

Theatre Access

2021 survey

“During lockdown, my inability to attend live theatre was my greatest regret. I am so glad theatres are now opening up again.”

“...I struggle a lot to get to places as well as not having much money, so if I could split my time between theatre and online, that would make such a difference.”

“I would love to see a mix of free and paid online content - it would make theatres more accessible and theatre performances able to be enjoyed by a wider range of people, including those who cannot afford regular theatre trips or cannot access theatres at all.”

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Foreword

The impact of Coronavirus had a disproportionate effect on people with disabilities. However, it also showed the potential of technology to provide engaging and accessible online content, and to connect communities around the globe in new and exciting ways. As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic, we must reignite our collective drive towards a fairer society, and focus on the ability, the potential and the contribution of disabled people in arts and culture - as both consumers and creatives. I welcome the *Theatre Access 2021* report as an important step in this journey.

I believe the importance of enjoying places of entertainment as disabled consumers should be matched by the fulfilment of creative potential, the elevation of disability role models and the promotion of a new narrative informed, and performed, by people with disabilities themselves. For many thousands of disabled people, the arts are the key to unlocking their potential. I hope the wealth of evidence and recommendations in this informative report inspire all those involved in, and concerned with, theatre and arts organisations, to make UK theatre a beacon of disability access and potential.

David Stanley BEM

Disability and Access Ambassador for Arts and Culture
Founder and Director of The Music Man Project

Introduction

Our *State of Theatre Access 2019* report revealed that fewer than 3 in 10 UK theatres (30%) listed any access services for upcoming productions on their website, whether audio-described, signed, captioned, relaxed, or inclusive.¹ On its publication, Nikolai Foster, Artistic Director of the Curve, challenged the sector to “find more innovative, imaginative and visionary ways to integrate accessible elements into performances”, ones that “offer exciting artistic opportunities for creatives and performers as well as equality for audiences.”

Two years on, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the theatre industry: venues and companies are closing, struggling to survive and facing huge financial strain. Skilled freelance creatives have left the industry in large numbers.² Theatres and other arts organisations have had to rely heavily on emergency funding and the furlough scheme.³

In recent months, theatres have been making difficult calculations and decisions on how to bring back staff, actors and audiences into venues, while tackling the complexities of government guidance and the impact of the pandemic on everyone’s physical and mental health.

Meanwhile, disabled people have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, faced by a ‘triple jeopardy’: the increased risk of poor outcomes from the disease (6 out of 10 people who have died from Covid-19 were disabled⁴), reduced access to routine health care and rehabilitation, and the adverse social impacts of efforts to mitigate the pandemic.⁵

“ Disabled people have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, faced by a ‘triple jeopardy’: the increased risk of poor outcomes from the disease, reduced access to routine health care and rehabilitation, and the adverse social impacts of efforts to mitigate the pandemic.”

In July 2021 Darren Henley, Chief Executive of Arts Council England called on subsidised arts organisations to take steps to ensure that disabled and clinically extremely vulnerable colleagues, performers and visitors are supported and given the flexibility that they need to feel safe to return, to give due consideration to the legal obligations they have under the Equality Act and commit to the *Seven Inclusive Principles* (See **Appendix A**).⁶

So, what are the legal obligations to disabled audiences? That no-one should face discrimination on the basis of their protected characteristics, and that venues must make adjustments to their services in order that disabled people can experience and enjoy them – the performances or online content – in as far as possible an equal or equivalent way to someone who is not disabled.

Importantly, their duty is ‘anticipatory’: they cannot wait until a disabled person wants to use the service, but must think in advance and on an ongoing basis about what disabled people with a range of access requirements might need. However, frequently, it still falls to disabled people and their organisations to proactively ensure access is available, identify gaps and problems, and suggest solutions to these, in order to experience theatre.

The onus should not be on disabled people. If we are to live up to the values enshrined in the Equality Act, it should be the urgent collective duty of everyone working in the arts and creative industries to take ownership of embedding and enforcing the social justice that it represents. That means

“ It should be the urgent collective duty of everyone working in the arts and creative industries to take ownership of embedding and enforcing the social justice that the Equality Act represents.”

theatre owners, producers, directors, managers, writers, and actors, all need to advocate for deaf, disabled and neurodivergent audiences in their venues and digital content.

Tarek Iskander, Artistic Director and CEO at Battersea Arts Centre, wrote something for the launch of *State of Theatre Access 2019* that is even more true now:

“No building can honestly call itself a ‘theatre’ unless it truly represents and includes everyone.... It is time for us all to get radical and uncompromising. The tools we need to transform already exist – what we need now more than anything is a fundamental change of mindset.”⁷

The digital bonus

The AHRC and DCMS research project *Boundless Creativity* (July 2021) examined the role of innovation in shaping cultural experiences during the pandemic: the unprecedented expansion of live streaming, digital offerings and online content was a major theme of the report and case studies therein.⁸ The words of scholar and British Museum Trustee Mary Beard at the project launch were quoted:

“One day we will look back to these dark and cloudy times as the moment when we really did harness technology to open up the best of what arts and culture have to offer on a wider and grander scale.”

As the report acknowledged, for this prediction to come true and be accurate, we must harness the lessons we have learned over the last year.

“ Streaming to ‘global audiences’ is simply exclusion by other means without audio description, subtitling and other accessibility and inclusive design measures.”

Aside from a case study of Entelechy Arts⁹, however, there was no recognition of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on disabled people, the significant proportion of disabled people who are clinically extremely vulnerable and that streaming to ‘global audiences’ is simply exclusion by other means without audio description, subtitling and other accessibility and inclusive design measures. None of the case studies for the National Theatre, Old Vic and Royal Opera House referenced the audio description and captioning that they provided for their digital offerings.

The report was correct in saying that content needs to be adapted or rethought for digital platforms, and that there is a challenge to making experiences ‘truly accessible’. Many of the issues acknowledged in *Boundless Creativity* are mirrored in comments from our survey respondents: unequal access to broadband; unequal digital literacy; digital fatigue; poor translation online of the live experience. But for the future to “not simply be an extrapolation from their past” as the report said, then disabled people need to be consulted, their views considered, their agency and creativity recognised and championed, and inclusive design principles applied to cultural digital innovation.

“ Disabled people need to be consulted, their views considered, their agency and creativity recognised and championed, and inclusive design principles applied to cultural digital innovation.”

1. The survey

According to the Government's recent *UK Disability Survey* research (June 2021), of those who had reported having difficulty accessing public buildings, **going to the theatre, cinema, or arts (48%)** was one of the top three activities which they had most frequently been unable to take part in for accessibility reasons.¹⁰

This research strongly informed the delivery of the Government's *National Disability Strategy*,¹¹ which announced a welcome new initiative for the arts, a free UK-wide arts access card for disabled audiences. This will hopefully be the first of further initiatives that support the expansion of access at venues and online and the growth of a more inclusive sector.¹²

We have been publishing reports on the accessibility of the theatre sector since 2017 with an audit of theatre website access information and services for blind, deaf and neurodivergent audiences. A similar report followed in 2019. We subsequently felt that it was important to couple these audits with surveys that turned the focus on the experiences that deaf, disabled and neurodivergent communities have in theatres and the online offerings that many developed to continue their work during lockdown.

This report publishes the findings of a survey that ran from 17 May 2021 to 16 August 2021, specifically seeking people who had visited a theatre in the 12 months before the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 and were users of access services or facilities there. The figures are based on 528 respondents who matched those criteria, 82% of whom identified as deaf, disabled or neurodivergent. For more details about respondents, see **Appendix D**.

1.1. Ten key findings

In theatres

#1 Access services

Around half of respondents (49%) said that access services for theatre performances (e.g. Audio Description, BSL, Captions or Relaxed) were very or extremely important to them.

See Appendix B for a guide to how theatres can explore improvements to their access provision.

#2 Booking

Of those who took the survey before 19 July, when Covid-19 restrictions were lifted, over half (52%) had not booked for any upcoming performances; after 19 July, this figure dropped to 40%.

Of all those non-bookers, around a half (51%) said that they would consider returning if they felt sufficiently confident that social distancing and hygiene measures had been put in place.

#3 Public transport

Nearly half (46%) were moderately or extremely concerned about using public transport as part of their visit to a theatre.

Many who regularly rely on public transport had Covid-related concerns, though for others, accessibility issues meant that it was never an option.

#4 Vaccine passport

3 out of 4 (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that they would be happy to get a government-issued 'vaccine passport' if required.

No details were provided about the form of the passport. Some suggested that we should have referred to an NHS-issued passport; others raised concerns about how a passport could exclude those who could not get a vaccine, as opposed to those who made a choice not to.

#5 Comfort factors

Over 4 out of 5 (82%) said that they would be more likely to visit a theatre that they knew had good access facilities and services.

The top 'comfort factors', each selected by over half of respondents, were: discounted tickets, disability awareness and knowledge among staff, and the provision of information about accessible facilities and support.

Online theatre

#6 Who's watching?

Since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 over a half of respondents (54%) – all of whom had been to a theatre in the previous 12 months – had experienced some theatre online.

