

Audience Outlook Monitor

How the pandemic has changed audience accessibility (January 2023)

Key findings

Attendance by audiences with access needs is recovering – but at a slower rate than average

Attendance levels among audiences with access needs have fluctuated during the pandemic. Data from October 2022 shows that 7 in 10 (69%) disabled audience members attended a cultural event recently – more than three times the level seen in July 2020 (19%). However, these attendance levels are increasing at a slower rate than average.

The fact that arts spaces, including museums, have been less busy has offered some disabled and immunocompromised audiences improved access to cultural activities at certain points in the pandemic.

The availability of digital events dramatically improved access for some segments. In October, 47% said they participated online recently, compared to 39% of those without access needs, though some note a dramatic reduction in the availability of online events.

Attendance has yet to return to pre-pandemic levels – and may take longer than audiences without access needs. 6 in 10 (58%) audiences with access needs are attending performing arts less than they used to, pre-pandemic, compared to 41% of audiences without access needs.

This report highlights insights from the Audience Outlook Monitor surveys, along with four case studies of audiences with access needs. They show that access needs continue to vary widely – and that more work is needed to address continuing and new barriers.

Read on for more of the summary insights, followed by a list of practical tips, and the detailed findings. [You can also access the full range of outputs online.](#)

Audiences with access needs are changing their behaviour and require updated strategies

While in general disabled audiences are more likely to face barriers to attending cultural events, the pandemic has led to new and heightened access needs. 26% of audiences surveyed identify as being disabled (10%) or immuno-compromised themselves (10%), or close to someone who is (9%), showing the impact of these issues.

There are signs that more people may be experiencing access challenges due to factors such as long COVID, reduced energy levels and re-entry anxiety.

Audiences with access needs are twice as likely to say their scheduling preferences have changed in light of the pandemic. 1 in 3 (32%) say there has been a change in the time, day or location of events, compared to 17% of audiences without access needs.

Some audiences say that they're now more likely to attend during the daytime and/or weekdays to avoid crowded times or places, minimise fatigue, and consider the availability of public transport when planning their attendance.

Financial pressures disproportionately affect audiences with access needs. The proportion citing financial reasons as a barrier to attendance is larger among audiences with access needs (49%), compared to those without (39%).

Although digital events can help to overcome barriers to live attendance, their availability is changing, and they are not for everyone. 75% of audiences with access needs see a role for digital events in their lives, but many are eager for opportunities to reconnect with the arts in-person, especially after times of isolation.

The pandemic has shown it's possible to challenge the status quo to make the arts more accessible

In some senses, the pandemic made the needs and experiences of people with disability more visible. Collective harm minimisation strategies, like lockdowns, encouraged the public to consider the needs of immunocompromised individuals and those at risk of serious health outcomes from COVID-19.

There are signs that work by d/Deaf and disabled artists and disability activists is contributing to a greater cultural awareness of disability and organisational capacity for access. Deaf artist Sue Jo Wright suggests even the presence of Auslan Interpreters at daily press conferences during lockdowns helped bring more exposure to the d/Deaf community.

After being advocated for by people with disability for many years, the livestreaming of arts events became a central part of cultural life during lockdowns – although there's still work to be done to find sustainable models for digital events.

Some people with disability will be limited in their ability to participate in public life while the virus continues to circulate, and the arts has an essential role to play in maintaining social connection and reflecting these experiences.

The pandemic showed us that it's possible to reorganise existing social practices for the collective good, especially where accessibility is concerned. Vital conversations, led by people with disability, have taken place – and the lessons learned mean the sector is better-equipped to take action to ensure the arts are accessible and inclusive.

There is an opportunity to review and update Disability Action Plans to capitalise on what has been learned and explore new strategies.

This report also includes four case studies to augment data with lived experience

A series of structured qualitative interviews were undertaken with audience members who identify as d/Deaf or disabled. Hearing from people with lived experience of inaccessibility highlights some of the challenges and opportunities for the arts and culture sector.

Alex Craig says online events have been a valuable advancement in the accessibility of arts and culture – but they're concerned the sector is trending away from digital. They say,

‘As a generalisation, people haven't taken lessons from being in lockdown and having to do things differently. For the most part, things have gone back to how they were pre-pandemic.’

