



## *Slump in disabled audiences' confidence presents major problem for the arts sector*

Andrew Miller considers the responses given by disabled audience members to the Act 2 national audience survey.

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It was a significant moment when Arts Council England announced in February that disabled people made up 12% of National Portfolio Organisation audiences during 2018/19. This statistic established for the first time that disabled people represented a substantial audience segment, according the purple pound real commercial value to the arts industry. Whilst still some way off representing the 21% of UK population who identify as disabled, it also provided an encouraging sign that large numbers of disabled people actively and regularly engaged with culture.

Within a few short months of that announcement, we are now of course in a very different world. As a result of the pandemic, all venues are closed and most disabled people are shielding. But as plans for re-opening the arts sector develop at speed, it's timely that Indigo Consulting's new survey *After the Interval Act 2* provides the first insight into what those disabled audiences are thinking now.

Undertaken in June 2020, approximately 4,000 (15%) of Indigo's respondents self-identified themselves as disabled. The headline finding is that 77% of disabled audiences consider themselves to be "vulnerable to Coronavirus" whilst only 28% of non-disabled audiences do.

This represents a huge differential that conveys vastly different priorities and concerns between disabled and non-disabled audiences as they think about booking tickets for cultural events.

And with good reason. According to the Office for National Statistics, disabled people accounted for over one third of all UK Coronavirus deaths between March and May - a grim and shockingly under-reported statistic. So entirely understandably, disabled people's choices to attend mass gatherings are viewed through the prism of health risk management to a considerably greater extent than the non-disabled. As one survey respondent observed, *"Because I am classed clinically extremely vulnerable, I just need to feel safe"*.

The good news is that the majority of disabled audiences (41%) will consider returning to venues with enforced social distancing and appropriate hygiene measures in place. The key concerns that will guide this choice is established as availability, accessibility and hygiene of toilets (61%), confidence that disabled seating is available within social distancing regulations (52%) and priority access if queue management is employed (51%).

The survey has provided valuable insights for cultural venues into why these factors count and should influence the sector's reopening plans. On toilets, one respondent observed, *"We foresee more temptation for disabled facilities to be misused if people generally have to queue longer to use the loo. Whilst it is (just) another toilet that anyone could use to ease the general situation, disabled folk often have a more compromised immune system, so the fewer members of the general public who may consider using a disabled toilet, the better for disabled patrons"*.

Others were more concerned about customer service, *"Visually impaired people still need to be guided to the seat. So before staff guide Blind people they should provide hand sanitiser and both staff and the audience should wear a mask"*. Many are concerned by provision of wider access, *"Disabled patrons should be given priority booking. This group needs to ensure its safety and those of accompanying carers and special provisions should be made for access to facilities, parking etc"*. Social distancing provided concern too, *"Many theatres especially West End have too many bottlenecks, narrow corridors, small bars and toilets with cramped access"*.

However, 26% of disabled audiences will not consider returning to venues **at all** until a vaccine or treatment for Coronavirus is available, approximately double the number of non-disabled respondents with similar concerns. Whilst many disabled audience members are torn by old loyalties, their health and wellbeing is now a greater priority in their decision making. A common survey response offered was, *"I'm missing events and want to support our local theatre, however at the moment, the risks are too great"*.

Elsewhere the data reveals that fewer disabled people are actively making advance bookings than their non-disabled peers; fewer disabled people would consider attending any outdoor event (44% versus 51% non-disabled) as many are concerned about the ability of organisers to safely enforce social distancing measures.

So it's clear that Coronavirus poses a major new barrier for disabled people to engage with the arts. The virus threatens all the progressive work that the sector has undertaken over decades to make venues accessible and to attract disabled audiences.

But none of this means that arts organisations can row back on their commitments to inclusivity. As one respondent observed, *"Relaxed performances should still be available. Without these I am unable to attend. Casual theatre formats are often more suited to social distancing"*. And another required that, *"Social distancing be applied to back stage access for disabled performers"*.

Whilst attending live events will challenge disabled audiences in the future, the survey also uncovers disparity with the only alternative, digital engagement. Interestingly fewer disabled respondents regard online events as less attractive than live events compared with non-disabled people. One disabled respondent who rarely attended events due to noise and crowds noted, *"I've LOVED online. I've attended events I NEVER would have been able to in person"*. Yet, significantly more disabled people are not confident in using the technology to access them. Indeed, a recent [survey](#) by the Glasgow Disability Alliance found that just a third of disabled people had access to home broadband during the pandemic.

Taken as a whole, this new survey confirms that Coronavirus has magnified the inequalities facing disabled audiences and compromises cultural participation and engagement. The evident slump in disabled people's confidence also presents a major problem for the arts sector. Losing up to 12% of your audience isn't good news for anyone, especially at a time when every ticket sale will count when venues re-open. As one disabled arts attender explained, *"Basically I am prepared to wait until things can return to normal. I don't think I am prepared to queue, wear masks etc - it would spoil the whole experience"*.

So how should the industry, government and national funders respond? I would suggest significant inducements be prepared to re-engage disabled audiences. For a start, any government backed sector bailouts should come with inclusive strings attached. As Disability Champion, I have long been [calling](#) for the creation of a Disability Cultural Charter and the introduction of a National Disability Arts Access scheme. Perhaps it's now time to deploy such measures in readiness for when disabled audiences, like me, are ready to return?

Disabled audiences themselves are concerned that they might be forgotten in this process, *"I do hope that disabled people will be considered in all plans for the reopening and rethinking of cultural venues"*. There is limited evidence to support that has been the case so far. With

no disabled representation on for example the Mendoza Commission overseeing Cultural Recovery & Renewal for the government; and only 3 disability representatives out of 179 members of the DCMS reopening guidance working groups. And recently Live Nation's outdoor music festival promoter Melvin Benn shared an unhelpfully ableist view of the recovery in The Guardian, "...the vulnerable are a relatively small number of people. I don't see any sign of fit, able people, young or middle-aged, losing any confidence, about the outdoors in particular".

Throughout the crisis, disabled people's voices have been marginalised, the severity of the virus rendering us invisible as we became cyphers for "underlying health conditions". In the arts, these frustrations have been given voice by #WeShallNotBeRemoved - a new national disability arts alliance with over 600 members campaigning for a more inclusive cultural recovery.

Whilst disabled people continue to experience a health and social crisis as the global pandemic plays out, *After the Interval Act 2* tells us booking tickets will not be a priority for many for some time to come. But once recovery is finally underway, it will never have been more vital for our venues, museums and galleries to remove all possible barriers to engagement. Indeed, given the scale of the disabled audience and the strength of their purchasing power, it will be both a moral and commercial necessity.

**Andrew Miller**

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