#7 After the return

Around 3 out of 4 (76%) said that they would be less likely to engage with theatre online after the return to venues, though 1 in 3 (35%) said that they would still consider things that they would not be able to experience in person.

There was a strong theme in the comments that online theatre is not an adequate replacement for the in-person experience, which for many was of great importance and inextricable from the theatre experience that they loved and valued.

Theatres should therefore focus more than ever on making their venues and live performances accessible: disabled people want to return, and online content alone is not a satisfactory 'alternative format'.

However, many respondents were very positive about a hybrid future that meant disabled people might experience even more theatre than before 2020, particularly those who are not able to travel as easily or for whom access barriers at venues are more significant. Online theatre should remain as a long-term option: both for accessibility and for opening up theatre beyond individual regions and beyond the UK.

#8 Free/paid

Around 1 in 4 (24%) said that they would be more likely to engage with theatre online after the return to venues: 13% would pay, while 11% said they would only engage with free content.

Free or low-cost online access is a good way of breaking down the financial barriers to accessing theatre, which are only increasing in significance for disabled people. For example, only one in four people of working age who are registered blind and partially sighted are in employment. The impact of Covid-19 has reinforced existing economic inequalities for disabled people.

#9 Like?

37% agreed or strongly agreed that they 'didn't like watching live-streamed or recorded theatre online' 28% were neutral, 5% didn't know, leaving 3 in 10 (30%) who were positive about watching theatre online.

Reasons given for disliking live-streamed or recorded staged productions fell into two main themes: the lack of atmosphere and intimacy of 'being in the room' and poorer quality filmcraft by comparison with drama produced for TV or on demand channels such as Netflix. Poor broadband was also an issue for some.

#10 Accessibility

For around half of respondents (47%), over half of the online theatre that they came across was inaccessible to them. For those for whom audio description is important, around 2 out of 3 people (65%) said that over half of the online theatre that they came across was inaccessible to them.

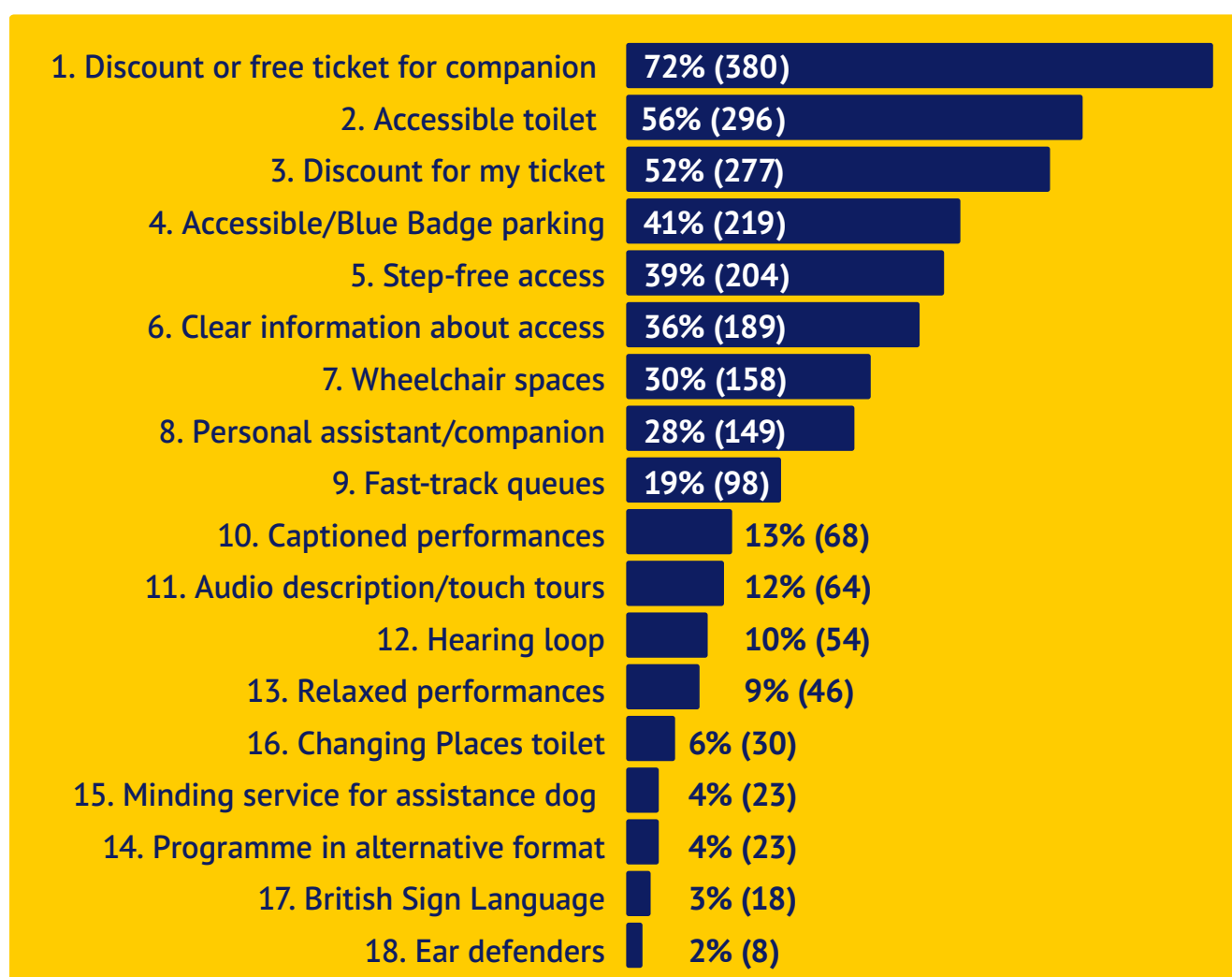
Online theatre is not a magic solution to theatre accessibility: many people do not have access to the internet. And it needs to be properly supported with professional audio description and subtitles to be accessible to all.

2. Full survey findings: in theatres

The first part of the survey focused on respondents' visits to theatres and related access requirements in the 12 months before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, and their thoughts on returning to theatres in the coming months in 2021, in relation to Covid-19 and access.

2.1 Access facilities, support or services

The table below is not intended to suggest a hierarchy of importance, but demonstrate how a wide range of access facilities, support or services are important to deaf, disabled and neurodivergent theatregoers. The 510 respondents to the question each selected an average of 4.4 items.



Other access facilities or requirements that respondents mentioned were, in alphabetical order:

- **Booking:** access; early; alternatives (online, phone, email etc)
- **Caption glasses**
- **Flashing lights:** information about
- **Food and drink:** in-seat delivery
- **Handrails**
- **Leaving/visiting toilet** during performance
- **Lighting levels:** FOH
- **Pre-show information:** script, content notes and plot summary
- **Quiet area**
- **Seating:** choice; comfort; leg room; numbers clearly and boldly marked; position (near toilets, aisle, level access/number of steps to); sightline for lip reading; sitting disability, consideration for; view from
- **Signposting and wayfinding:** clear in FOH areas
- **Sound levels and noise:** information about
- **Staff (on switchboard and FOH):** caring; considerate; guiding to seat; knowledgeable; trained
- **Ventilation** and air conditioning
- **Walker:** storage of
- **Wheelchair:** level floor; within area that Audio Description reaches

2.2 Access services in theatres

Around half of respondents (49%) said that accessible theatre performances (e.g. Audio Description, BSL, Captions or Relaxed) were very or extremely important to them.

Only 1 in 5 (20%) said that they were of low, or no importance.

Around a quarter (26%) said that they required them in order to feel comfortable returning to a theatre in the coming months.

In their own words

“AD means the world to me ... it makes the experience. Without it it's a real struggle and I miss out on a lot”

“I am visually impaired, it is very important to have audio description even though I have a little sight to just about make out what is going on stage. If there was no audio description, I would have struggled very badly and not been able to enjoy myself.”

“It's unlikely I would go to see a show unless it had an audio description and/or touch tour as I find these integral to the whole theatre experience.”

“If they did not do AD performances we would not attend and it would break my husband.”

“Captions are the only way I can follow a performance, so if it's not captioned, I don't go.”

“I am profoundly deaf and lipread so I can never follow any dialogue unless the whole show is captioned or signed by a BSL interpreter. Personally, I prefer captioned and 80% of the shows I attend are captioned.”

“I need a wheelchair space plus captions - captions are often not visible from wheelchair spaces so I often miss out on performances.”

“Without them [captions] I cannot hear the performance, even with hearing aids. For difficult scripts like Shakespeare, they are also invaluable.”

“I can attend some things without the need for any access services, but I have friends who cannot – we want to be able to go to things together so it's important for everyone.”