Maree Jenner is a regular arts attendee who goes to events of all kinds, and says that a proactive approach to accessibility at in-person events is key. She says,

‘Disability inclusion and awareness training is really important. It means organisations become aware of the kind of help they can offer. ... Rather than waiting for people to ask, be more proactive.’

Sue Jo Wright believes that awareness of d/Deaf audiences is growing, but would like to see that d/Deaf audience members have access to the same range of works as other audiences. She says,

‘It would be fantastic if all shows were Auslan accessible. Currently, we have limited options, and like everyone else, many d/Deaf people have different tastes. I understand there's a budget problem for Access. However, if you want d/Deaf people to be there, truly make all venues/shows accessible.’

Sarah Korte says the pandemic showed a more inclusive approach to the arts was possible – and that the challenge will be for organisations to stay committed to accessibility. She says,

‘The pandemic was obviously awful for disabled people, but all the things we’ve been asking for many years, were suddenly available.’

Opportunities exist for improving access on-site, online and organisationally

Together, the Audience Outlook Monitor and [case study](#) research reveal some practical suggestions that are relevant at this time:

On-site

Provide as much information as possible, ahead of events, whether it's about venue accessibility, COVID-safety measures or ticketing policies, or the performance or venue itself. Providing information up-front about what to expect will help individuals with access needs plan their attendance on-site.

Check whether all Front of House staff have received Disability Awareness Training, and/or appoint a dedicated roving staff member before, during and after live events

to proactively offer support. As we return to in-person events, it's important to recognise that encountering untrained staff can have an emotional toll for audiences with disability.

With the use of QR codes becoming commonplace during the pandemic, venues might think about using this technology to offer alternative options for ordering food and drink, audio descriptions or Auslan interpretation.

Restore and increase sensory-friendly options such as relaxed performances, noise-cancelling headphones and quiet spaces to ensure audiences with sensory needs are able to fully participate. Tactile experiences weren't possible during some stages, but most audiences say it's now time to offer these again.

Review seating options as attendance numbers increase. Find ways to make seating available in most spaces of the event or venue – such as foyers and queuing areas – as well as performance and exhibition spaces. In addition to audiences with mobility needs, 30% of audiences say they need seating to enjoy attending.

Online

Websites:

When welcoming disabled audiences back, look into having a dedicated accessibility page on your website, so that audiences with access needs can simply and easily find the information they need. This avoids placing the 'burden of asking' on audiences with access needs and demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity.

Digital productions:

Now that in-person events have returned to a regular schedule, continue investing in digital work that is sustainable for your organisation. The pandemic taught us that digital events play a vital role in accessibility and overcoming barriers to participating in cultural experiences – and many want them to continue.

Hybrid events are one option, but sometimes digital attendees can feel sidelined compared to in-person attendees. Consider digital-only events, or appointing a digital facilitator to ensure people tuning in from home are given the opportunity to engage with performers/speakers and ask questions during Q&A's.

Marketing/communications:

Use inclusive language and accessible formats in digital advertising, communications and booking systems to let potential attendees know that an event or venue is accessible to all. This includes Plain English resources or Auslan interpretation, audio descriptions, image descriptions and alternative text.

Organisationally

As we look to the next chapter, the conversation about accessibility is evolving. Consider reviewing and updating your Disability Inclusion Action Plan to address the heightened needs of audiences with access requirements.

Incorporate accessibility early, for example when planning and decision-making. Add an accessibility line to your budget templates and develop a checklist for accessibility considerations when conducting important tasks like selecting venues, programming and commissioning works, advertising opportunities, launching major marketing campaigns and ticketing major events.

Involve disabled and immunocompromised people in the planning process of your major programs and projects. This can assist in fostering allyship and creating

opportunities for people without access needs to collaborate with disabled and immunocompromised people on access strategies.

With cost of living pressures disproportionately affecting disabled audiences, explore revenue models that address financial barriers such as subsidised ticketing policies, accessibility funds supported through grants, donations or fundraising, or partnering with advocacy groups and support networks.

Introduction

This fact sheet shares insights related to audience accessibility from over 800 attendees of arts and cultural events

Launched in May 2020, the Audience Outlook Monitor is tracking audience sentiment in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. It involves a cross-sector collaborative survey process involving around 100 arts and culture organisations, including museums, galleries, performing arts organisations and festivals.

