
Time to Act

How lack of knowledge in the cultural sector creates barriers for disabled artists and audiences

Initial findings

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Background

The EU-27 has **more than 42 million disabled people** aged 15–64, equivalent to **12.8 % of the population** of that age.¹ That figure rises rapidly when the definition of disability extends to those who acquire it in later life, that is **1 in 5 people (19%) in the European population.**²

The **EU and all its member states have ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2006)**, which recognises disabled people's right to take part on an equal basis in cultural life, and states' duties in ensuring this. Despite this, disabled audiences, arts professionals, and artists across Europe all report significant barriers to full participation in culture.

In this context, the British Council has commissioned On the Move, the international cultural mobility network,³ to lead **a study into the level of knowledge and experience held by European cultural operators in relation to disabled artists and their works.** The study also looks at the level of knowledge of ways to **make performing arts programmes accessible to disabled artists and to disabled audiences.** The area covered by the study includes the 40 countries currently participating in the EU Creative Europe programme, as well as Switzerland and the UK.

The study is **part of the large-scale arts and disability project [Europe Beyond Access](#).**⁴ Co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the EU, this initiative aims to support disabled artists to break the glass ceilings of the contemporary theatre and dance sectors. The core partners of the project are British Council (operating for this project in the UK and Poland), Onassis Stegi (Greece), Holland Dance Festival (The Netherlands), Kampnagel (Germany), Per.Art (Serbia), Skånes Dansteater (Sweden), and Oriente Occidente (Italy). Dissemination associates are

IETM, ONDA (France), EUCREA (Germany), Acesso Cultura (Portugal), Instytut Teatralny im. Zbigniewa Raszewskiego /Theatre Institut (Poland), and ISPA.

The global Covid-19 pandemic hit at the beginning of the research process, with devastating consequences for the lives of millions of women and men in Europe and across the world, as well as for our fragile cultural ecosystems as they have tried to cope with unprecedented measures to limit or stop all activities. It of course impacted heavily the way this research was conducted.

This report presents the **preliminary findings of the research**. Sources used include relevant literature, semi-structured interviews with representatives of 12 European and international networks and platforms, and responses to an **online survey** (July – October 2020). The survey was addressed to a broad array of cultural actors in the performing arts, split into four groups: venues and festivals, arts and culture professionals, funders, and others. Overall, it gathered answers from **298 respondents based in 35 countries**, with the highest numbers of responses coming from Portugal, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Southern Europe was the region with the most respondents (37%), followed by Western Europe (27%), Northern Europe (20%), and Eastern Europe (11%). A small number of responses came from outside of Europe (5%).

The aforementioned impact of Covid-19 has been one of the **challenges encountered during the research project**, including in terms of stakeholders' limited availability to answer the online survey. Other difficulties included the length of the online questionnaire, which led to incomplete, though often still relevant, replies, and the limited spread of respondent profiles, with some stakeholders in the sector arguing they did not have enough specific knowledge about disability to respond, while professionals and organisations with expertise in the field were more comfortable with the survey and may be overrepresented in the final sample.

A more detailed report will be presented in late 2021.

These preliminary findings aim to feed into ongoing discussions and advocacy, notably at the level of the EBA project, as well as forming the basis for discussions and feedback from interested parties leading up to the final report.

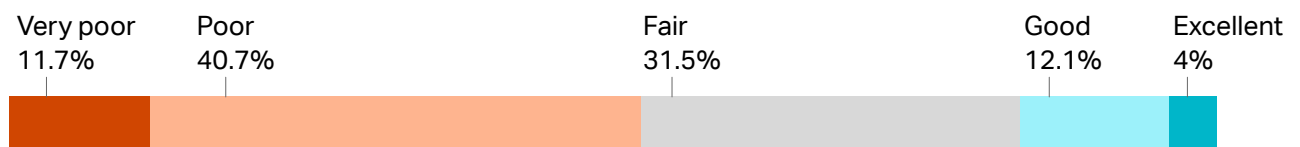
Feedback or suggestions can be sent to mobility@on-the-move.org

Knowledge

- **Limited knowledge of work by disabled artists.** When asked how familiar they are with the works of European disabled artists, only 16.2% of respondents to the online survey reported Good or Excellent knowledge. More than half (52.4%) rated their knowledge as either Poor or Very Poor.

