

C4 Disability Disruption commission: creative brief

This brief is also available in BSL and Easy Read versions on request

At Channel 4 we are proud of our ground-breaking representation of disabled people throughout our 40 year history; we are the home of the *Paralympics*, *Born to Be Different*, *The Undateables* and *The Last Leg*, champions of talent like Rosie Jones, Billy Monger, Bryony Mae Williams, Ed Jackson and Ruben Reuter, and have cast disabled people in all our major formats from *Big Brother* to *First Dates*, and *GBBO*, *Hollyoaks* and *Gogglebox*.

In 2022/23, we plan to take this reputation for disability inclusion to the next level, ripping up the playbook and showing disabled people as they have never been seen before on British TV.

Why? The vision

With this commission we want to **radically change the national conversation around disability**.

We need ambitious, outlandish unscripted ideas which will blow apart offensive and outdated (but still dominant) stereotypes, assumptions and over-simplifications about disabled people and the experience of being disabled today in UK.

We're also interested in ideas which can have tangible impact. Think: what *It's A Sin* did for AIDS testing, what *Old People's Home for 4 Year Olds* did for elderly care, what that *Brookside* kiss did for lesbian representation, and how *Benefit Street* got the nation talking.

We want content that subverts, totally ignores or smashes up the typical media tropes around disability, and which steers clear of - or deliberately plays with - those familiar stories we have seen time and again about disability. Our reference points here are shows like *Joe Lycett v The Oil Giant* and *Smuggled* and the subversive spirit they demonstrated.

We have outlined these disability types and tropes in more detail in Appendix 1 below

Think of those stories and characters around disability that have been missing in TV.

Where are the disabled yummy mummies outdoing each other on the school run? Where are the disabled business leaders making their millions? Where are the disabled supermodels bitching about each other? The disabled people who are disloyal friends, alternative parents or demanding lovers? The disabled airline

pilots, neurosurgeons and politicians going about their daily work? The people who are glad they were born or became disabled, the ones who are on an active mission to stop people helping them, the ones who hate other disabled people?

In terms of narrative, we are really interested in what we believe are two of disability's best secrets:

- The social model of disability which says that the "problem" of disability doesn't lie within the disabled person but in society; people are disabled by external barriers (physical, attitudinal and/or cultural) put up around them. This places emphasis on others and wider society to adapt rather than disabled people to fix or change themselves.
- The disability paradox, a psychologists' term to describe the contradiction that while disabled people often report a high quality of life, non-disabled people often assume they are miserable or struggling because of their condition.

A big, noisy commission which brings either or both of these concepts to life in smart and arresting ways will go a long way to fulfilling this brief of radically changing the national conversation around disability.

What? The execution

This will be a non-scripted commission. It also should avoid the topic of sport, because with that have well covered through our Paralympics and related coverage.

But beyond that, we are genre-agnostic; they could be documentaries, a feature or a format.

We are also open about shape: they could be a one-off, a stripped event, a short series.

Whilst we want ideas that make a real-world difference, we're probably not looking for an 'on the nose' campaign. These need to be high quality, entertaining ideas which stand on their own as engaging pieces of telly aside from of the subject matter.

What we do know is that it needs to play in peak on Channel 4, to TX in early 2023, be very watchable on All4 and have great potential for social media uptake. It needs all the sensibilities and tone that audiences expect of Channel 4, at its absolute best.

In terms of budget, this commission will be within the usual tariff range for the relevant genre. You can find out more about this on [4Producers](#). Whilst we would prefer you to concentrate on the core of the idea rather than the detail of the budget at this stage, you will need to be confident that it can be made within that ballpark figure.

Who? The audience

Too often, programmes about disability feel like they are targeted at non-disabled people (see ‘inspiration porn’ and ‘awareness-raising’ narratives in Appendix 1 below).

Of course, in aiming to radically change the national conversation around disability, we in no way want to exclude non-disabled viewers or commission something which feels niche and specialist. There should be universal human truths at the heart of this idea and wide-reaching appeal.

But at the same time as engaging the broadest possible audience, we are looking for content that also grabs the attention of disabled viewers, which speaks their truth and illuminates the disabled experience for them too. In short (and to borrow from Hugh Jackson et al) we want disabled people to watch this and think: This is me.

Who? The creative teams

In the spirit of the disability mantra ‘nothing about us without us’ and to ensure we break the cycle of disabled people being spoken for and about by others, this is a closed tender to disabled-led production companies¹ or production companies with senior disabled creatives involved in the development process and likely to be working on the production if it is commissioned.

For what we mean by disabled, see Appendix 2 below.

As we say, our priority is getting the right, ambitious idea. Then we’ll talk about how to make it. For example, the successful production company may be paired with another indie after commission, if needed to support them to deliver something of scale.

When it comes to production, the successful commission will be contractually required to ensure it reaches out to disabled creatives and that at least 20% of their off-screen talent, working across multiple roles, self-identify as disabled, to reflect the UK population at a minimum. Channel 4 will support the production company in achieving this.