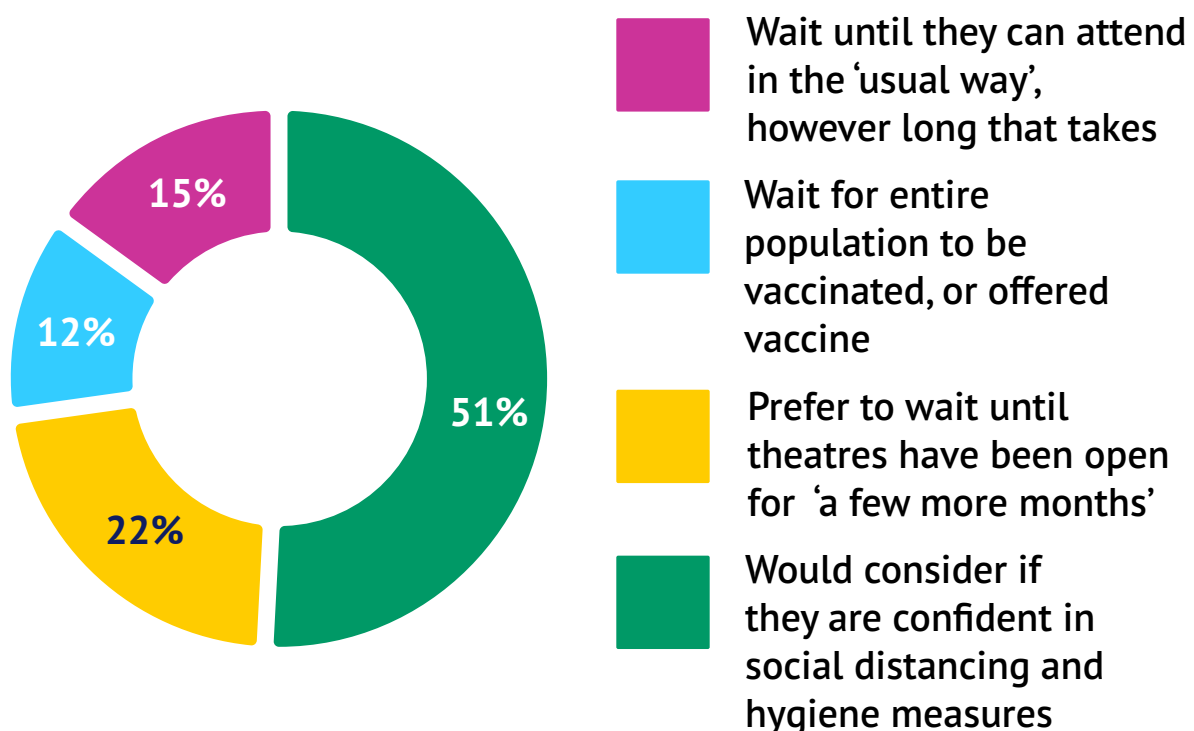
“...I think it's important for subtitles/BSL/audio description to be used in as many performances as possible. Not only do they help those who need it, using them as much as possible normalises accessible features. People who aren't disabled can also use these features to be able to take in as much of the performance as possible. I find it hard to focus on TV shows and films without subtitles.”

2.3 Returning to theatres

As reported by Arts Council England (*A re-opening for everyone*, 16 July 2021), there is considerable caution among disabled people and people who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) about revisiting arts spaces as restrictions are removed. Our survey strongly backs this up.

Only 14% of respondents have visited a theatre since re-opening, and nearly half (45%) have not booked for any upcoming performances.

Of those non-bookers, around a half (51%) said that they would consider returning if they felt sufficiently confident that the required social distancing and hygiene measures had been put in place. The remainder stated that they would prefer to wait until theatres have been open 'for a few more months' (22%); 'until the whole population had been vaccinated (or offered a vaccine)' (12%) or 'until they can attend "in the usual way" again, however long that might take' (15%).

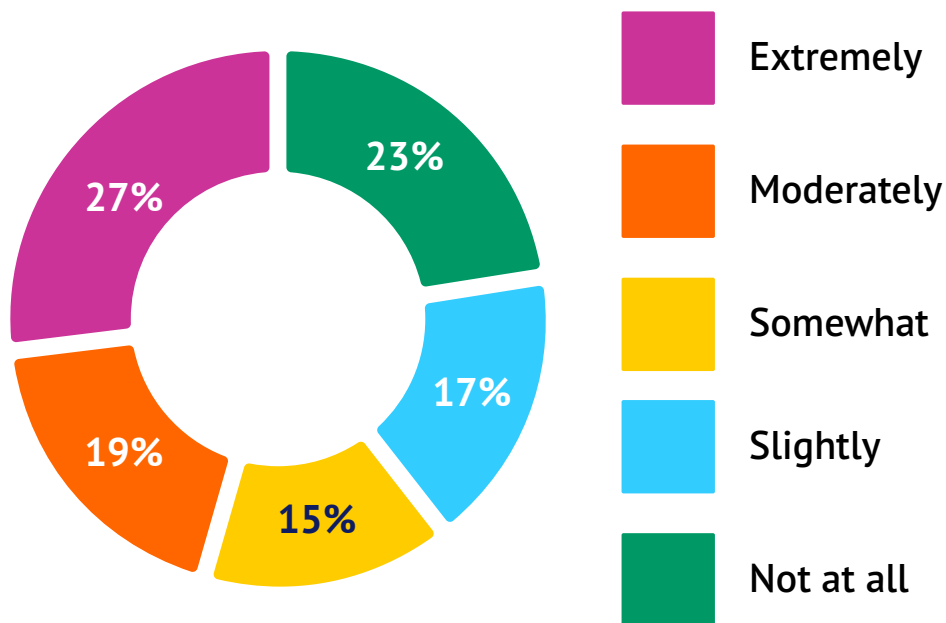


Other reasons why people have not booked

- **Inflated prices.** “I know theatres have been hit hard but so have I and my disabled companion.”
- **Lack of shows that they are interested in or want to see.**
- **Lack of confidence that the performance will not be postponed or cancelled.**
- **Mask-wearing.** Several said that they wanted masks worn by all throughout the performance, not just in lobby.
- **Poor air circulation.**
- **Lack of accessible parking** at or near theatres.

2.4 Public transport

Many respondents were concerned about using public transport as part of their visit to a theatre (46% were moderately or extremely concerned): the implication is that people who use access facilities will not make visits outside their local area: and for many who do not live near a theatre, this means that they will be excluded for a long time.



In their own words

“Mobility disability prevents me using public transport - take it this question relates to catching covid.”

“More concerned regarding accessibility on transport and frequency of service.”

“Availability to transport is a problem from where I live. Services have been withdrawn & not yet reinstated if ever!”

“Being registered blind, I am unable to judge how close people are to me and do not know whether or not they are wearing a face mask.”

“Busy public transport is one thing that exacerbates my disability so the way it is quieter now is ideal. I doubt it will continue to be this way but I hope maybe they can put extra transport on so people aren't forced to be squashed together.”

“Can't really use public transport other than mini cabs - which I am still reluctant to do.”

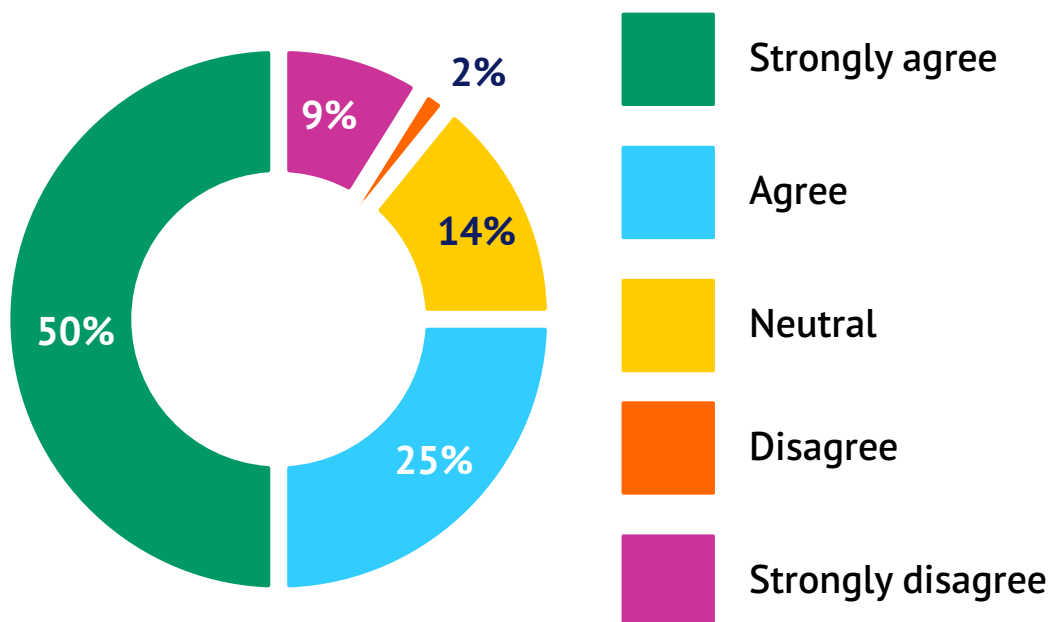
“Disturbed to use [rail line] last week and mask wearing was very haphazard so for those of us who've had to shield, this is very disturbing.”

“Do not feel safe travelling on public transport at night.”