52% of performing arts professionals rated their knowledge of work by disabled artists as either poor or very poor.

How would you rate your knowledge of work by European disabled artists? (n=273)



- **Variable numbers of productions seen.** 83% of respondents had seen work by disabled artists in the last two years. 50% had seen between 1 and 3 productions, and 13% had seen 7 or more. The survey's disabled respondents were more likely to have seen productions by disabled artists than were the non-disabled respondents (and twice as likely to have seen 7 or more). Meanwhile, 17% of respondents had not seen any productions in the last two years. This final figure was higher in Eastern Europe (23%) and the Balkans (24%) than other regions, with Northern Europe (12%) scoring lowest.
- **Difficulties in identifying and accessing reliable information sources.** When answering the questionnaire or interviews, most respondents found it difficult to provide examples of information that helped them navigate accessibility issues. They often complained about a lack of available resources.

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- **Disabled artists and professionals, peer arts organisations and specialised services arise as key information sources.** 49% of survey respondents identify disabled artists and disabled culture professionals as their trusted sources when they had questions or needs as regards supporting or programming work by disabled artists. 45% mention peer arts organisations, and 30% specialised service providers. Indeed, a few specialised agencies and services (e.g. Arts & Disability Ireland; Culture for All, Finland; Acesso Cultura, Portugal; Pro Infirmis, Geneva, Switzerland; Servicestelle Inklusion im Kulturbereich, Dresden, Germany) and some grassroots initiatives (tanzbar Bremen, Germany; the Without Walls Access Guide, UK) are identified as key information points. The information from governmental bodies is rarely quoted, with the notable exception of public bodies in the United Kingdom.
 - **National asymmetries in the availability of information.** The difficulties identified by interviewees and survey respondents as regards the accessibility of information seem to confirm findings from the literature review, which suggest that substantial literature on arts and disability exists in a few countries (e.g. the United Kingdom, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland) but is less easily available elsewhere. Limited availability of information on arts and disability has been noted before by European networks and EU bodies.⁵
 - **European networks and programmes facilitate access to knowledge and to experiencing work, balancing out existing asymmetries.** European and international performing arts networks are mentioned by 32% of respondents as their trusted sources when looking for information on work by disabled artists. This figure is higher than for national performing arts networks (22%). A similar pattern exists when asking about trusted sources when aiming to engage with disabled audiences. The literature review also found that European and international arts networks and EU-funded projects have led to broader opportunities for accessing work by disabled artists within the European cultural sector, including in countries where these opportunities were previously rare.

Experience

- **Only 28% of venues and festivals regularly present or support work by disabled artists.** Venues and festivals that took part in the survey were asked whether they support or present work by disabled artists on a regular basis. Responses show that 28% of them present or support at least one production per year. Among these, less than 6% present four or more productions per year. An additional 53% of all festivals and venues surveyed present work by disabled artists but on an irregular basis (i.e. less than one production per year), whereas 15% do not present work of this kind.
- **31% of all arts organisations do not look for new work by disabled artists.** Asked where they looked at for new work by disabled artists, respondents identified direct contact with companies, tour bookers and agents as the main source (37% across all respondents; 49% among venues and festivals), with international peers and European or international performing arts networks coming second (36%). The latter figure again confirms the important role played by international networks in this area. Other sources include national peers and networks (28%) and online and offline media (27%). Meanwhile, 31% of respondents indicated they do not look for new work by disabled artists.
- **Disabled people are keen to attend arts activities, particularly when their needs are taken into account.** Research conducted in Ireland may challenge some expectations about attendance among disabled people: 86% of them had attended at least one arts event (including cinema) in the previous year (79% if cinema is not included). Indeed, these figures were higher than those from a similar survey covering the overall population (64% had attended at least one arts event – including arthouse cinema but not mainstream cinema).⁶ Physical access, health issues, economic aspects, distance to venues, personal isolation and problems with online booking of events have been identified as major obstacles in several European countries.⁷