¹ By “disabled-led” we mean that the main shareholders, the leading decision makers, or the creative leaders of the production company self-identify as disabled

How? The approach

We are looking for a big, memorable on-air moment, likely to have big scale and impact around the time of TX.

But to reassure you that this comes with long-term commitment, we intend to ensure there is with baked in on- and off-screen legacy to this project, and that it will be accompanied by disability representation in our top returning shows across 2022 and beyond.

In terms of process, we are issuing this written brief widely via our genre commissioning teams. They are happy to follow up with one-to-one conversations as they usually would, to bring the ambition to life and answer any questions. It will also be available on our [4Producers website](#).

Submissions, in the form of brief written treatments, will be taken and from these we will shortlist three ideas for a brief period of further funded development. The three ideas will then be pitched to a small number of the Channel 4 team, from which the final idea will be chosen.

Once we have commissioned the idea, it will be looked after by a Com Ed within a relevant genre team as usual, who will have close support from the Creative Diversity team. To ensure that we maintain authenticity and accountability we are also planning to put together a small advisory panel of senior disabled industry creatives who will input and advise at regular points throughout the production process.

Timings and milestones are as follows:

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| • Brief distributed | 17 February 2022 |
| • Written treatments submitted to genre teams | 10am, 21 March 2022 |
| • Shortlisted ideas notified | 4 April 2022 |
| • Final pitches | w/c 2 May 2022 |
| • Successful commission notified | w/c 16 May 2022 |

What next? Further questions

If you would like more information about this brief or have any questions, please contact the Commissioning Editor who shared this brief with you or our Creative Diversity & Disability Lead Ally Castle referencing 'Disability Disruption brief' – ACastle@channel4.co.uk

To make sure we are inclusive and accessible to all, please let us know if you require any adjustments or assistance for meetings and communications with you.

Appendix 1: Disability stereotypes and tropes

As characters, disabled people stereotypically portrayed as:

- **Fakers** – scroungers who are a drain on society, probably exaggerating or entirely making up their conditions, impairments or illnesses
- **Freaks** – weird and abnormal; an object of fascination, disgust and/or cruelty
- **Villains** - bitter and twisted characters whose impairments are a proxy for evil
- **Victims** – very nice but weak, vulnerable, needy and dependent; always in receipt of help or charity; suffering and to be pitied
- **Undesirables** – asexual and/or sexually unattractive; incapable of any kind of romantic or sexual relationships
- **Unstoppables** – brave heroes who have “overcome” being disabled, can face anything and never complain

In terms of stories, disability is often framed within the following trope narratives, which often overlap and reinforce once another and draw on the stereotypes above:

- **The tragedy narrative:** disabled people are seen as suffering because of what is wrong with them; they are objects of pity who can't cope and whose lives are barely worth living
- **The triumph narrative:** disabled people overcome an obstacle or rise to a challenge “against all odds”, drawing on some kind of extraordinary inner strength, as if their conditions or impairments - and the disabling society around them - are largely just in their mind
- **The miraculous healing narrative:** a disabled person is suddenly cured of their impairment or condition and returns to a “normal”, far more preferable life; the experience is never spoken of again
- **The able saviour narrative:** non-disabled people rescue disabled people in need; disabled people are terribly grateful
- **The inspiration porn narrative:** disabled people succeed at something (usually relatively everyday) in a lovely heart-warming way, to make non-disabled feel good about themselves, reassuring them that things may not be that bad for disabled people after all and that they just need to try harder to achieve anything (see: the triumph narrative)
- **The awareness-raising narrative:** disabled people's stories are told (usually by others) and their trauma mined so that non-disabled people are educated (and/or entertained) but aren't challenged to do anything tangible to alter their own attitudes or behaviours; 'being aware' is enough to feel they are making a difference

- **The coming to terms narrative:** a disabled person struggles with or fights against their condition or impairment for the majority of the story, then at the end suddenly has some kind of epiphany and is forever totally ok with it.
- **Disability denial narratives:** disabled people “overcome” being disabled by claiming that it has no impact their lives whatsoever, that they are in no way different from non-disabled people and that nothing can hold them back.

We exaggerate, to make a point. But we’re sure you get the point.

Appendix 2: Who is disabled?

To paraphrase the UK’s Equality Act 2010, a disability is a physical or mental condition that is long-lasting and has a substantial adverse effect on day-to-day activities.

This covers a wide and diverse range of conditions, impairments, injuries and illnesses, including those which are not immediately apparent such as mental ill health, chronic illness, neurodivergence or learning disabilities or difficulties.

Under this definition, 20% of the population – ie one in five people – are disabled in the UK today (source: Department for Work & Pensions, Family Resources Survey 2019/20).

It is for each person to decide if they identify as disabled under this definition. Many people have conditions or impairments which are not immediately apparent to an outside observer, but definitely entitle them to identify as disabled. Some have conditions or impairments which, to an outside observer, might meet the criteria and will choose not to identify as disabled. Others may choose not to disclose or share openly that they are disabled.

Everybody is different; our rule of thumb is to avoid any assumptions and to be led by the individual.