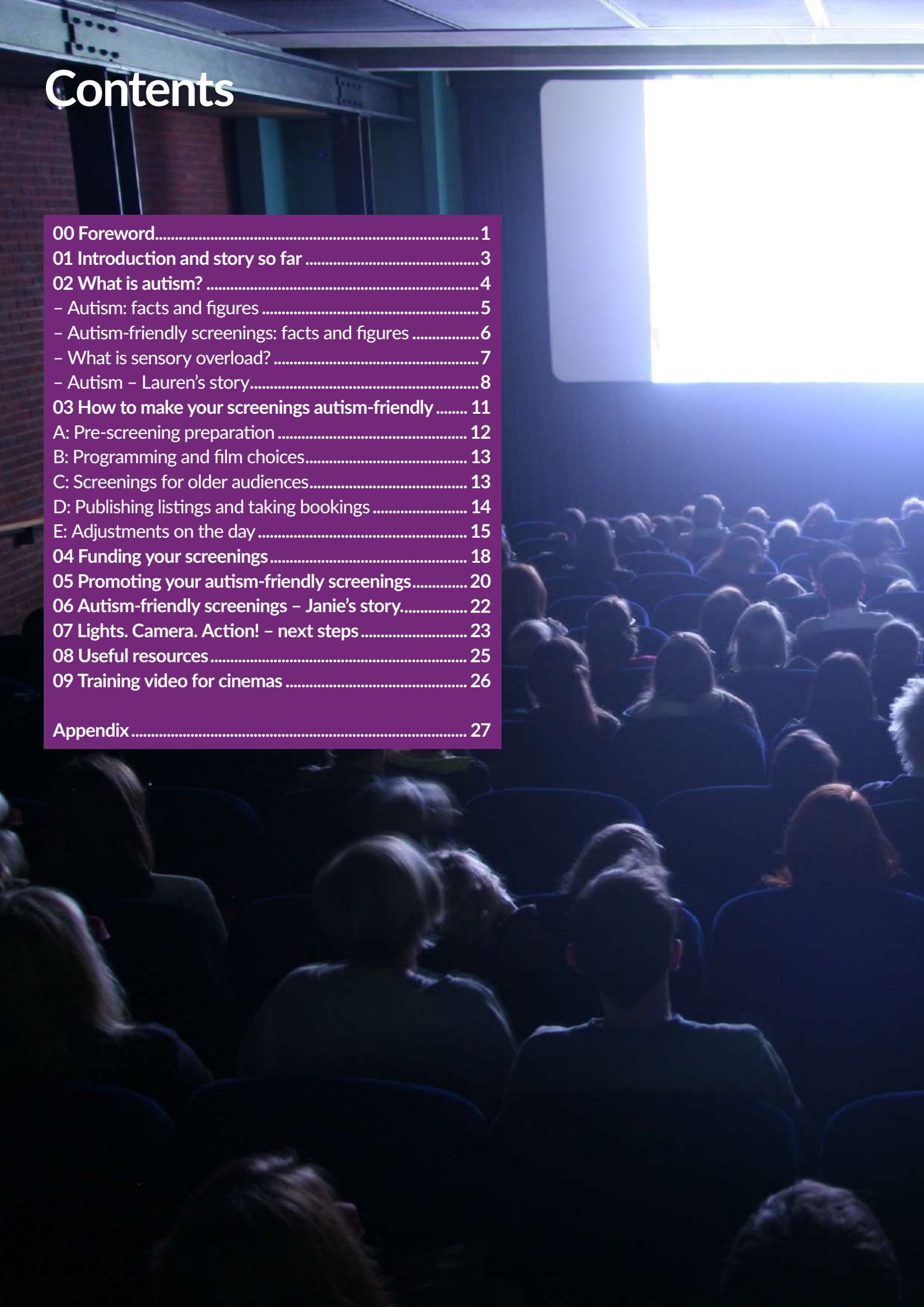


Autism-friendly screenings: A guide for cinemas



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Every parent of an autistic child knows the slightly panicky feeling that comes with inappropriate behaviour in a public space. My son will happily snatch a bag of crisps from a stranger's hand, or make exuberant shrieking noises whenever or wherever he feels like it; thankfully, he has stopped removing all his clothes whenever he spilled a single drop of water on himself.

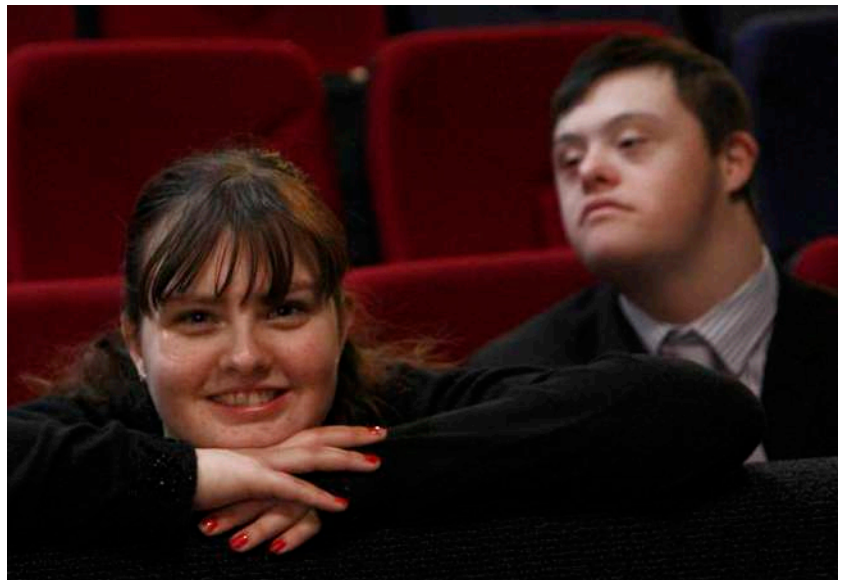
Expeditions anywhere might be cut short at any time, because the enjoyment of neurotypical people would be impaired. Is that right? I don't know. Those who pay good money to see movies and pantomimes want to be able to hear, to enjoy themselves without distraction. On the other hand, noisy autistic kids then become the problem of carers and parents, when really, of course, it should simply be a part of life, a shared problem – what does it matter if a couple of lines of dialogue are missed, compared to the vital need, for inclusion?