“I am concerned that social distancing will not be enforced on buses in my city - they were extremely overcrowded at weekends and evenings before the pandemic “

2.5 Vaccine passports

A clear majority of respondents were favourable to a vaccine passport (75% agreed or strongly agreed that they would be happy to get a government-issued vaccine passport if required, compared to 11% who disagreed or strongly disagreed).

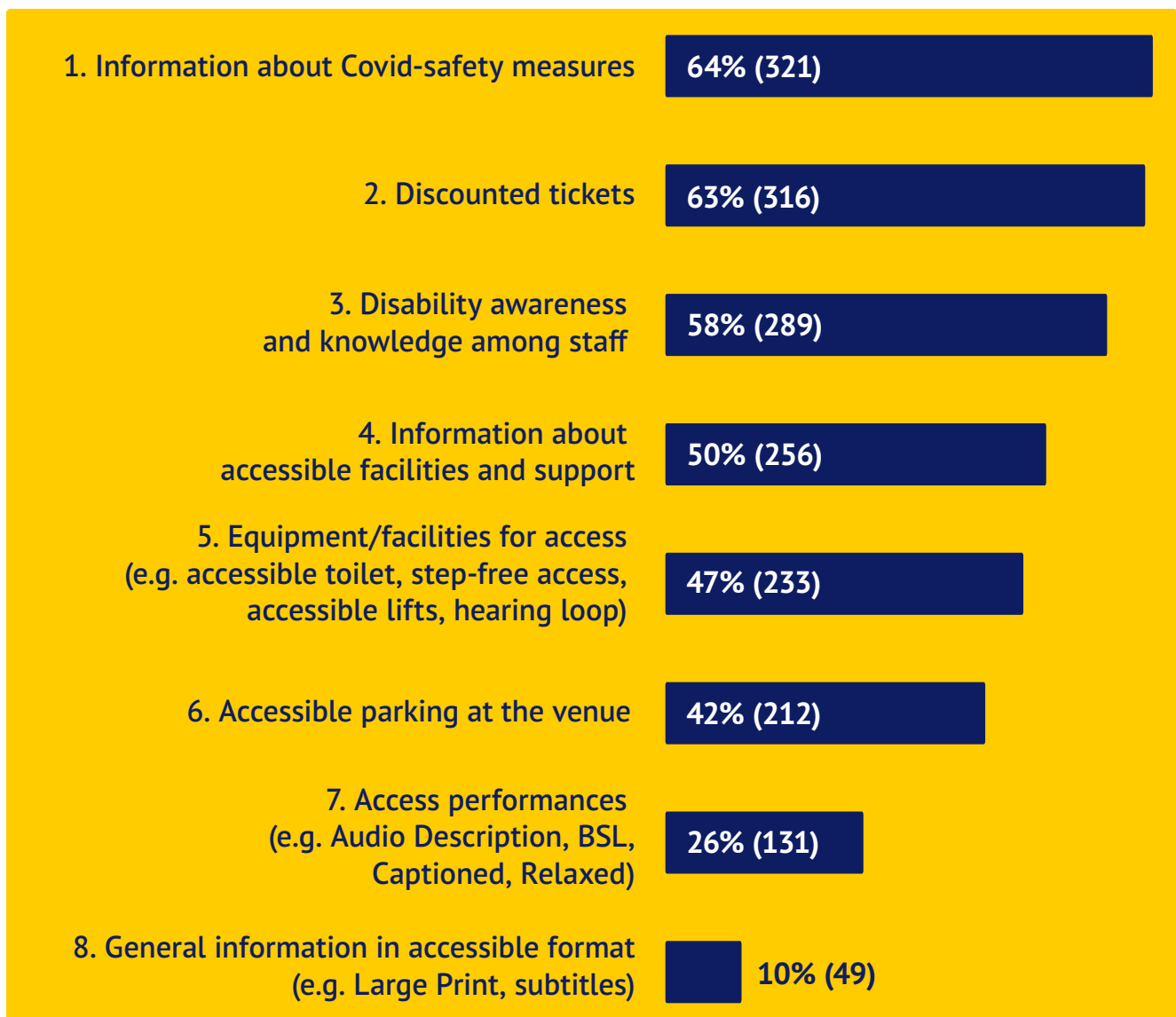


At the time of writing, the UK Government plans only to enforce use of the NHS Covid Pass in higher-risk settings such as nightclubs, with legislation scheduled for the end of September, by which time all people over 18 will have had the chance to be fully vaccinated. In the meantime, commercial theatre organisation Ambassador Theatre Group have already decided to require ticketholders provide proof of double vaccination status or a negative lateral flow test (as of 19 July). Others may follow.

2.6 Comfort factors

Over 4 out of 5 respondents (82%) said that they would be more likely to visit a theatre that they knew had good access facilities and services.

The survey asked respondents to select factors which they would require to feel comfortable returning to theatres.



Each respondent to the question selected an average of 3.6 of the 8 factors.

In their own words

“I think they should be compulsory.”

“Would feel safer knowing other audience members had been vaccinated.”

“Would have no issues if it meant I could go back into a theatre.”

“This is an excellent idea for theatres and I strongly support it”

“I would hope that there would be an alternative to an electronic one as that could be difficult for me.”

“In order to go to a theatre, I don't think that it is extremely necessary to have a vaccine passport if I am already following the government guidelines for example e.g. wearing a mask, staying 1/ 2 meters distance or applying hand sanitiser.”

“The vaccine doesn't stop an individual from getting the virus and lateral flow tests are only 50% effective so I don't understand why vaccine passports would make a difference.”

“No consideration for those who cannot have it.”

“This is shocking and will result in a 2-tiered society.”

In their own words

“Also one that I have visited before, so the layout is familiar.”

“Truer to say ‘it is impossible for me to visit a theatre that does not have good access and facilities’”

“I tend to suffer dreadful places in order to hear something special. It’s more a matter of can I actually get to it.”

“I would travel further and pay more for a venue that put accessibility as a priority. Sadly very few exist.”

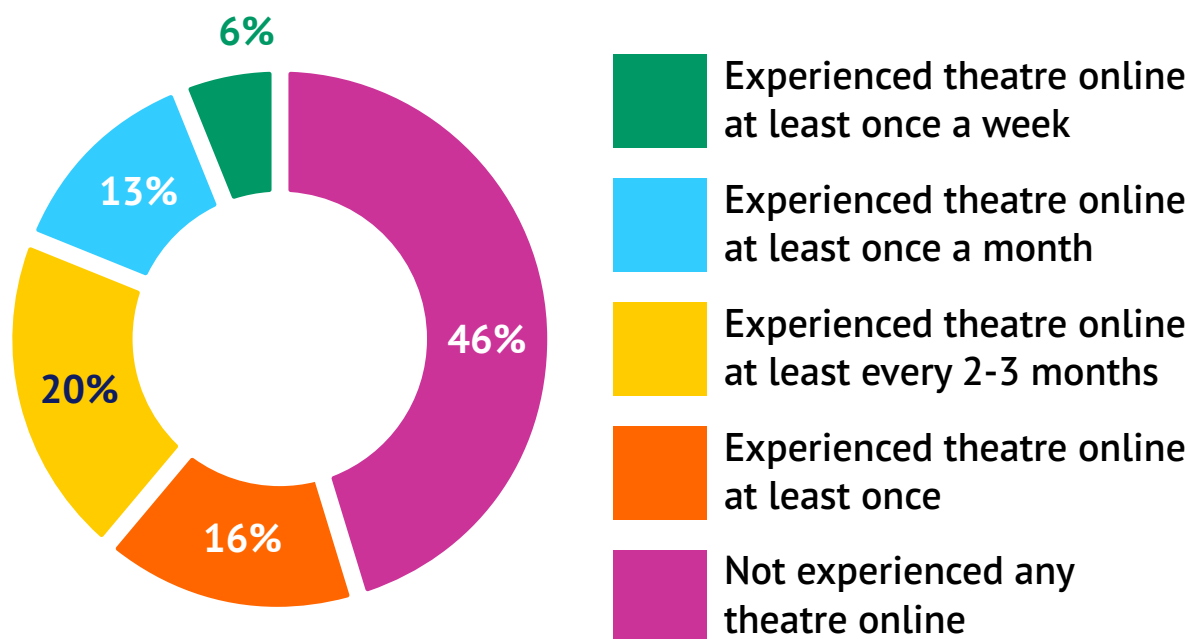
“If I really wanted to see something even where access facilities are basic I will attend, but it does make it a bit more challenging and sometimes stressful.”

“I am not able to visit most West End theatres. Only National Theatre, Barbican and The Bridge.”

“I can always be sure that Birmingham Hippodrome has fantastic facilities, nearby parking. We love this theatre.”

