capacity across the sector.

Key concerns and challenges identified:

- The need for adequate funding and resources to support long-term capacity building.
 - Support for accessibility audits for buildings and venues.
 - The importance of collaboration and strengthening networks across the sector.
 - A lack of training opportunities, including access rider support, dramaturgy and peer-to-peer learning.
 - The value of having disabled people within teams, contributing to more genuinely inclusive environments.
1. Develop training pathways, masterclasses and professional meeting opportunities for disabled artists.
 2. A cohesive network of practitioners for peer support and shared events throughout the year.
 3. Expand and investigate co-funding for continuous professional development opportunities in inclusive dance.
 4. Invite presentations from national and international experts in the field.
 5. Develop a capacity-building and access toolkit for dance artists and producers.
 6. Funded training opportunities for dance makers and producers.
 7. Advocate for venues to improve backstage access for disabled artists and crew.
 8. Use more inclusive language in call-outs and opportunities to broaden participation.

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To reaffirm the summary outlined, the Open Floor conversations were intended to support Luail in developing a deeper understanding of inclusive dance practice on the island of Ireland, to inform and strengthen the organisation's EDI policies, and to create opportunities for meaningful connection and cohesion between the national dance company and inclusive dance communities.

As these conversations were designed as open forums for discussion, the subject matter extended beyond Luail's original impetus for convening them.

In response to the 8 recommendations outlined above, Luail has identified several areas where action is both possible and appropriate. In particular, Luail can address the first recommendation by considering the appointment of a disabled artist as Artist in Residence with the company in 2027.

Luail will also continue to be part of the conversation for improved access in theatres for all artists, audiences and participants and to develop work that offers equitable experiences for disabled audience members where possible.

Additional actions include establishing a WhatsApp networking group to support peer connection, inviting disabled choreographers, dancers and creative artists to engage with the company through teaching, creation and dialogue over the coming years, and commissioning an international disabled maker to work with the company.

Further commitments include strengthening inclusive language across communications to broaden participation, offering mentoring opportunities for artists working in inclusive practices, and programming workshops that support the company's ongoing learning and development in this area. All activity for 2026 and 2027 is outlined below.

Led by Luail's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan 2025, Luail has developed a more inclusive approach to making and sharing work in the following ways:

- In-person *Open Floor Conversations* in 2025
- Audio-description and a sensory tours in partnership with Dublin Dance Festival and Mo Harte for *Chora* at Bord Gáis and at Cork Opera House.
- Collaborated with Access Consultant Mo Harte on *REVERB* who hosted sensory tours at Linenhall in Mayo for 12 children from St Anthony's Special School, and for over 80 young people at St Mark's Special School in Co. Kildare. We also produced a *Know Before You Go* guide to familiarise people with the performance beforehand.
- Co-commissioned *Moonlight Dream* – a work for young audiences – created by Maiden Voyage Dance; Luail's foundational partner in Northern Ireland.
- Commenced conversations with Project Potential Access Manager at Project Arts Centre, to discuss future access possibilities.
- Created a *Familiarisation Pack* for *Dancehall*.
- *REVERB* a commission by Luail created by Sarah Golding was developed for young audiences, we also had the opportunity to bring in schools with additional needs at Linenhall in Mayo, at An Táin in Dundalk, and at Riverbank Theatre in Newbridge in Co. Kildare.
- *Dance Corner*, by Dylan Quinn brought dance to people in unexpected places across the 9 counties of Ulster, bringing 37 performances of *Dance Corner* to 21 locations, engaging with over 9,000 spectators with over 90,000 people encountering dance in their daily lives.



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2026 LUAIL PROPOSED ACTIVITIES

- **Open Floor at SpringMoves** — Luail with SpringMoves Dance Festival will present *The Arc of a Heart Shaped Curve*, a new dance piece performed by Sighle Hennessy and Cindy Cummings. Directed by Steve Batts, with live music by Dave Boyd. This will be followed by a Q&A with the artists, and time for discussion and networking.
- **Audio Description Report** with Project Arts Centre Project Potential and Access Manager.
- **Exploring Touch Tours, and ISL** with Luail Artist in Residence, Amanda Coogan in 2026 and 2027.
- **Know before You Go** guides created for all of Luail's productions.
- **Supporting Inclusive Dance** Artist Laura Sarah Dowdall to lead a workshop for VI and sighted community members alongside professional performers and makers interested in exploring inclusive dance practice.
- **Travel Bursaries** offered at **SpringMoves Dance Festival**.
- **Travel Bursaries** offered to invited artists **in collaboration with Undercurrent Moving Together showcase**.
- **Supporting Inclusive Dance Artists with in-kind marketing**.
- **Luail will partner with Crash Ensemble, Maiden Voyage Dance and artists working in inclusive dance** to provide over 100 hours of online mentoring. Participants will be offered mentorship across all aspects of the partner organisations. This opportunity will be aimed at people working in the arts and will take place in Summer/ Autumn 2026. Three fully resourced mentorships are planned for winter 2026.
- **Open Floor WhatsApp group** — a space for artists and arts workers to share inclusive events and connect.
- **Open Floor: Focus On** — monthly profiling of Inclusive Dance Artists through Luail's online channels.
- **Inclusive Language Review** — Luail will review workshop and professional development callouts to include more accessible language.