But once in a while it is a pleasure both for autistic people, and for those in their life, to go somewhere where they know that nobody will be flummoxed by, or disapproving of, noises and movements that are completely natural to everyone touched by autism, and a relief to be in a place where those running the event know roughly what to expect and how to cope. Those screenings are for the autistic and non-autistic alike: there are many families who never go to the cinema because everything is too much hassle. Care can be hard to find, so even non-autistic siblings can be affected, and this initiative may provide the chance for a rare family outing, a couple of hours of straightforward, uncomplicated joy and distraction for members of our community who can't take these things for granted. I'm happy to know these screenings exist. I hope there are many more, the length and breadth of the country, for years to come.

Nick Hornby
April 2019

Photo by Miriam Douglas





01

Introduction and story so far

Back in 2011, Dimensions and the UK Cinema Association joined forces to help introduce regular autism-friendly screenings to the UK, developing the work begun by Picturehouse Cinemas in collaboration with National Autistic Society (NAS) in 2009.

ODEON was one of the first UK cinema companies to roll out the delivery of autism-friendly screenings, in over 40 sites across the country. Over 3,000 guests attended those screenings, since which time they have grown tremendously in terms of availability and popularity.

2016 marked the fifth anniversary of national autism-friendly screenings in the UK. In those first five years, there were 280,000 visits to 200 screenings across 300 sites operated by ODEON, Cineworld, Vue, Picturehouse and Showcase Cinemas, with many more independent cinemas picking up the mantle and running regular programmes of their own.

“The autism-friendly screenings are brilliant! They allow families to access an activity they might not have been able to access. My little one went to a number of normal screenings, but it was just too much for her. Now she loves the cinema.”

With five national cinema chains, and a number of independent exhibitors, now partnering with Dimensions and committed to high quality, regular screenings, cinema is becoming increasingly accessible for guests with sensory sensitivity. Through this training, we aim to support more cinemas in the delivery of autism-friendly screenings.

The UK Cinema Association, supported by Dimensions and the BFI Film Audience Network, have produced this guide on how best to deliver and promote autism-friendly screenings at your cinemas. We hope you find it useful and it inspires you to consider putting on your own autism-friendly screenings.

Whilst this guide predominantly focuses on autism – and screenings are therefore referred to as autism-friendly screenings (AFS) – we know many cinemas use the terms ‘relaxed’ or ‘sensory friendly’. Whatever the name used, such screenings can benefit anyone who finds standard screenings overwhelming.

People with a broad range of cognitive conditions can look at what these screenings do differently to see if they might be of benefit to them.

Key characteristics

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person understands the world around them and how they communicate.

This means people can have difficulty with:

- **social communication**
 - making their thoughts understood
- **social interaction**
 - knowing social rules
- **social imagination**
 - predicting what others think
- **processing sensory input**
 - lights, sounds, smells and textures can be too overwhelming.

“Sometimes, me and Isaac curl up together in the chairs or lie on the floor. I can hear the patter of feet as children run around. It’s nice, it doesn’t disturb us, we’re in our own moment and they are part of it.”



Photo: Into Film

Autism: facts and figures

Autism

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how a person senses and understands the world, as too much sensory input can be overwhelming. Autism affects everyone differently.

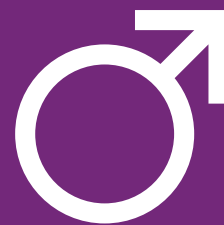
1 in 100

More than 1 in 100 people in the UK have autism – that's around 700,000.*

www.autism.org.uk

2.7 million

Autism touches the lives of 2.7 million people every day.



Autism appears to affect more men than women, but research shows women tend to 'mask' it and sometimes aren't diagnosed until adulthood.*

www.spectrumnews.org/features/deep-dive/costs-camouflaging-autism/



It might seem that autism is becoming more common, but experts suggest this is down to changes in diagnosis and understanding.*

“Some people use autism-friendly screenings as a transition into regular screenings, but this isn't possible for everyone.”

Autism-friendly screenings: facts and figures

280,000

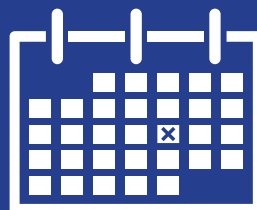
In its first five years, autism-friendly screenings with Dimensions had 280,000 visits.

600+

Today, there are over 600 different cinema sites hosting autism-friendly screenings.

60%

The sector saw a 60 per cent growth from 2015 to 2016 following the awareness campaign run by UKCA and Dimensions, where over 1,500 autism-friendly screenings took place over one week in support of World Autism Awareness Day.



Cinemas usually hold one autism-friendly screening per month at the same time and (generally) in the same screen.



Cars 3, *Minions* and *Incredibles 2* are some of the most popular past films, and National Theatre Live screenings of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night Time* had to run encores to meet demand.