- **Most venues and festivals have adopted some measures to improve physical access.** Step-free access from street to auditorium, office and backstage spaces was the most frequently mentioned measure to improve access to venues and festivals (57%), followed by wheelchair-accessible toilets (52%). 34% also provide extra funding to access requirements more broadly, 31% have wheelchair-accessible toilets with hoist, and 21% have accessible adult changing rooms in office or backstage areas.

- **Access measures are less frequent in artistic programming and decision-making.** Among the measures that may be adopted by venues and festivals to improve access, only 17% of respondents indicated that they have dedicated calls for disabled artists or curators, and only 13% involve disabled arts professionals on selection panels and commissioning teams. 8% consider alternative ways to answer open calls, and 7% allow extra time for disabled artists when answering open calls.

87%

of venues and festivals don't involve disabled people in selection panels or in the commissioning process.

- **A wide range of measures have been adopted to foster access for audiences, but to varying degrees.** When asked about the initiatives for audience access taken by organisations, wheelchair accessible toilets came first (72%), followed by free or discounted tickets for personal assistants (48%), discounted tickets for disabled audiences (44%), sign language interpreters (42%), and audio description (31%). Meanwhile, only 24% have front of house staff trained in disability awareness, 19% have an accessible website, 16% have a dedicated contact point for access queries, 13% provide accessible communication and marketing materials, and 12% have an accessible booking process.

Gaps in access: venue and festival programmes fall short

87%

of venues and festivals don't provide accessible marketing materials

88%

of venues and festivals don't offer an accessible booking process

81%

of venues and festivals don't have an accessible website

- **Access measures tend to focus on audience first, artists later.** Both the evidence above and answers to open questions in the survey show that most arts organisations give priority to ensuring access for disabled audiences, with disabled artists coming second. This confirms findings of the literature review, according to which venues have often been made accessible to audiences but not artists, as seen in backstage areas and dressing rooms.⁸ Some authors suggest this may be connected to the prevailing notion, at least in some countries, of disabled people as 'passive' recipients of culture, rather than 'active' participants.⁹
- **Less than half of venues and festivals have a strategy to engage with disabled audiences.** 33% of venues and festivals do not engage with disabled audiences on a regular basis, whereas 24% do so but do not have a specific strategy in this area. Meanwhile, 42% of respondents have a specific strategy to engage with disabled audiences.
- **Employing disabled people and having dedicated staff or budget are drivers for change within organisations.** Generally, the organisations that employ disabled staff, that have staff responsible for accessibility, or that have a dedicated budget tend to be more confident than the average respondents that their artistic programmes are accessible to disabled artists. A similar pattern emerged when

asking about engagement with disabled audiences. Responses to open questions confirmed that having one or more disabled staff members had served to raise awareness of specific issues and opened up internal conversations, leading to more inclusive practices.

- **Perceptions on the improvements made may be overconfident.** A large proportion of survey respondents believe that artistic programmes and venues have become more accessible in recent years. For example, 58% of respondents from venues and festivals argued that their organisations had become more accessible for disabled artists in the last 5 years, although the figure was lower for organisations without a budget dedicated to accessibility (46%). Similarly, 58% of venues and festivals believed accessibility for disabled audiences had improved in their organisations (41% for those without a dedicated budget). This contrasts with some of the evidence about actual practices – e.g. the fact that only 28% of venues and festivals regularly present or support work by disabled artists, 87% of organisations do not provide accessible marketing materials, and only 12% offer an accessible booking process. Therefore, there may be some overconfidence, not backed by evidence, on the actual improvements in accessibility for both artists and audiences.