On 12 October 2022, participating organisations simultaneously sent the Phase 8 survey to a random sample of their audience – defined as those who had attended an arts or cultural event in person since January 2018. This report compares the October 2022 results with data collected previously in July 2021 (Phase 5), November 2021 (Phase 6), March 2022 (Phase 7) and the August 2022 ‘Pulse Check’ to examine how things are changing over time.

In addition to this fact sheet, [more information about the study is available online](#), [and the October 2022 results are available in a free interactive dashboard](#). Users can explore the data for different artforms, types of events and demographic groups in all parts of Australia.

Context for this fact sheet

The pandemic has heightened challenges for disabled and immunocompromised people

In February 2022, the Disability Royal Commission released a [Statement of Ongoing Concern](#) with respect to the continued impact of the pandemic on people with access needs.

This statement came two years after the [initial March 2020 statement](#), and it noted that the Royal Commission remained deeply concerned that people with access needs were still not being appropriately prioritised during the current phase of the pandemic in a myriad of ways, including health care, access support and the vaccine/booster rollout.

Additionally, [research from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) (2021) highlights that the cost of living crisis is impacting people with disability to a greater extent than those without disability. The data reveals a complex set of considerations when looking at attendance at cultural events almost three years into the pandemic.

This report focuses on the experiences of disabled and/or immunocompromised audiences, and those close to them

This fact sheet explores two samples of Australian arts attendees. The first sample uses the term 'disabled' to describe the 556 survey respondents who responded 'Yes' to the question, 'Do you have a disability and/or experience barriers which limit the activities you participate in or attend, unless access and/or support is provided?', referred to as 'disabled audiences'.

Where relevant, comparisons to respondents who selected 'No' to this question have also been included, referred to as 'non-disabled audiences'.

In using the term 'disabled', the Australia Council for the Arts and Patternmakers are guided by the social model of disability, which distinguishes between an individual's impairment or condition and the barriers in society that are disabling. These barriers can include attitudes, communication, or the physical environment.

This definition includes mental health. However, not all people who experience a mental health condition identify as disabled. This definition of 'disability' can also include people who are d/Deaf or hard of hearing. However, members of the Deaf community may not always identify with disability, and may identify as part of a cultural and linguistic group with their first language being Auslan (Australian Sign Language) or another sign language.

The Fact Sheet also explores findings related to immunocompromised audiences, defined as the 542 survey respondents who selected 'Yes – me' to the survey question: 'Is anyone in your network immunocompromised or especially vulnerable to a serious health outcome related to COVID-19?'. This sample of respondents have been referred to as 'immunocompromised audiences' for the purposes of this report.

At times, where the results are very similar, this fact sheet refers to these two samples overall (863 respondents in total), described as 'audiences with access needs'.

This report also explores results from carers and people who are close to someone who is immunocompromised

At times, this fact sheet reports on insights related to audiences who are close to someone who is immunocompromised. Part of this segment is defined by people who responded 'Yes – someone in my immediate family/household' or 'Yes – someone in my extended family/network' to the survey question, 'Is anyone in your network immunocompromised or especially vulnerable to a serious health outcome related to COVID-19?'.

This segment also includes carers, or people who responded 'Yes' to the question, 'Are you caregiving to one or more older adults in your family or circle of friends, who you bring out to cultural programs from time to time?'.

A summary of the samples described is available overleaf. Read on for the key findings related to audiences with access needs.

Measuring audiences with access needs

This report looks at audience accessibility in a range of contexts

- 26% or 1,343 respondents are affected by access barriers in some way, as of October 2022.
- 10% or 556 respondents self-identify as disabled or experience barriers which limit the activities they participate in.
- 10% or 542 respondents are immuno-compromised or vulnerable to a serious health outcome.
- 9% or 1,184 respondents have someone in their immediate family or household that is immuno-compromised.

The data shines a light on some of the key access needs experienced by audiences

- 16% or 560 respondents identify as carers to an older adult they know.
- 30% or 1,631 respondents said seating was helpful for them to attend arts events.
- 11% or 598 respondents want an option for digital participation.
- 8% or 427 respondents say relaxed and sensory-friendly interactions are helpful.

Notes on the sample sizes

Disabled audiences and immunocompromised audiences are not mutually exclusive, and there is an overlap between these samples. The total proportion of respondents who fall into either or both category ('audiences with access needs' is 17%).

The 9% of respondents with an immunocompromised person in their immediate family or household is exclusive of audiences with access needs.

The 30% who mentioned seating may or may not identify as being disabled or immunocompromised themselves.