+1

In April 2017, staff at ODEON Trowbridge made national news when they put on an extra screening so a guest wouldn't miss out.



In February 2017, Glasgow Film Theatre became the first cinema in the UK to win an autism-friendly award after beginning their Access Club screening programme in April 2015.



Parents often say the most important thing is they don't feel judged.

What is sensory overload?

People with autism can find it difficult to suppress background input, such as noise, lights, smells and thoughts to focus on making decisions or listening to your instructions. They also experience sensory input differently, for example a light touch on the arm might feel like a prickly feather for some people. Others may experience it differently.

For example – imagine trying to do long division in your head in the rain at a heavy metal concert. Too much input can cause sensory overload, and is why routine, a relaxed atmosphere and clear instructions and choices can really help your guests with autism.

“Although I do not have autism, I went to an autism-friendly screening because I have hypervigilance, anxiety and hallucinations... The film started straight away so I was not sitting anxiously... The lights were on so I could keep an eye on hallucinations, the sound was not booming and I could be myself without anyone staring... Thank you, the cinema is now accessible.”

Sensory overload is when a person becomes overwhelmed and unable to cope. To onlookers this often appears as a ‘meltdown’ or a ‘shutdown’. In a meltdown the person expresses their distress externally and physically, such as thrashing around on the floor, crying or shouting. With a shutdown a person withdraws and may try to hide, hum or rock.

The result of a sensory overload can be very different but essentially a person is unable to communicate and behave as they normally would.

If you see someone having a sensory overload you shouldn't try to intervene. But if they don't have anyone with them you can help by:

- asking if they need help, but not asking lots of questions
- trying to ensure that they can't hurt themselves or others if possible
- trying to divert onlookers away from them
- offering them a quiet place to go if possible.

Autism – Lauren’s story

My name is Lauren, I’m 18 and have Asperger Syndrome, which is a form of autism.

I love Japanese films, especially animé and I am studying film-making at college.

I know loads about film and love going to the cinema but sometimes it would help if people knew a little about me to help me have a good time. I have sensory processing disorder and for me that means that I experience sensory input much greater than others.

“Sounds are louder, smells are stronger and lights are brighter. So it makes going to public places very difficult and can make me anxious and exhausted.”



I have selective mutism which means that I can talk but find it difficult to speak to strangers, particularly when stressed. My younger brother and sister are also autistic but they experience this in different ways, so I have thought about how to help people with autism access the cinema.

The following pages have some tips on making autism-friendly screenings a success.

“ODEON first launched autism-friendly screenings in 2011 at 40 cinemas and have continued to screen monthly showings since, growing to over 100 cinemas participating each month in the UK and Ireland. We understand that our cinemas are large, busy and exciting environments and for some this creates barriers or results in sensory overload. We’ve worked with Dimensions and the UK Cinema Association to develop a regular programme of screenings designed to create a relaxed and safe environment for those who need it with subtle adjustments made to make our guests feel more comfortable. ODEON are proud to participate in AFS and support our guests with autism with these performances.”
Calum Corser, ODEON Cinemas



Here are Lauren’s tips for autism-friendly screenings:

Eye contact

Don’t expect eye contact – it’s not always comfortable and autistic people can find it hard to concentrate on the conversation.

Listen

Don’t assume silence is because of a lack of understanding. Some autistic people can find it difficult to talk, while others can talk quite a lot about topics or areas they have an interest in or know a lot about.

Patience

Autistic people can find it hard to block out background noise, lights and colours to focus on the conversation, so allow at least six seconds of thinking time.

Help them to choose

Lots of options can be overwhelming so instead of saying “What would you like?” perhaps start by asking “Would you like a fizzy or still drink?” and then move on to food, “Would you like salted or sweet popcorn?”

Try not to give too much information if it’s not necessary and give information in advance.

Help plan

Try to be specific but don’t make promises you can’t keep, for example understating the length of the queue.

Empathy

Some people can say hurtful or rude things when stressed but please don't take it personally, they might be having trouble communicating their distress. Show understanding. This may be the only time they are able to go out together because they can be themselves without fear of judgement.

Also autistic people can have very keen empathy for others and some may find emotional scenes in films distressing, so be aware of the film content and don't just rely on its age rating.

“Autism-friendly cinema screenings help people feel more relaxed and confident, so you can fully immerse yourself in the film without worrying about being judged.”

Don't rely on words

Some autistic people do not communicate using words. Learn basic Makaton* such as drink, food and toilet. Or use physical objects for reference, such as a bag of sweets. This can help reduce stress as the focus is on the object or hands and not on the individual's face.

Think literally

Avoid jargon, slang and metaphors. Just simply say what you mean.

Independence

Put up plenty of signs and provide information before the screening to reduce the need to ask for help.

Personal space

Some people with autism do not like being touched, it can cause a lot of stress and anxiety.

Everyone's experience of autism is different so be aware that some people find it hard to understand personal space and they might want to hug you or take your hand. If you don't want this then please gently and firmly tell them what they should do instead.

*For more info about Makaton, please visit: www.makaton.org

03

How to make your screenings autism-friendly

There are a wealth of possible adjustments to help make your cinema autism-friendly and inclusive for your guests, not only with autism but also other learning disabilities and cognitive disorders.

This guide outlines the recommended adjustments that can make your cinema screening autism-friendly. The more of these adjustments you can put in place, the more accessible (and popular) your screenings will become.

Adjustments that are mandatory to qualify as an autism-friendly screening are highlighted using the word **'must'** in the text.