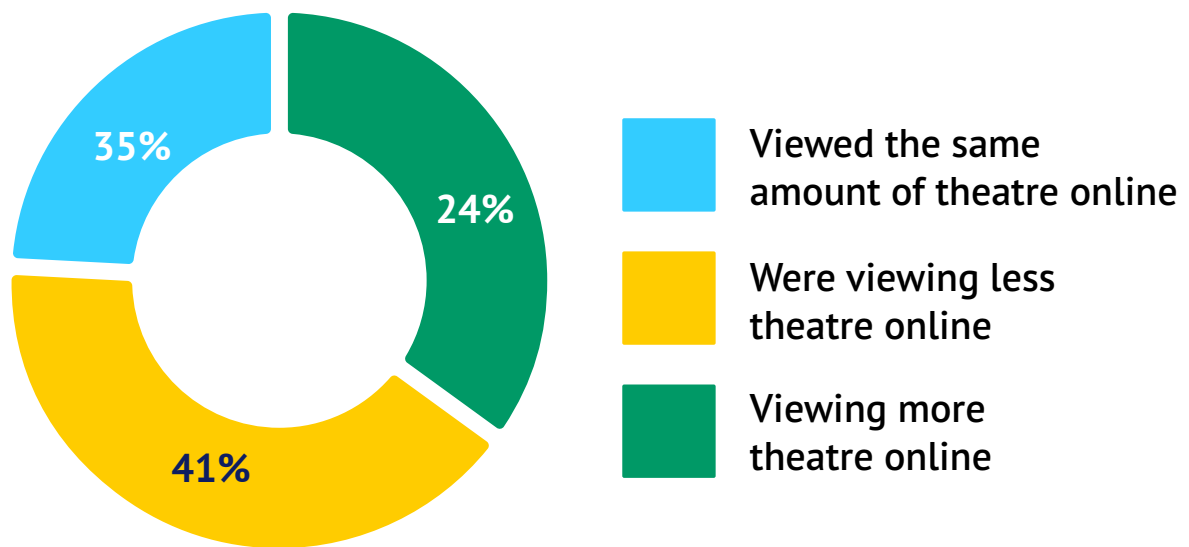
3. Full survey findings: online theatre

3.1 How much theatre online



Since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020

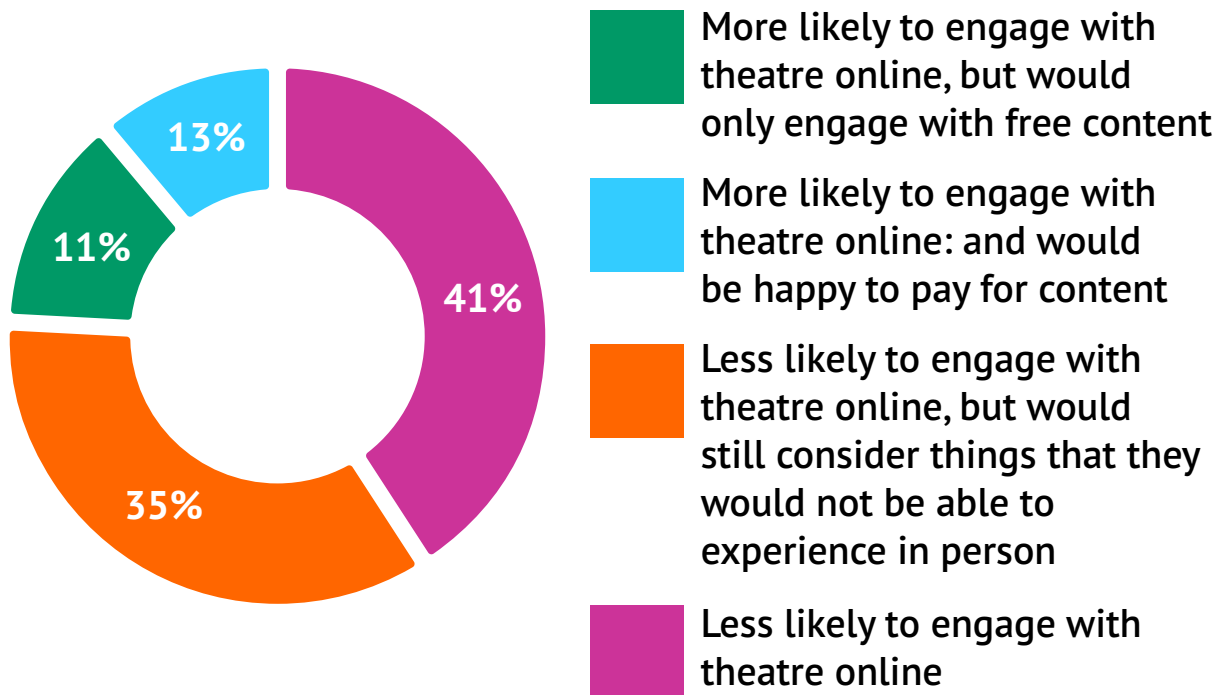
- Nearly a half of respondents (46%) had not experienced any theatre online
- 16% had experienced theatre online at least once
- 20% had experienced theatre online at least every 2-3 months
- 13% had experienced theatre online at least once a month
- 6% had experienced theatre online at least once a week



Compared with before Covid:

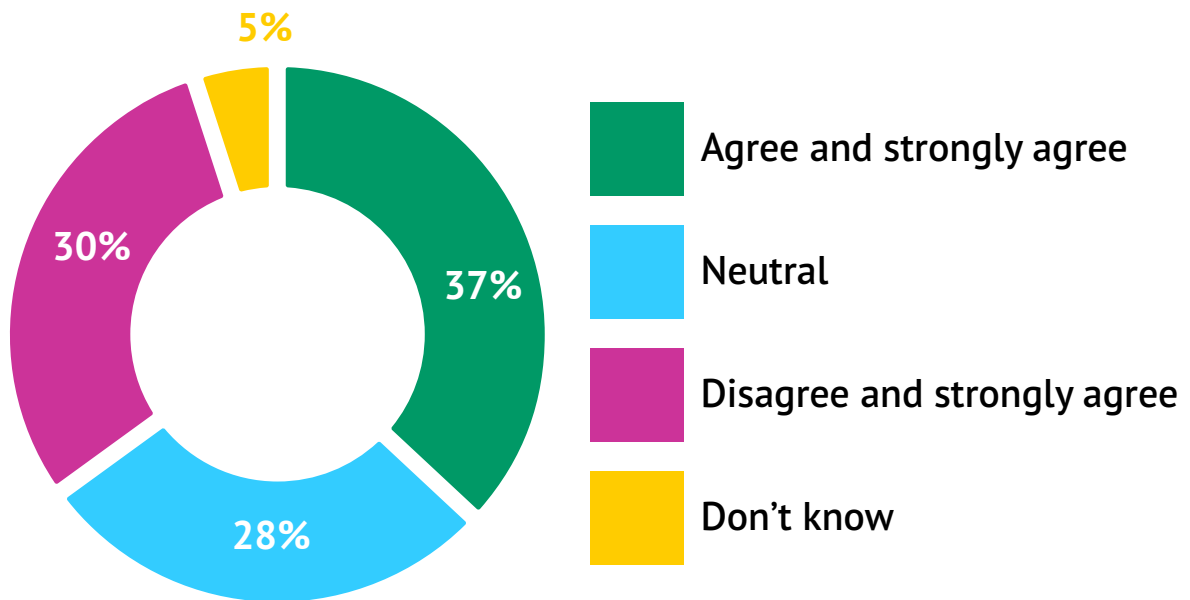
- Around 1 in 3 (35%) respondents were viewing more theatre online
- Around 4 in 10 (41%) were viewing less
- 1 in 4 (24%) were neutral

3.2 The future when we are 'back in theatres'



Around 3 out of 4 of respondents (76%) said that they would be **less likely** to engage with theatre online, though 1 in 3 (35%) said that they would still consider things that they would not be able to experience in person.

Around 1 out of 4 respondents (24%) said that they would be **more likely** to engage with theatre online: 13% would pay, while 11% said they would only engage with free content.



37% agreed or strongly agreed that they “didn’t like watching live-streamed or recorded theatre online” 28% were neutral, 5% didn’t know, leaving 3 in 10 (30%) who were positive about watching theatre online.

In their own words: positive

“I think that having live theatre available has been a great development for those in the disability community. It has created access to many who may not be able to travel as easily or struggle with access. It’s a shame that it took a pandemic to create more options to access theatre from your home, but would love for it to stay and be an option. Great option if you’re poorly and unable to go or logistics that are difficult to see theatre in their buildings. Been great watching from the comfort of my home. Whilst it definitely doesn’t replace the in-person experience, which I preferably prefer and love. However, to have options are great. Happy to pay a reasonable price, since I love to support the theatre. Long may it stay!”

“It is FABULOUS to be able to access the theatre in this way. I saw many productions especially National Theatre ones that I hadn’t been able to access due to health issues and lack of convenient subtitling.”

“It’s been fab as even not in lockdown I struggle to go out and be reliable. I miss events due to illness. Online I can watch in bed! Not same but it’ll do.”

“Online has opened up a whole new world, literally, with the chance to view material from the US and Canada, Australia and New Zealand and other English-speaking regions.”

“The livestreaming of theatre, particularly the series of free performances on YouTube via the “The Shows Must Go On” channel, has been wonderful. I would love to see more West End shows make live performances available online. The huge success of the Hamilton movie has proved that livestream theatre can not only be artistically relevant, it can be highly profitable.”

“I prefer live-streamed it has changed my enjoyment of the theatre.”