- **Improving accessibility makes sense from a range of perspectives – including rights, cultural diversity and business.** Existing literature often emphasises that access and participation in cultural life are part of human rights – and that, therefore, governments and public cultural institutions should in particular ‘ensure a cultural offer that is accessible to everyone, with specific measures for certain population groups, such as children and young people, the elderly, disabled people or migrants...’¹⁰ Further to this, the literature review, interviews and the online survey have found a range of arguments that call for a ‘cultural change’ within the arts sector, which should become more inclusive and diverse and see disability as a form of enrichment that broadens possibilities of expression,¹¹ ultimately looking at disability in a ‘non-normative, non-ableist’ way.¹² Furthermore, it has been

argued that making arts attendance accessible to disabled people 'makes good business sense' – research in Ireland suggests the national cultural sector could earn an additional €7 million if half of the disabled people who regularly attended (before Covid-19) did so just one more time per year and brought a friend or family member with them.¹³

- **Lack of funding and knowledge stand as major obstacles.** When asked about the obstacles that prevent their organisations, or the cultural field at large, from supporting work by disabled artists, 52% of arts organisations identified lack of funding as the main factor (the figure was 54% among venues and festivals, and only 23% among funders). Lack of knowledge of work by disabled artists in their country (38%) or in Europe and internationally (35%), insufficient work made by disabled artists (31%), lack of official inclusive guidelines from local, regional or national governments (26%) and lack of knowledge on how to meet access requirements (25%) were also mentioned. A similar pattern emerged when asking about obstacles to further engagement with disabled audiences: lack of funding (62%), lack of appropriate communication tools, such as an accessible website and marketing materials (54%), lack of contacts and networks to reach out to disabled audiences (42%), lack of human resources (41%), and lack of knowledge on how to meet access requirements (29%) emerged as major obstacles. A further 27% also pointed to lack of interest in engaging more with disabled audiences.

How Covid-19 threatens progress made

The study has identified a general concern that the current Covid-19 pandemic will have a lasting effect on accessibility. In the online survey, respondents underlined the vulnerability of disabled people but also a general lack of consideration in emergency measures taken by public authorities in regard to this population and their specific needs and challenges.

Recent research in the United Kingdom suggests **77% of disabled audiences consider themselves to be 'vulnerable to Coronavirus', whereas only 28% of non-disabled audiences do**. This may be connected to the fact that, according to data from the UK's Office for National Statistics, disabled people accounted for over one third of deaths related to Covid-19 between March and May 2020.¹⁴

41% of disabled audiences surveyed argued they would consider returning to venues once social distancing and appropriate hygiene measures were in place. 26% said they would not consider returning to venues until a vaccine or treatment for Covid-19 was available –twice the figure among non-disabled respondents. Fewer disabled people would consider attending an outdoor event (44%) than the overall population (51%). These figures suggest that **the Covid-19 crisis has 'magnified the inequalities facing disabled audiences** and compromises cultural participation and engagement'. Furthermore, it has been estimated that this could mean the loss of 12% of total arts audiences, with **significant economic impacts for organisations in this field**.¹⁵

This perspective echoes initial evidence about the impact of the pandemic in employment in the cultural sector. A range of studies internationally have pointed to how Covid-19 is badly affecting activity and employment across culture. Research conducted in the United Kingdom suggests that **the impact is higher for disabled artists and cultural professionals than for non-disabled ones**.^{16 17}

Overall, this evidence on the impact of Covid-19 on disabled audiences and disabled creative professionals suggests the **need to adopt particularly inclusive measures.**¹⁸