Remember, while they are called autism-friendly, these screenings should be open to anyone who feels they will benefit from the adjustments.

Some people use autism-friendly screenings as a transition into regular screenings, but this isn't possible for everyone.

These guidelines are broken down into:

- A: Pre-screening preparation**
- B: Programming and film title choices**
- C: Hosting screenings for older audiences**
- D: Publishing listings and taking bookings**
- E: Adjustments on the day**

“Black Moon Film Club has screened in arts venues such as the Black Box in Belfast, the Nerve Centre in Derry/Londonderry, in pubs and clubs in Lurgan and Enniskillen and community venues such as Involve House in Magherafelt. We have hosted events such as a sing-a-long double bill of *Grease* and *Little Shop of Horrors*, the original *Hairspray*, *The Breakfast Club*, the *Back to the Future* trilogy and Japanese animé classics such as *Howl's Moving Castle*, as well as screening *The Lego Movie* at The Hive in Belfast as part of Disabled Access Day.”

Black Moon Film Club



“We went through a period of significant research and development with the group who selected the film for the launch screening, delivered an access audit of the cinema in terms of sensory sensitivities and wider access issues and established a new format for an accessible film screening at Gulbenkian. The format included lights being kept at a low level, lower sound levels, no trailers or adverts, assistance to help find seats and allowance for increased levels of movement and noise. These were advertised in advance as part of the copy and on the flyer.”

Jess Thomas, Gulbenkian



A: Pre-screening preparation

Preparing for a trip out can be stressful for families or individuals with autism. Their trip to the cinema might involve weeks of preparation and many are likely to be apprehensive on the day of the screening.

Provide as much information as possible in advance. This will help guests to prepare and will reduce stress and anxiety.

To make their experience as seamless as possible, consider providing:

- Maps and photos of the cinema, showing where to buy tickets and drinks, which screen the film will take place in and where the nearest toilet is.
- Information about ticket prices and discounts available, e.g. do you accept the CEA Card?
- Food menus and concessions including serving sizes and prices.
- Social stories. A social story is something people with autism may use to prepare for their trip to the cinema. It clearly outlines what they can expect from the day including photos, times and even the plot of the film. A template is available on the Dimensions website: www.dimensions-uk.org/autismfilms
- A walk-through of the cinema and physical journey to the screen (a short video showing what to expect when they arrive) can be extremely helpful.
- Contacts and/or descriptions for who they can talk to before, during or after the screening and how they can identify that member of staff.

B: Programming and film choices

- Films **must** be programmed at least four weeks in advance, so guests have time to prepare.
- Choose films that don't have too many fluctuations in light and sound.
- Avoid films that could be considered as presenting a risk to people with photo-sensitive epilepsy.
- Consider forming an advisory programming committee or talking to people with autism to help select a suitable programme. Run your shortlist past these individuals or groups and take on board their advice and suggestions with an open mind.
- Consider what other cinemas in the local area are offering: are there already multiple autism-friendly screenings of the same film or multiple screenings at a similar time? Perhaps you can offer some variety while trying not to clash with their screenings.
- Show the screening at a quieter time of day to avoid hustle and bustle, but think about what is accessible for the intended audience. For example, Sunday mornings are often a popular choice for family-friendly autism-friendly screenings, but for people coming with residential carers a weekday might be easier.

“Absolutely love autism-friendly films. My son looks forward to it and now another cinema has come on board he has more choice. Thank you.”

C: Screenings for older audiences

Currently, most autism-friendly screenings are targeted at families and young children. There is demand for films more suited to an older audience, but guests are more likely to attend if they are consistent and regular.

Consider films for older audiences or people with specialist interests. When choosing a film, think about the content and highlight any moments in advance that may cause stress or anxiety. For example, sudden changes in volume or a noticeably quieter scene can be stressful for some.

It's possible that your local area has support groups, home education groups or film and media students or clubs. They can tell you exactly the type of film they'd be interested in seeing (and when), and working with them will also develop a relationship and trust with the audience.

D: Publishing listings and taking bookings

- Publish the film and date at least four weeks in advance, to give guests time to prepare.
- Provide guidance about how to book for the film, e.g. how far in advance can guests book? Can they add a CEA Card to their online booking? Are phone bookings available?
- Explain that seats are unreserved.
- Promote your screenings on www.accessiblescreeningsuk.co.uk
- Communicate your booking procedure clearly on your website.
- Where possible, provide a film synopsis (or a link to) with key plotlines and possible triggers:
 - If there is a ‘short’ film (usually with Disney Pixar films) before the feature
 - If there are any sudden or unexpected changes in lighting (such as strobing)
 - If there are any sudden or unexpected changes in sound levels (such as explosions or sudden silences)
 - If there are any potentially upsetting or confusing scenes – even those that could be considered mild might be upsetting for guests with autism who feel strong empathy
 - The BBFC’s Insight reports provide information about these factors: www.bbfc.co.uk

“We’ve been doing autism-friendly screenings – and schools autism-friendly screenings – at Picturehouse Cinemas for over 12 years now. They are an important part of our commitment to make our cinemas welcoming and accessible to all, and we strive to ensure that our autism-friendly screenings make what can be a stressful experience into an inclusive and enjoyable one.”
Leah Byrne, Picturehouse Cinemas



“The Into Film Festival is a celebration of the diversity of film and as such aims to attract as diverse a group of attendees as possible. We remain committed to ensuring that the provision and promotion of autism-friendly screenings are central to the festival programme. 40,000 attended these screenings in 2018 and the feedback from teachers and young people is always very positive.”