Attendance outlook

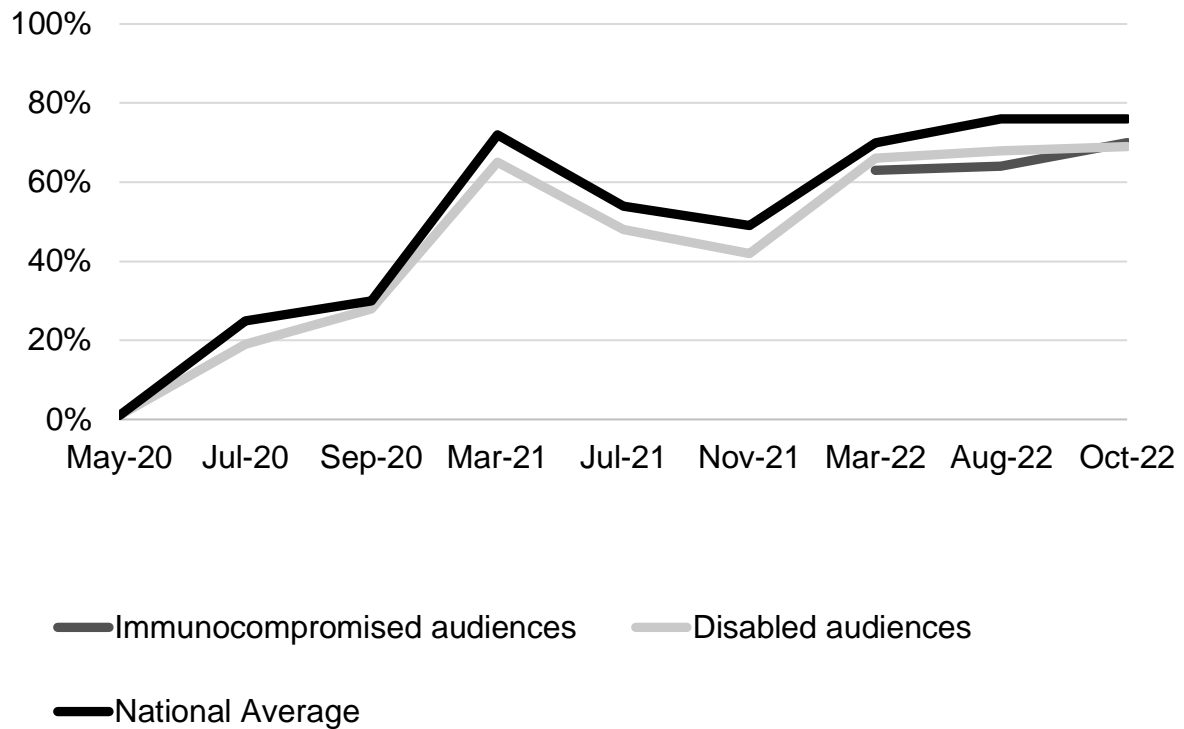
Attendance levels have increased since earlier phases of the pandemic, but remain lower than audiences without access needs

Audiences with access needs are attending more than they did previously, but these rates are still lower than audiences without access needs.

In October 2022, 7 in 10 (69%) disabled audience members said they attended an in-person cultural event. This is the highest rate since the pandemic began, stable with 68% in August and 66% in March 2022. However, numbers fall behind that of non-disabled audiences, among whom 76% attended an event recently.

Similarly, 7 in 10 (70%) immunocompromised audience members attended an in-person event recently, up from 64% in August and 63% in March, compared to 75% of non-immunocompromised audience members.