Solutions

- **Policy frameworks and support arise as key enabling factors.** In line with obstacles identified above, the literature review suggests that the existence of cultural policies addressing disability and access and providing a dedicated budget has been instrumental in enabling progress, as shown in countries like the United Kingdom. This arises as the leading factor in catalysing change at the sector level. Several studies have also addressed the important role played by 'gatekeepers', including curators, producers, programmers and educational institutions. They suggest that more attention should be paid to their practices, as well as to ensuring that gatekeepers become more diverse internally, ultimately resembling more the overall make-up of the population.¹⁹ Other enabling factors include support from private foundations, the active engagement of disabled-led companies and other arts and disability organisations, and specific communication strategies (e.g. inviting audiences to rehearsals or conducting artist-led workshops in schools before or after a performance).
- **Examples of good practice and relevant experiences are available.** Over the last decade, a set of guides, manuals and similar publications on arts and disability have collected practical information on how to increase accessibility and inclusion.²⁰ Developing all-encompassing approaches to inclusion, which incorporate disabled people but are also positive for broader sections of the population, involving disabled people in decision-making and management, ensuring physical accessibility, providing in-house information, training and capacity-building, adapting communication and marketing, integrating accessibility in the design and presentation of productions (e.g. audio descriptions, touch tours, tactile model boxes, etc.) and establishing partnerships with specialised and facilitating organisations are some of the solutions proposed.
- **Making knowledge and practical guidance more easily accessible is critical.** The literature review has identified a significant, diverse range of toolkits, guides and other materials providing practical guidance for arts organisations willing to be

more accessible for disabled artists and audiences. However, these materials appear to exist only in some countries and languages, and may not be well-known by many organisations in the field. Indeed, venues surveyed suggested that they would need guidance on designing accessible, inclusive artistic projects (43%), developing disabled audiences (43%), international mobility and collaboration with disabled artists and professionals (33%), and creating accessible workplaces (26%). Interestingly, several of these figures are even higher among funders: 64% of them identify a need for guidance on developing disabled audiences, as well as on facilitating international collaboration with disabled artists, 57% require guidance on designing accessible, inclusive artistic projects, and 43% need guidance on making online exchanges between arts professionals accessible to disabled participants.

- **There is a demand for arts funders and national ministries to engage more in this field.** When asked who should be doing the most to provide guidance, training and best practice resources, survey respondents gave the top spots to arts funders and national ministries (44% each). Venue and festival respondents were more likely to say that local governments and municipalities should also be engaged in providing resources (34.2%), while artists and professionals put greater emphasis on the role of disabled artists and culture professionals themselves (30%).

Follow-up

Evidence collected in this report points to the following:

- There are still **major gaps in the accessibility of performing arts activities and organisations** for disabled artists and audiences. **Action in this field is needed**, and should cover the availability of knowledge (data, good practices, networks) and the provision of support to make organisations and venues more accessible and inclusive.
- Progress made in several countries points to the **critical role of specific policies and dedicated budgets**, supporting measures that foster accessibility for artists and for audiences within all types of organisation in the cultural sector.
- There is also a demand from organisations in the sector for support and guidance in this field, and an **expectation that governments and funders will take the lead**. In particular, there exists a demand for guidance on designing artistic projects which provide equal opportunities to disabled artists and arts professionals, developing disabled audiences, facilitating international mobility and collaboration with disabled artists and arts professionals, and creating accessible cultural workplaces for arts professionals and ensuring accessible recruitment processes.
- **Covid-19 threatens to magnify pre-existing inequalities and to limit opportunities for both disabled artists and audiences**. Addressing this risk, and ensuring that disability is taken into account in public responses to the crisis, is an issue of rights, as well as of economic sustainability for the sector.
- In the last few years, **specialised organisations in arts and disability, and European networks and programmes have contributed** to fostering knowledge and good practice exchange. Support for these initiatives is necessary.

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- Because knowledge and good practice in this area exist, but are not evenly spread across the EU nor sufficiently well-known, **EU institutions, including the Council of Ministers of Culture, could support the exchange of knowledge and the adoption of common guidelines** to foster access and inclusion for disabled people.

A longer report will be presented in late 2021, which will bring together further evidence extracted from the online survey and subsequent interviews and consultations. Among the issues that will be addressed are the following:

- Discrepancies identified between perceived progress and effective improvements on the ground.
- Solutions and best practices identified in some specific regions and countries.
- Further analysis of the countries and regions where less evidence has been obtained in the initial survey.
- Identification of specific training and support needs which could inspire policies and programmes to foster accessibility in the cultural sector.