Sam Wilson, Into Film

Photo: Into Film



E: Adjustments on the day

You must:

- Reduce the sound level to 4.5. Be flexible, this might still be too loud for some people.
- Remove/lower the volume of background music in foyer and café areas.
- Leave the house lights on low, and consider minimising your foyer lighting where this doesn't compromise safety.
- Not play any pre-feature trailers or adverts. But perhaps have a countdown and a holding slide promoting AFS and the film up on the screen
- Start the film promptly at the time advertised.
- Only fill the cinema screen to (a maximum of) 75% capacity.
- Allow guests to sit where they choose, regardless of the seat allocation requirement in booking tickets. Ensure guests are made aware of this at the time of booking, and once they're at the cinema.
- Allow guests to take their own food and drink into the screening, and provide food containers to minimise rustling packets.
- Allow guests to use non distracting aids such as personal devices, ear defenders, fidget spinners and chewable jewellery etc.
- Allow guests to move around the screen and change seats. NB: but make clear that running isn't allowed.
- Clearly signpost from the cinema entrance through to the screen and highlight key locations, such as the foyer and the toilets.
- Turn off hand dryers in the closest toilet and provide paper towels.
- Introduce your screening and explain the autism-friendly set-up to the audience, in case there are any visitors who don't recognise they are in an autism-friendly environment.
- Assign a member of staff to stay in the cinema screen for the first five minutes of the film, and return regularly, to ensure all adjustments are in place and guests are comfortable. This team member can also warn guests of any scenes that could cause distress – such as storyline or sudden changes in lighting, sound or tone of the film.

“I have taken my grandson who is autistic to several autism-friendly screenings and they are fantastic for the children and parents.”

Where available

- Provide a quiet area where guests can relax and calm down either before, during or after the screening. Provide soft mats and bean bags for those who prefer to lie down.
- Hold every autism-friendly screening in the same screen.
- Hold the autism-friendly screening in a screen close to an accessible toilet.
- If your screening is the first of the day, open concessions earlier and make sure the cinema doors are open in enough time for people to book tickets, buy snacks and choose where to sit before the film starts.
- Put on extra staff for the screening and open extra tills, particularly if it's a popular film or the cinema is expected to be busy.

“The best thing for us is that they allow us to do something regular, as a family, rather than as one parent with a child each.”

Going the extra mile

- Appoint a member of staff to be your cinema's autism champion, making themselves available for extra guest support and raising awareness.
- Invite local support groups to promote the event and have a stand in the foyer to talk to families.
- If a guest seems particularly nervous when enquiring or booking, or if they ask, take them on a short private tour of the cinema before the autism-friendly screening and talk them through the adjustments. This will help them familiarise themselves with the environment and what to do when they get there.
- If you see someone having a meltdown or sensory shutdown, clear the area of potential hazards and try to make the environment less stimulating. Ask the person who is with them, or wait for them to calm down, and ask if there's anything you can do to help.
- Host extra autism-friendly screenings and events during your local school holidays or during World Autism Awareness Month.

Remember

- These screenings aren't exclusively for people with autism – anyone who feels they will benefit from the adjustments should be welcome to attend. Some cinemas call them 'relaxed' screenings – but always try to minimise the risk of confusion as this could imply they don't have specific sensory friendly adjustments.
- Guests attending an autism-friendly screening should be made aware and asked to respect the environment of the screening.
- Guests do not need to provide evidence of diagnosis.
- Friends and families are welcome too, though be sensitive to the impact large groups can have on the other guests.
- Very young children and babies aren't banned from these screenings, but please be aware crying can impact the sensory friendly nature of the screenings.
- Dimensions, the UK Cinema Association, and the BFI Film Audience Network encourage cinema staff to make reasonable adjustments for disabled customers – that could include providing a free ticket for a carer whether or not they hold a CEA Card.
- You won't be able to provide adjustments for everything, and people react differently to environments and film content. Be comfortable knowing you're doing what you can and listen to feedback from your audience.

“Access Film Club is a very diverse programme. Every month we welcome people of all ages and always have a mixture of neuro-diverse and neuro-typical patrons because the film programme is diverse and interesting. In addition, we collaborate with autistic volunteers who co-host the events, which has such a positive influence on our audiences. Finally, the fact that we have space for a post-film chat offers people the chance to share views on the film, learn from different perspectives, broadens film culture understanding and bolsters the social aspect outcome of the programme.”
Jodie Wilkinson, Glasgow Film Theatre



“We know that if she wants to have a chat, if she wants to get up and move around, no-one's going to judge.”

Running your autism-friendly screening will take time and effort from your teams to perfect, and will require the input from front-of-house staff, programmers, marketers and technical staff. Preparation is key and making time to develop relationships with consultants, autism groups, and communicating well with your existing audience will all be really important.

Many cinemas successfully embed autism-friendly screenings into their regular programme without requiring extra funding, though more staff may be needed on the day to provide support (these can be volunteers), and more time and energy is needed to make sure the screening meets all the requirements of being autism-friendly.

Some cinemas find that funding to help get their autism-friendly programme set up can be useful. If you feel this could be a necessity to get your screenings started, we have listed a few potential sources of funding with which to make enquiries.