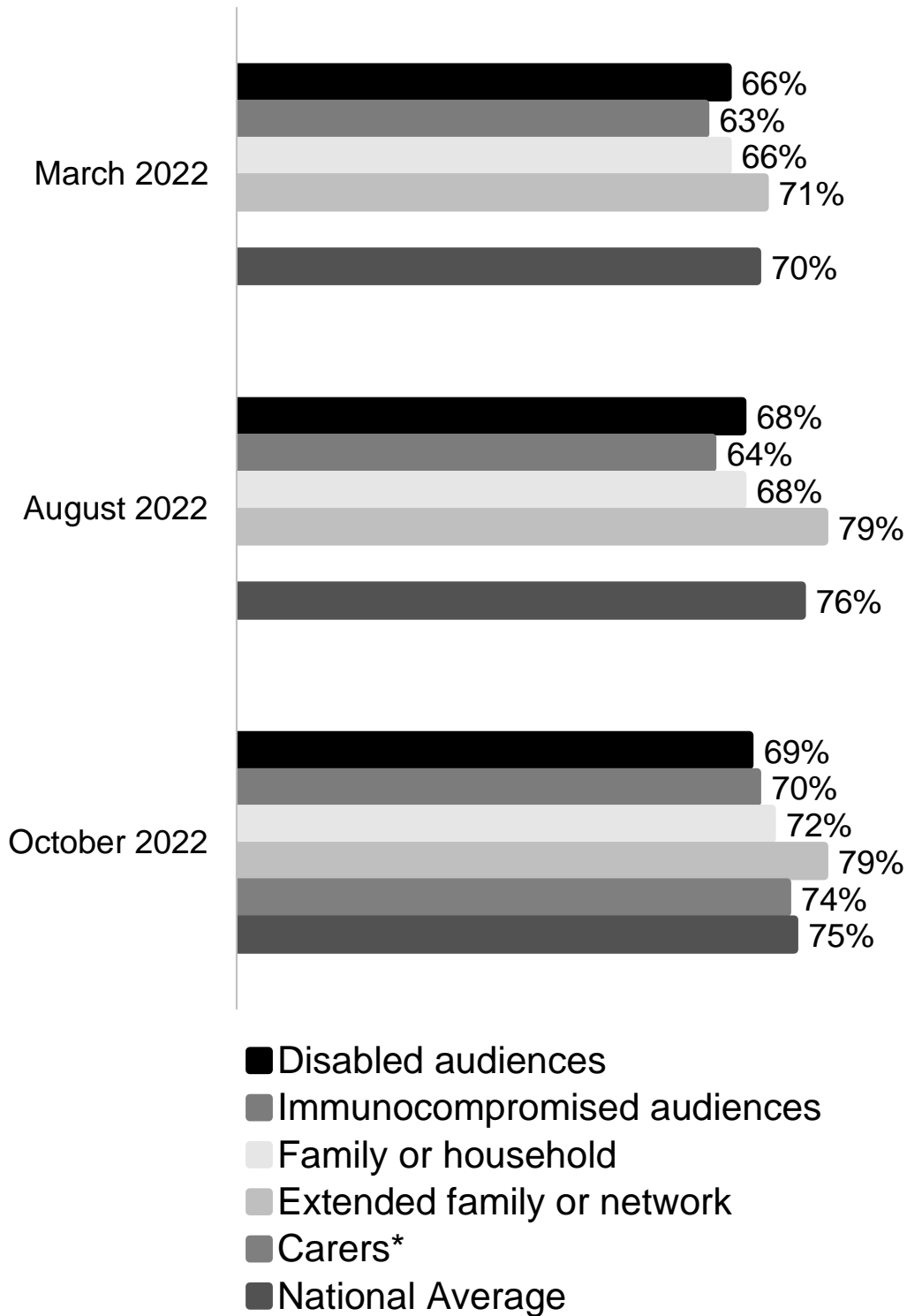
Figure 1: A line graph showing the proportion of audiences who attended an arts or cultural event in the fortnight before data collection, May 2020 – October 2022. The rate of attendance amongst disabled and immunocompromised audiences is increasing, but at a slower rate than the national average. Disabled audiences (n=556) and the national average (n=4,735).



*Immunocompromised audiences were first identified in the March 2022 survey

Around three quarters (72%) of those with a vulnerable person in their family or household attended a cultural event recently.

Figure 2: A stacked bar graph showing the proportion who attended a cultural event in the fortnight before data collection, March to October 2022. The rates of attendances are highest in October 2022. Disabled audiences (n=556), immunocompromised audiences (n=542), people with a vulnerable person in their household (n=698), or their network (n=991) and carers* (n=838).



*Carers were not identified in the March 2022 and August 2022 surveys.

The pandemic has renewed an appreciation for in-person cultural experiences, among audiences with access needs

When asked 'What has it been like to return to the arts after COVID? What did you discover you missed?', many disabled respondents shared their appreciation for being immersed in culture once again. One said,

'I missed the complete absorption I get from watching good live theatre, where you come out as if from another world.'

One immunocompromised audience member shared,

'[I] approached with trepidation, but found nothing beats going to a live performance. I've become very selective about what I choose to attend.'