References

¹ 2012 figures, taken from “Disability statistics - prevalence and demographics” conducted by Eurostat: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/pdfscache/34409.pdf> In this report, we use the term **'disabled artists'**, but we are aware terminologies and concepts vary enormously. As a point of reference, we use the British Council's guide to disability equality *Promoting Inclusion* (www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/guide-disability-equality.pdf) and we would like to quote here the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), which states: 'Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.'

² According to the Papworth Trust as well as the European Parliament.

³ More information here: www.on-the-move.org

⁴ More information here: www.disabilityartsinternational.org/europe-beyond-access

⁵ See e.g. European Blind Union (2012). *EBU Access to Culture Survey 2012: Mapping current levels of accessibility to cultural venues and activities in Europe*. Paris, EBU; and Pasikowska-Schnass, M. (2019). *Access to cultural life for people with disabilities. Brussels and Strasbourg, European Parliament Research Service (EPRS)*; available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_BRI%282019%29644200

⁶ Maitland, H. (2017). *Audiences-in-waiting?* Dublin, Arts & Disability Ireland. Available at <https://adiarts.ie/assets/uploads/2018/01/Audiences-in-Waiting-survey-bulletin-final.pdf>

⁷ See e.g. Fundación Eguía-Careaga Fundazioa (2016). *Informe 2016 sobre la aplicación de la Estrategia Integral Española de Cultura para todos*. Madrid, Real

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⁸ See e.g. Karhunen, M. (2020). "Disabled artists, gatekeepers and new standards." #StopHatredNow seminar, 11 May 2020, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R33pV9kAS28&feature=emb_title

⁹ See e.g. Panagiotara, B. (c. 2019). *Dance & Disability. A research on inclusive dance education & training in Greece, Netherlands, Sweden & the UK*. Several locations, Onassis Stegi, Holland Dance Festival, Skanes Dansteater and Stopgap Dance Company. Available at <http://www.idancenetwork.eu/activities/dance-disability>

¹⁰ European Parliament (2018). Resolution of 14 June 2018 on structural and financial barriers in the access to culture (2017/2255(INI)). European Parliament. P8_TA(2018)0262, para 55, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2018-0262_EN.html

¹¹ See e.g. Tanja Erhart, in Marsh, K. and J. Burrows, Eds. (2017). *Permission to Stare: Arts and Disability*. Brussels, IETM and British Council. Available at <https://www.ietm.org/en/publications/fresh-perspectives-7-permission-to-stare-arts-and-disability>

¹² Karhunen (2020).

¹³ Maitland, H. (2017). *Audiences-in-waiting?* Dublin, Arts & Disability Ireland.

¹⁴ Miller, A. (2020). "Slump in disabled audiences' confidence presents major problem for the arts sector". Birmingham, Indigo Cultural Consulting Ltd. Available at <https://www.indigo-ltd.com/blog/act-2-confidence-of-disabled-audiences>

¹⁵ Miller (2020).

¹⁷ O'Brien, D.; et al. (2021), "The impact of Covid-19 on jobs in the cultural sector – part 2". Leeds, Centre for Cultural Value. Available at <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/CV/resources/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-jobs-in-the-cultural-sector-part-2>

¹⁸ Ramps on the Moon, Attitude is Everything, What Next? Paraorchestra and WeShallNotBeRemoved (2020). *Working Safely through Covid-19: Seven Inclusive Principles for Arts & Cultural Organisation*. London, several publishers. Available at <http://www.attitudeiseverything.org.uk/resources/seven-inclusive-principles-for-arts-and-cultural-organisations>

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²⁰ See e.g. Acesso Cultura (2020). *A participação cultural de pessoas com deficiência ou incapacidade. Como criar um plano de acessibilidade*. Lisbon, Câmara Municipal de Lisboa, available at <https://acessocultura.org/manual-plano-acessibilidade/>; Cemaforre (2009). *Accessibilité et spectacle vivant. Guide pratique*. Paris, Ministère de la culture et de la communication et Centre national de ressources pour l'accessibilité des loisirs et de la culture (Cemaforre), available at

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