1 Regional film hubs

- Film Hub North: www.filmhubnorth.org.uk
- Film Hub Midlands: www.filmhubmidlands.org
- Film Hub South West: www.watershed.co.uk/filmhub
- Film Hub South East: www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/film-hub-south-east
- Film Hub London: www.filmlondon.org.uk/film-hub-london
- Film Hub Scotland: www.filmhubscotland.com
- Film Hub Northern Ireland: www.filmhubni.org
- Film Hub Wales: www.filmhubwales.org

2 The BFI Audience Fund

The BFI Audience Fund aims to boost diversity and inclusivity, and to build a broad film culture across the UK which recognises and values the quality of difference and seeks to rebalance under-representation on screen, in the workforce and in audiences.

www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/distribution-exhibition-funding/bfi-audience-fund

3 Cinema for All

Cinema for All supports community cinemas with advice, support, services and benefits. Members can receive access to bursary, training and screening funds.

www.cinemaforall.org.uk

“Spend time talking to your audience. When can they come out? When do they have support to get out and do things? We spend time researching audiences and connecting with the gatekeepers in the community to get people to our festival. We’ve noticed, when touring, that screenings in the evenings and weekends are sometimes tricky to get people to. There is less support for people at these times and it can be harder for people to get to these events.”
Lizzie Banks, Oska Bright Film Festival



4 Into Film

Into Film provides free screenings for schools around significant dates, and as part of the annual Into Film Festival in collaboration with hundreds of schools and venues across the UK. 50% of the screenings across the Festival are accessible, and Into Film encourages autism-friendly environments.

www.intofilm.org

5 Commercial sponsorship

Some cinemas have had success with national and regional organisations sponsoring their screenings, whether by providing services or supplies in kind or stumping up cash in return for recognition and publicity. Many organisations have a budget set aside for corporate social responsibility (CSR), so they can support campaigns that will help their brand to be positively recognised. With a carefully-tailored proposal and data about audiences to share, your screenings could be supported through this kind of partnership. Culturehive has some useful resources such as this:

www.culturehive.co.uk/resources/how-to-attract-a-corporate-sponsor

6 Trusts and foundations

Many trusts and foundations have aims to support organisations developing better social opportunities for people with autism or other sensory sensitivities. Spend some time researching relevant grants funders and you could find support to begin a programme. Here’s a few to start you off:

www.disability-grants.org

Any funder wants to be sure that you can deliver on your promises, and that your project will meet their overall aims so be sure to check eligibility criteria and the aims of the funder thoroughly before putting together any applications or proposals.

05

Promoting your autism-friendly screenings

Promoting your screenings is key to growing this audience base. They need to trust the screenings and feel confident that you understand autism.

There are a number of ways you can promote autism-friendly screenings to your local community – don't keep it all online, provide printed materials and talk to people locally too. Word of mouth will be your greatest asset.

Remember to keep autism-friendly at the forefront of your messaging and design – keep the language simple and inclusive (say what you mean) and the design clean. Use this as an opportunity to showcase your autism awareness and understanding.

National promotion

Below are the key platforms you can use to promote your screenings.

- Accessible Screenings UK: www.accessiblescreeningsuk.co.uk
- Dimensions UK: www.dimensions-uk.org/autismfilms
- National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk/calendar.aspx

Promoting on Social Media

Using your Facebook page or Twitter account is a great way to promote your screenings.

The Thurso Cinema in Scotland put up a Facebook post to announce its first autism-friendly screening; the post had over 5,000 views within 24 hours from a local population of just 10,000 people.

Helpful Twitter accounts and hashtags:

- Dimensions: [@dimensionsuk](https://twitter.com/dimensionsuk)
- UK Cinema Association: [@cinema_uk](https://twitter.com/cinema_uk)
- FAN Inclusive Cinema: [@inclusivecinema](https://twitter.com/inclusivecinema)
- National Autistic Society: [@autism](https://twitter.com/autism)
- NAS WAAD: [@WorldAutismDay](https://twitter.com/WorldAutismDay)
- [#autismfriendly](https://twitter.com/autismfriendly), [#autism](https://twitter.com/autism), [#autismfilms](https://twitter.com/autismfilms)

Local promotion

Searching for local services

To grow your audience at a local level, we strongly recommend that you contact your local authority to access information on local services and organisations.

Finding your Local Authority: www.gov.uk/find-your-local-council

Search for Local Offer – this is the provision made by each local authority. Most local authority websites will have a section dedicated to ‘disability services’ and will generally have separate listings for adults and children [Disabled Children Services/ Adult Social Care and Health]. You may find that your local authority has collated all the information into a downloadable information pack.

The local authority websites will have contact details for children’s centres, schools, outreach teams, local services and organisations for people with autism, all of which are great places to contact and pass on information about your screenings.

“Our partnership with the local advocacy group was invaluable on many levels, but we had to be careful it wasn’t seen as an event for their members only. We handled the situation sensitively – ensuring that they understood how valuable the partnership was while still encouraging new audiences to attend. As the leaders of the advocacy group changed, we found new ways to promote our screenings so that we weren’t too reliant on their support during team transitions.”

Alice Black, Dundee Contemporary Arts



The National Autistic Society also has an A-Z directory of available services around the country, an excellent resource to use to see who you can contact in your local area. The majority of the services are listed alphabetically, starting with the town name of where the organisation is based. If you are unable to see anything relevant on the list, there is also the option to do an advanced search, as well as browse by category and area, please visit the following for more information:

www.autism.org.uk/services/autism-services-directory.aspx

Or you can email to: **autism.friendly@nas.org.uk**

You can also send out information on screenings for schools through Into Film and non-school screenings through the various BFI Film Audience Network hubs:

www.inclusivecinema.org/about-inclusive-cinema

Autism-friendly screenings – Janie’s story

“Me and my husband tried to take Janie* to a regular screening before autism-friendly screenings started. She was ten and the cinema was very busy so we had to queue. When we got into the cinema she put her fingers in her ears and got anxious because it was so loud. This made us anxious, which she picked up on and it made her worse.”