“Have tried hard to support as many productions as possible especially regional theatres.”

“As previously, it would supplement when and where I cannot attend live theatre performance.”

“Enables me to enjoy theatre in parts of the country I could not get to.”

“...I struggle a lot to get to places as well as not having much money so if I could split my time between theatre and online, that would make such a difference.”

“Would happily engage with theatre online but also want to experience live theatre in person. Cannot experience the same atmosphere online. However, would happily engage online as it allows access to so much more.”

“I would love to see a mix of free and paid online content – it would make theatres more accessible and theatre performances able to be enjoyed by a wider range of people, including those who cannot afford regular theatre trips or cannot access theatres at all.”

“I’d be happy to keep online subscriptions in order to access online theatre as subtitled performances in the theatre are not always at the most convenient times. This would give me flexibility and the chance to see theatre that I wouldn’t without the online platforms.”

“I can’t get out to the theatre as often as I would like because of my fatigue and pain; there is no form of access service that can help reduce this so being able to see some shows online means I would not be missing out. I would go to things in person if I can but when I am too ill to go out I can just relax at home and watch a show. Also, the financial barrier to accessing shows is bigger for the disabled community – we often don’t have as much money to spend on entertainment so a low-cost live stream is ideal.”

In their own words: negative

“... I’ve discovered I don’t want recorded theatre. It only really works for more intimate shows where the scale of the performance matches the size of shot, because that’s closer to how it would be if I was in the audience....”

“For me, it is the LIVE aspect of theatre that makes it so special. To see the actors directly in front of you rather than in a small glass box. It’s also the whole experience of getting dressed up, fancy dinner, selecting the seats. It’s a whole wonderful experience!”

“I hate online theatre & will not watch anymore of it.”

“Broadband provision is unreliable which is a disincentive.”

“I find the online experience such a distortion of the live experience that I prefer productions made for television or to read a good book.”

“I am loath to pay much in advance for tickets for live events as my broadband is often unreliable.”

“Apart from being visually impaired, I have mild learning difficulties, viewing things online is difficult for me. I prefer to be in an actual theatre, sat in the audience and listening to the performance live like that.”

“Have only watched one show. It wasn’t as good as live theatre and felt like watching a poor-quality film. Would much rather wait until I can see shows in person.”

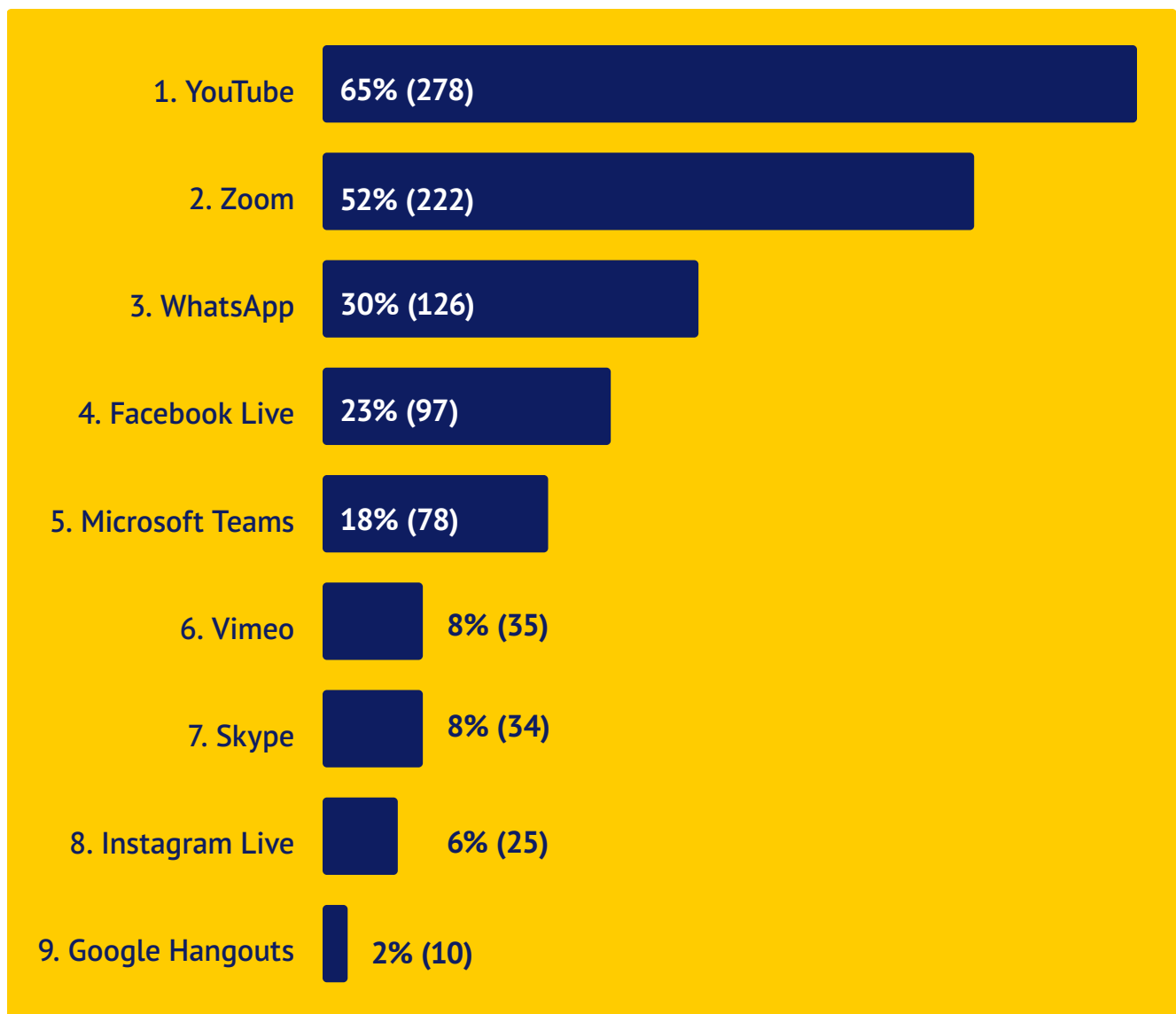
“I go to the theatre to get out and feel alive not to sit at home and watch it on the telly (which I don’t have).”

“There is enough live theatre in London so little incentive to watch performances not designed for television.”

3.3 Platforms

Of those who had experienced online theatre during the pandemic, **video platforms** such as YouTube, Vimeo were the most used (246, 84%), followed by **video-conferencing/meeting platforms** such as Zoom, or Microsoft Teams (141, 48%) and **social media platforms** such as WhatsApp, Facebook Live or Instagram Live (96, 33%).

The most 'accessible or easy to use' platforms



Respondents selected an average of 2.1 platforms. Other platforms mentioned in the comments were BBC iPlayer, Discord, Disney+, MetroHD, Netflix, NT Live, Stabal, Stream.Theatre, Trafalgar Releasing and Twitch.

Access services

Around 1 in 5 respondents (18%) said that **Audio Description** was somewhat or very important for their experience

Around 1 in 10 respondents (9%) said that **British Sign Language** was somewhat or very important for their experience

1 in 3 respondents (33%) said that **Subtitles** were somewhat or very important for their experience.

3.4 Accessibility of online theatre

The proportion of online theatre that was accessible to those who told us that access services were important for their experience of online theatre:

	All	AD	BSL	Subtitles
Less than 25%	30%	39%	25%	27%
25%–50%	17%	26%	22%	22%
50%–75%	17%	19%	25%	20%
75%–100%	36%	15%	36%	30%

For around half (47%) of respondents, half of the online theatre that they came across was inaccessible to them.

For those for whom audio description is important, around 2 out of 3 (65%) said that over half of the online theatre that they came across was inaccessible to them.

The quality of the access

	All	AD	BSL	Subtitles
Poor/Very poor	10%	10%	20%	17%
Neutral	58%	44%	51%	39%
Good/Very good	31%	45%	28%	44%

Only 3 in 10 respondents (31%) said that the access services that they experienced was good or very good. 58% were neutral, and 1 in 10 (10%) said that it was poor or very poor.

Appendix A:

The Seven Inclusive Principles

1. All organisational activities must comply with the requirements of *The Equality Act (2010)* and make reasonable adjustments to operating practice that ensure disabled people are not unlawfully discriminated against.
2. All actions relating to disabled people should be undertaken in accordance with the Social Model of Disability and aim to combat and eliminate ableism.
3. Co-production with disabled people: disabled people should be consulted when organisations develop bespoke operating or re-opening plans, and undertake Equality Impact Assessments before making decisions.
4. Organisations need to provide clear, accurate and comprehensive information about Covid-19 measures to enable disabled artists, practitioners, employees, visitors, audiences and participants to assess their own levels of risk, and be prepared to adapt to specific enquiries or requests.
5. The customer journey for disabled audiences and visitors should be thoroughly mapped, ensuring it is equality impact assessed, clearly communicated in multiple formats to the public, and prioritise free companion tickets to maintain essential access.
6. Disabled artists are an important cultural asset in the UK and their engagement in all new creative projects should be prioritised.
7. Organisations should ensure they celebrate diversity, embed anti-ableist principles to support and protect disabled people, and should demonstrate due care for the disabled workforce when making decisions about redundancy, restructuring and new ways of working.¹³

Developed by: We Shall Not Be Removed ([WeShallNotBeRemoved.com](https://www.weshallnotberemoved.com)), Ramps on the Moon ([RampsOnTheMoon.co.uk](https://www.rampsonthemoon.co.uk)), Attitude is Everything ([AttitudelsEverything.org.uk](https://www.attitudelsomething.org.uk)), Paraorchestra ([ParaOrchestra.com](https://www.paraorchestra.com))
What Next? ([WhatNextCulture.co.uk](https://www.whathnextculture.co.uk))

Appendix B:

Access guide for theatres

#1 Set up an access user group

Learn from the group about access barriers. Consider meetings both at the theatre, and online. Provide refreshments and reimburse local travel costs for the former.