“We tried to get a seat where we could make a quick exit but this meant we arrived early and the trailers were an issue because she didn’t know what we were there to see. Normally we take her Nintendo DS or phone which we can put close to her ears but we were so conscious of disturbing other people, we couldn’t do it.”

“That trip wasn’t successful. We tried to take her again and booked tickets in advance so we didn’t have to queue but she was so distressed she wouldn’t even get out of the car. Because her first trip wasn’t a pleasant experience she expected it to be the same this time.”

“The autism-friendly screenings (AFS) are wonderful; when I first went I couldn’t believe how relaxed the atmosphere was. Janie still sat with her fingers in her ears but it was better for her and she loves it.”

“When Janie’s excited she jumps up and down in her seat and laughs, it’s great she can do this and we don’t have to discourage her so she doesn’t disturb other people, everyone understands. It’s also great to be able to take your own food and drinks, Janie only drinks 7Up or Sprite and only eats beige or brown food so she loves popcorn and it was the first time she’d had it.”

“Janie really loves the cinema now, because she’s had good experiences. She knows what to expect when we say cinema and showing her the trailers really helps reduce her anxiety. We feel more confident going to new places now and Janie is more relaxed.”

*Names changed to protect privacy.

Lights. Camera. Action!

– next steps

We hope this guide has provided you with sufficient information to pilot an autism-friendly screening at your cinema.

The key to a successful screening is all in the planning – work in partnership with local organisations, appropriately prepare and adapt the space and train all staff to be autism aware.

There are lots of useful resources to help make both your venue and staff ‘autism-friendly’ – a few of these are cited at the end of this resource. That said, should you require any further help please contact one of the below contributing organisations.



About Dimensions

Dimensions is a national not-for-profit organisation that supports people with learning disabilities and/or autism. This means our resources and any surplus goes back into providing high quality support services.

But, we want to change society and help people we support and their families to lead this change. We want to see a world where people with autism and learning disabilities are in paid employment, able to enjoy time in their communities and don't face the stigma and ignorance that is still so abundant.

At Dimensions we're proud to make a difference – we don't just talk about the change, we help make it happen – and by partnering with us for autism-friendly cinemas you can be part of it.

Contact: autismfilms@dimensions-uk.org

Website: www.dimensions-uk.org/autismfilms

“My pupils, who all have differing degrees of special educational needs, loved the experience and want to go to the cinema every week.”



About the UK Cinema Association

The UK Cinema Association (UKCA) represents the interests of well over 90 per cent of UK cinema operators. Our members range from the largest cinema circuits to a wide range of single site owner-operated companies. The UKCA advocates on behalf of the UK cinema sector at international, national, regional and local level as well as working with other sectors of the industry, particularly colleagues in film distribution, to promote the value of cinema to the wider public and identify and share best practice.

The UK cinema sector is recognised as a world leader in its efforts to meet the needs of disabled customers, with cinemas continuing to strive to make watching a film as fully inclusive and as positive an experience as possible. Autism-friendly screenings (AFS) have seen phenomenal growth in terms of offering and attendance since they were first piloted in 2011, and are an area of activity which continues to grow year-on-year in the UK, with around 70 per cent of the Association's membership currently offering a regular programme of AFS.

Contact: info@cinemauk.org.uk

Website: www.cinemauk.org.uk



About the BFI Film Audience Network

Supported by National Lottery funding, the BFI Film Audience Network (FAN), is central to the BFI's aim to ensure the greatest choice of film is available for everyone. Established in 2012 to build wider and more diverse UK cinema audiences for British and international film, FAN is a unique, UK-wide collaboration made up of eight Hubs managed by leading film organisations and venues strategically placed around the country. FAN also supports talent development with BFI NETWORK Talent Executives in each of the English Hubs, with a mission to discover and support talented writers, directors and producers at the start of their careers. BFI FAN Film Hubs can be found in Midlands, North, South East, South West, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and London.

Website: www.bfi.org.uk/supporting-uk-film/distribution-exhibition-funding/film-audience-network

Film Hub Wales, based within hub lead organisation, Chapter Arts Centre, leads on BFI FAN's Diversity & Inclusion strategy, featuring the Inclusive Cinema project.

Contact: includeme@filmhubwales.org

Website: www.inclusivecinema.org

Accessible Screenings UK (ASUK), UK Cinema Association

ASUK is the first ever comprehensive and searchable listings database for accessible screenings in UK cinemas. This is where you can list and find your AFS screenings.

www.accessiblescreeningsuk.co.uk

The Autism-Friendly Award, National Autistic Society

This can help make your business and cinema more accessible, which will open up public spaces to autistic people and their families.

www.autism.org.uk/professionals/autism-friendly-award.aspx

Autism-Friendly Screenings Survey, Dimensions

In 2018/2019 Dimensions ran a survey asking existing and potential autism-friendly screenings guests about their experiences of autism and the screenings. Please see the results here:

www.dimensions-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018-19-autism-friendly-screenings-guest-feedback-survey-report.pdf

Disability and Access, UK Cinema Association

All UKCA members can find a wide range of resources which will help your cinema become fully accessible, including further info about AFS (password protected).

www.cinemauk.org.uk/members-area/ukca-reference-documents/disability-and-access

Importance of Autism-Friendly Cultural Spaces, Culture Republic

An interesting report detailing the importance of removing barriers for customers with additional needs.

www.culturerepublic.co.uk/blog/news-&-resources/importance-of-autism-friendly-cultural-spaces

Inclusive Cinema, Film Hub Wales

Inclusive Cinema is a project created by Film Hub Wales to support cinemas in delivering British and independent cinema to more diverse UK audiences in a more inclusive way.

www.inclusivecinema.org/?s=autism

Understanding Autism, Ambitious About Autism

You can deepen your understanding about autism with these resources.

www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/understanding-autism

Training video for cinemas

To accompany this written guide for cinemas, the UK Cinema Association, Dimensions and the BFI FAN have produced a visual training resource that can be used to teach cinema staff all about autism and the key adjustments needed to make your cinema autism-friendly and welcoming to a sensory sensitive audience.

“It is brilliant to be able to take your very ‘different’ child to a place where other parents are not giving you disapproving looks when your child decides to do a ‘runner’ or make noise. We all understand how difficult it is raising a child with such special needs and it is wonderful being able to involve them in ‘normal’ activities which other families take for granted.”

The training video focuses on two people with autism and their families, and gives a personal insight into the barriers people with autism face on a daily basis. The resource then goes on to outline some key important adjustments a cinema should consider when making their spaces relaxed and autism-friendly.

Once your staff have watched the video, they can then go to the UK Cinema Association website and complete a five-minute quiz. For more information about this training video, please visit: www.cinemauk.org.uk/AFStrainingvideo



Appendix

Reference projects – The following organisations have contributed case studies, resources and experiences to this toolkit.

Access Film Club, Glasgow Film Theatre

Glasgow Film Theatre provides an independent film programme for diverse audiences in Glasgow and Scotland, including specific audience development initiatives aimed at cultural diversity, disabled, D/deaf and hard of hearing audiences, and socially/economically disadvantaged audiences. Access Film Club is a popular and inclusive film event that happens at the Glasgow Film Theatre in partnership with The National Autistic Society Scotland. Every club always has a mixture of people and ages coming along. The club is not exclusive and it is important that everybody feels welcome to attend. If you have any questions about Access Film Club please contact Jodie Wilkinson, Public Engagement Coordinator on: jodie.wilkinson@glasgowfilm.org
For more info: www.glasgowfilm.org/plan-your-visit/venue-access/access-film-club

Autism-Friendly Relaxed Screenings, Dundee Contemporary Arts

DCA's Relaxed Screenings are perfect for anyone who would benefit from a relaxed environment to enjoy a trip to the cinema. Taking place in our smaller screen, the films are shown without any advertising and with consistent lighting and lower sound levels throughout. Visitors are free to move around or come in and out as they feel comfortable, and drawing activities are available in the foyer. Film fans can sign up for DCA's six-weekly Accessible Screenings email, with details and booking links for upcoming films: <http://bit.ly/2zER8sa>

Autism-Friendly Screenings, ODEON cinemas

ODEON Cinemas first launched autism-friendly cinema experiences at 40 cinemas in 2011 and since then ODEON have welcomed thousands of guests to over 12,000 performances. ODEON screen a family themed film on a Sunday in more than 100 cinemas and films aimed at older audiences on a Monday evening in 11 cinemas each month. Each screening has been specially designed working with Dimensions and the UK Cinema Association to create a safe environment and to provide sensory friendly experiences for our guests with autism. For more info: www.odeon.co.uk/accessibility/autism-friendly-cinema-screenings/

Gulbenkian

The Accessible Film Club is an inclusive film-screening event that happens at Gulbenkian, in partnership with Square Pegs Arts on a monthly basis. Running since December 2017, we work with a core group of 15-25 years old individuals to programme and run the events. At the club screenings, the films are screened in a relaxed, safe, comfortable and inclusive environment. For more info: www.thegulbenkian.co.uk/accessible-film-screenings

Black Moon Film Club, Belfast Black Box

Black Moon Film Club has been running in Belfast's Black Box since 2014. Developed with the support of BFI & Film Hub NI as an offshoot from our monthly Black Moon Club Night, BMFC is by and for adults with learning disabilities. We programme experimental and experiential events including dance-offs, sing-offs and outdoor screenings. We aim to programme four large scale events per year, with more regular, cosy 'living room' style events in our Green Room or Moonbase spaces. Our programme content ranges from family-friendly blockbusters to taboo-breaking subject matter that represents our audience's experiences. The Black Box is a fully inclusive and accessible venue.

For more info: www.blackboxbelfast.com

Into Film Festival

Into Film Festival is a UK nationwide film festival, which runs for three weeks during November. The festival delivers free screenings and events for all young people as part of an educational and audience development programme. In 2018 we had over 230 events and almost 60,000 places in autism-friendly events. We are committed to improving this offer in 2019. For more info: www.intofilm.org/festival and our autism-friendly resources: www.intofilm.org/search/global?globalsearch=autism

Oska Bright Film Festival

Oska Bright Film Festival tours the UK and abroad in non-festival years sharing award winning films and features, delivering training in engaging and developing learning disabled audiences, and hosting seminars. Packages of film are available to hire if you're looking to programme work made by, or featuring people with learning disabilities, autism or Asperger's. For more info: www.oskabright.org

Picturehouse Cinemas

Picturehouse Cinemas have been running autism-friendly screenings for over 12 years, and most Picturehouses programme an autism-friendly screening on the third Sunday of every month, and many also offer a schools' autism-friendly screening once a term. Adapted in a variety of ways to help reduce anxiety and over-stimulation and ensure a safe, enjoyable cinema experience for people with autism, sensory sensitivity, learning disabilities and/or additional needs and their families, friends and carers.

For more info: www.picturehouses.co.uk/autismfriendly



In partnership with