#2 Map the visitor journey

Learn from your access user group about how they find out what's on, how they book tickets, travel to and from the theatre, and experience the show both in person and online.

Consider intersectionality: are the caption units visible from the wheelchair spaces? Does the audio description reach the wheelchair spaces?

#3 Check accessibility of marketing and promotion

Are your marketing and social media communications accessible? Do you have connections with local groups to promote your access performances?

#4 Check your ticket booking system

Ensure your booking systems (online, phone and face to face) enable disabled people to book access tickets, buy discount and free companion tickets.

Attitude is Everything's [State of Access Report 2018](#) examines the barriers to booking tickets for live music events and sets out a vision for ticketing without barriers.

#5 Review your website information

Detailed, informative and accurate access information online is a vital step for disabled people considering or planning a visit. See *State of Theatre Access 2019* for more details, and **Appendix C** for a checklist of key information that you should provide.

#6 Commission an access audit of your venue

An access audit will help establish how well your venue performs in relation to access and ease of use by a wide range of potential users, including people with mobility, cognitive and sensory access requirements. The recommendations can then inform future planned works.

#7 Explore access services for your productions

See **Appendix F** for organisations to contact about Audio Description, BSL, Captioning and Relaxed performances.

#8 Employ disabled actors, writers, creatives, managers and front of house staff

Read UK Theatre's [*Inclusive Recruitment Guide*](#) which breaks down the recruitment process to help you write a better job pack, remove bias from selection processes, and suggests where to post job ads to reach a wider talent pool.

The guide also highlights examples of best practice from existing resources and recommends organisations and consultants who can assist with recruitment.

#9 Consider integrating access within your productions

Rather than adding access after the production has been written and designed, consider how you can integrate accessible features such as BSL, audio description and captioning into the heart of the production itself. Work with a disabled consultant from the start of the production, and empower the company to find creative and inclusive solutions to access.

Appendix C: Key theatre website access information

State of Theatre Access 2019 has more detail on location, structure and formats.¹⁴

#1 Welcome message

Use inclusive language throughout, addressed directly to the reader.

#2 Access contact details

Provide email and telephone number for people with additional enquiries or requesting personal support.

#3 Getting to the theatre

For arrival on foot, by public transport or car. Provide descriptive directions for blind and visually impaired people.

#4 Accessible parking

Location, alternative if main one is full; cost and how to pay or book; distance to main entrance.

#5 Venue images

Exterior and interior.

#6 Concessions

Information about ticket concessions for disabled people and companions. Details of proof required, if relevant.

#7 Physical access

Areas of venue without step-free access; alternative routes, including lifts and ramps

#8 Accessible toilets

Location and information, including photographs; nearest Changing Places toilet.

#9 Alternative formats

Large Print/Braille programme.

#10 Hearing induction loops

Instructions and coverage in auditorium.

Appendix D: About the respondents

Respondents were invited to complete the survey as a UK resident who had visited a theatre in the 12 months before the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 and was a user of access services or facilities.

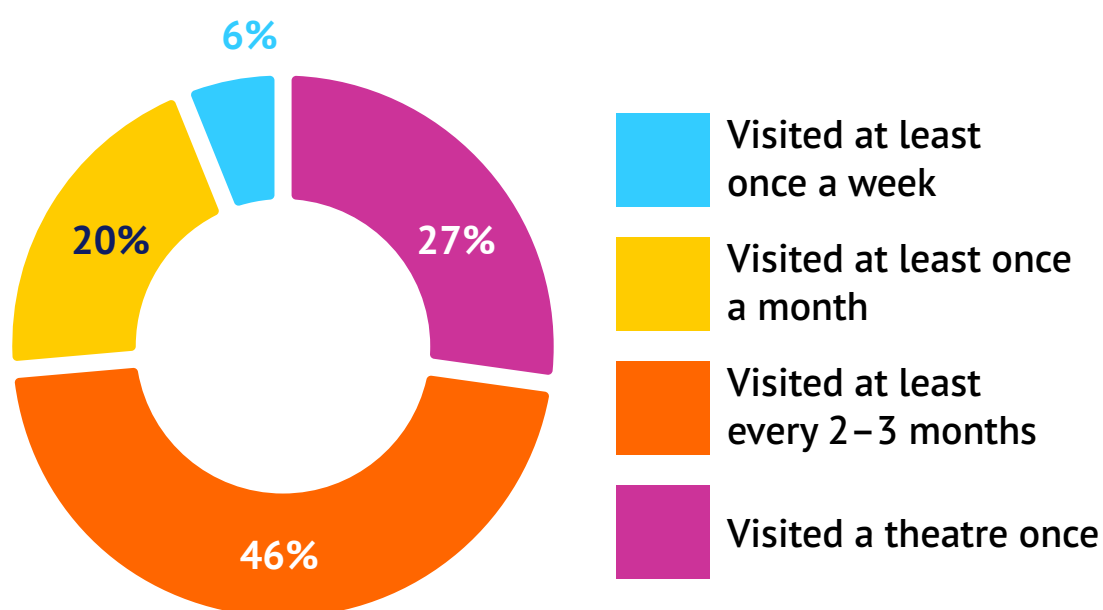
The survey was open from 17 May 2021 – when theatres were permitted to re-open to the public – to 16 August 2021. Distributed using the SurveyMonkey platform with an alternative format version in Microsoft Word, it was promoted through social media and email marketing by VocalEyes, Stagertext and the Centre for Accessible Environments, with additional assistance from other sector bodies such as The Audience Agency and other arts organisations in our networks.

A total of 540 people responded to the survey, from across the UK.

The published figures are based on the 528 responses from UK residents who matched the requirements. No questions were mandatory, and percentages given are based on the respondents for the specific question.

82% of respondents identified as deaf, disabled or neurodivergent.

During the 12 months before the first lockdown of March 2020:



Respondents thus made at least 3,969 theatre visits in the 12 months before the March 2020 lockdown.

Age (n=489)

16–24: 5%, 25–34: 10%, 35–44: 11%, 45–54: 16%, 55–64: 24%, 65+: 34%

Gender identity (n=488)

Female: 79%, Male: 20%, Non-binary: 1%

Percentage is calculated excluding the 6 respondents who selected ‘prefer not to say’

Ethnic identity (n=490)

White British: 89%; White Irish: 1%; Other White background: 3%; Black Caribbean: 1%; ; White and Black Caribbean: 1%; White and Black African: <1%; White and Asian: 1%; Other Mixed background: 2%; Indian: <1%; Chinese: <1%; Other Asian background: 1%; Arab: <1%; Other ethnic group: 1%

Percentage is calculated excluding the 14 respondents who selected ‘prefer not to say’

Location (n=485)

East Midlands: 7%; East of England: 3%; London: 20%; North East England: 1%; North West England: 3%; Northern Ireland: <1%; Scotland: 1%; South East England: 8%; South West England: 5%; Wales: 1%; West Midlands: 50%, Yorkshire: 2%

Appendix E: Additional comments by respondents

Live theatre

“Covid measures will be especially important to disabled people as so many of us are at higher risk; the government guidance does not properly protect us so we will be relying on individual theatres to enforce appropriate measures so that we are still able to attend, thank you.”

“During lockdown, my inability to attend live theatre was my greatest regret. I am SO glad theatres are now opening up again.”

“I find that the whole experience of a theatre trip is enjoyable: the travel, social interaction and live performances.”

“I love live performances, that what the theatre is all about.”

“I miss live theatre and cannot wait until I have both vaccines and will be able to “return”

“I’ve felt so invisible in the last year. Theatres have an opportunity to send a radical message to disabled people that they are thought about and welcome – but I’m yet to see much evidence of this.”

“In general, the access requirement that helps me – someone who works in theatre and is very comfortable in arts spaces but is neurodivergent (ND) – is just the knowledge that staff will be approachable and may have been trained in how to help someone ND if they’re struggling. So if I’m in a really busy space, with lots of people, and I’m stressed, I just need people to be calm and kind. Regardless of whether or not I’m asking for help. So, if I can’t hear well because background noise is drowning out the detail of speech, then e.g. not being impatient or frustrated if I ask someone to repeat themselves makes a massive difference.”

“Thank you to all the lovely staff at The NT and Sam Wanamaker. I really appreciated their support when returning to the theatre after becoming deaf. I am not ashamed to admit I cried as I hadn’t been able to go for over

four years! It meant a lot to be back in the theatre. I look forward to going again and absolutely love live-stream theatre with subtitles. Please keep them going!”

“There is nothing else like live theatre. When I feel safe I can’t wait to watch again. Live stream is second best but first choice always live.”

Online

“Watching theatre brings a lot of comfort to many people and having the opportunity to watch a show [online] you really want to see but can’t due to logistics or anxiety will be reassuring so those with access needs, or for other reasons i.e. financial constraints etc. can still see their favourite show!

“I’m hoping that online theatre will continue post lockdown as I’m guaranteed an unobstructed view of the stage and clear subtitles. The only thing missing is the atmosphere....”

“In theory streamed content should be easier for me, no travelling and no standing in queues, no uncomfortable seats etc. and being able to stand and move around when stiff. In reality though I prefer live performance because of the atmosphere and being able to see the performers close up. It feels more intimate, thousands could be watching online, but in a theatre the performance is just for the audience. Attending a performance makes me have a flare up of pain etc. which is why I only attend occasionally for something I really want to see.”

“Keeping some livestreamed and recorded content makes theatre more accessible to a wide range of people, not just disabled people.”

“I have found online theatre more accessible and convenient than in real life. When online, all performances tend to have option of captions. In real life, typically only one or two performances in a run will have captions or BSL. Why would I be tempted “back to real theatres? They have to up their access game to compete with online.”

“On-demand recorded performances are more convenient than one-off livestreamed performances. When watching in the home convenience is key; the sense of occasion isn’t there and the atmosphere is different.”

“Theatre that is specifically created for online broadcast is better than simply watching a film of a performance.”

“There were so many online monologues during lockdown, I just long to see more people”

“With online performances, these should be available to view at our own preferred choice of time and remain available for longer than 48 hours.”

“With so much more captioned online during lockdown I saw many more productions than I could hope to see live. It is sad to say that as someone who loves theatre, opening up after lockdown makes me sad because I think access for me will deteriorate.”

Appendix F: Organisation directory and recommended reading

Partners

VocalEyes (VocalEyes.co.uk) brings theatre, museums and heritage sites and to life for blind and visually impaired people. They provide audio description services for live performances, film and training. Contact: enquiries@VocalEyes.co.uk

Stagetext (StageText.org) is a deaf-led charity passionate about making culture accessible to all with the use of captions, live subtitles, digital subtitles and training. Contact: olivia@stagetext.org

Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE.org.uk) is the UK's leading authority on inclusive design and management. They provide access audits for public venues of all types. Contact: info@CAE.org.uk

Disability arts and access organisations, and recommended reading

Alzheimer's Society, Dementia Friendly Arts Venues Guide (alzheimers.org.uk/get-involved/dementia-friendly-communities/organisations/dementia-friendly-arts-venues)

Audio Description Association (AudioDescription.co.uk). A membership organisation for audio describers.

Audio Description Association Scotland (ADScotland.com). A membership organisation for audio describers and listing service for AD events in Scotland.

Birds of Paradise Theatre (BOPtheatre.co.uk). Scottish-based company that employs disabled and non-disabled actors and other theatre professionals, commissions new work, works in partnership with other organisations at home and abroad, to create positive images of inclusion and to encourage participation in the arts.

DadaFest, (DaDaFest.co.uk). An innovative and cutting edge disability and deaf arts organisation based in Liverpool that was established in 1984. Their vision is simple; to inspire, develop and celebrate talent and excellence in disability and deaf arts.

Dark Horse Theatre (DarkHorseTheatre.co.uk). One of the leading learning-disabled theatre companies in England. Tours original productions around the country and provides vocational actor training for people with learning disabilities, preparing them to work on equal terms with their non-learning-disabled peers in the professional industry.

Deafinitely Theatre (DeafinitelyTheatre.co.uk). Combine the use of BSL with spoken English, enabling both languages to be accessed at the same time.

Disability Arts Online (DisabilityArts.online). Features editorial, blogs and showcases of disability arts and culture art, providing a place where opinion pieces, reviews and interviews can be shared and commented on. Includes a directory of organisations funded as part of the Arts Council England's National Portfolio that are either led by disabled people or have programmes with a strong disability focus (DisabilityArts.online/directory/category/npo) which expands on those listed here.

Extant (extant.org.uk). The UK's leading company of visually impaired artists & theatre practitioners. Their *Integrated Access report 2018* is a useful research inquiry into the use of audio description and integrated access in the UK.

Flow Observatorium (FlowOBSAD.wixsite.com/flow-observatorium). Supports Neurodivergent people to make work, collaborate, and engage within society, the cultural sector and support the co-creation of attitudinal and physical 'safe spaces'. Read their Kongress Project about the barriers to engaging in the arts for Neurodivergent creatives (FlowOBSAD.wixsite.com/flow-observatorium/resources).

Graeae Theatre (graeae.org). A theatre company for deaf and disabled actors that includes BSL, creative captioning and audio description woven into all their productions in a mixture of both live and in ear, depending on the nature of the production.

Inclusive Description for Equality and Access (IDEA) (VocalEyes.co.uk/about/research/inclusive-description-for-equality-and-access/). A partnership between Royal Holloway University of London and VocalEyes.

Leeds Playhouse, *Theatre & Dementia*, (LeedsPlayhouse.org.uk/creative-engagement/older-people/theatre-dementia)

Leeds Playhouse, *Guide to dementia-friendly performances* (BaringFoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Dementia-Friendly-Performances-Guide.pdf)

Mind the Gap (mind-the-gap.org.uk). England's leading learning disability performance and live arts company. Collaborates and partners with other organisations to ensure that the arts sector is more inclusive to people with learning disabilities and autism.

The Music Man Project (TheMusicManProject.com). International music education and performance service for children and adults with learning disabilities. They have performed at the London Palladium and Royal Albert Hall, and oversee teaching centres across the UK and around the world. Their goal is to connect the global disabled community through music.

Nicky Taylor (NickyTaylor.uk). An independent UK based consultant and researcher focused on arts access and co-creative practice. Expertise on dementia-friendly and relaxed performances.

Oily Cart (OilyCart.org.uk). Creates interactive, sensory shows that tour across the UK and internationally. Performances use sounds, smells, touch, lights, music and movement, and can take place on a stage, a trampoline, or even up in the air. Made for and with children and young people, regardless of their age or perceived ability.

Quiplash (Quiplash.co.uk). Working from an access first perspective, Quiplash makes space for queer disabled creatives and audiences. They make accessible performances, run training and consult on disability awareness, disability justice and accessibility. Their speciality is creative and integrated audio description. Situated at the intersection of queerness and disability, Quiplash works to uplift queer disabled people and to support wider awareness of disability and access in the creative sector.

Signed Culture (SignedCulture.org.uk). Works with BSL users, arts and cultural organisations and BSL interpreters and Deaf presenters to help ensure that the cultural sector is as open and welcoming to Deaf people as it can possibly be.

Taking Flight Theatre (TakingFlightTheatre.org.uk). Creates work with deaf and disabled actors alongside non-disabled actors, and a source of advice and guidance for Welsh companies looking to improve their inclusivity.

THEATRESIGN (TheatreSign.com). BSL interpreters, training and consultancy

Tincture of Museum (TinctureOfMuseum.wordpress.com). Award-winning museum volunteer Claire Madge covers all things museum in her blog, consultancy and talks, though with a strong focus on making museums and theatres more accessible for autistic children.

Touretteshero (TourettesHero.com). Artist, writer and theatre maker Jess Thom co-founded Touretteshero in 2010 with her colleague Matthew Pountney as a response to being diagnosed with Tourette's

Syndrome in her early twenties. Their goal is to change the world ‘one tic at a time.’ They support organisations to develop relaxed performances and relaxed venues.

Unlimited ([WeAreUnlimited.org.uk](https://www.WeAreUnlimited.org.uk)). An arts commissioning programme that enables new work by disabled artists to reach UK and international audiences.

#WeShallNotBeRemoved ([WeShallNotBeRemoved.com](https://www.WeShallNotBeRemoved.com)). An intersectional UK Disability Arts Alliance formed as an emergency response to the pandemic. A forum to advocate, to campaign and support deaf, neurodivergent and disabled creative practitioners and organisations through and after Covid19. Read their UK Disability Arts Alliance 2021 Survey Report ([WeShallNotBeRemoved.com/2021survey/](https://www.WeShallNotBeRemoved.com/2021survey/)) which focuses on the impact of the pandemic on disabled people and organisations in arts and culture. The survey reveals an alarmingly fragile cultural environment for disabled people, full of intersectional inequalities.

About this report

This report was written by Matthew Cock, Chief Executive of VocalEyes, with Joanna Wood, Chair of Trustees, VocalEyes; Melanie Sharpe and Liz Hilder of Stagertext; and Teresa Rumble, Centre for Accessible Environments.

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Download the report as a PDF or Large Print text-only version in Microsoft Word at VocalEyes.co.uk/about/research.

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Notes

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