Another said,

'I couldn't believe how happy I was to return the WASO performances again. It lifted my spirits so much; it was a joy. Life is a sadder place without our arts and culture, a huge void.'

More than half (55%) of disabled audiences are ready to attend 'now' — the highest level of confidence seen in 18 months

Only a small proportion of disabled audience members aren't willing to attend cultural events at all right now (3%), the lowest rate since the study began.

The majority (55%) say they are willing to attend 'now', up from 46% in August and 43% in March 2022. This is the highest level of confidence seen since March 2021 (54%).

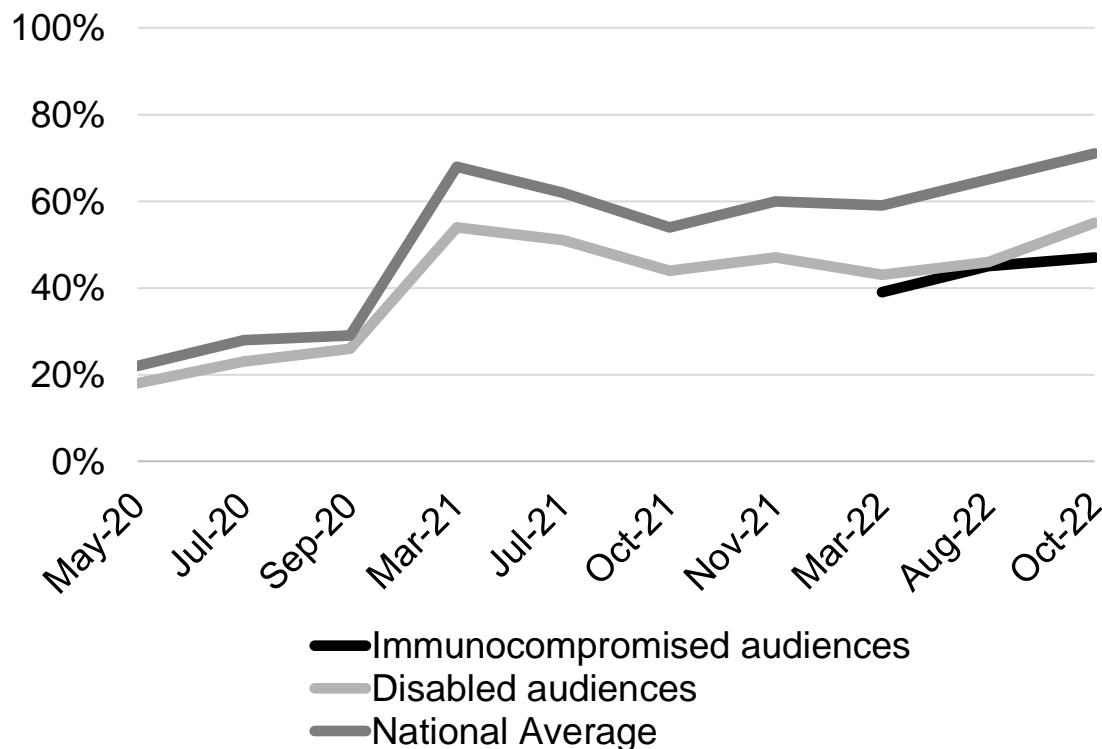
Almost half (47%) of immunocompromised audiences say they are ready to attend 'now', stable with August (45%) and up from March (39%). However, this proportion is significantly smaller than audiences overall (71% ready to attend 'now').

Like attendance, proximity to people who are immunocompromised is impacting confidence levels: 50% of those with someone in their household/family and 62% of those with someone in their extended family/network say they are ready to attend 'now'.

One shared,

'I cannot attend arts because the pandemic is not over, despite common attitudes.'

Figure 3: A line graph showing the proportion of audiences who are 'ready to attend now', May 2020 – October 2022. In October 2022, the rate of those 'ready to attend now' for disabled and immunocompromised audiences is increasing, but is lower than the national average. Disabled (n=555), immunocompromised audiences (n=540*) and the national average (n=5,431).



*Immunocompromised audiences were first identified in the March 2022 survey

Attendance rates are yet to return to pre-pandemic levels and audiences with access needs may take more time to return

The latest Phase of the Audience Outlook Monitor (October 2022) sought to compare current attendance frequency to pre-pandemic activity.

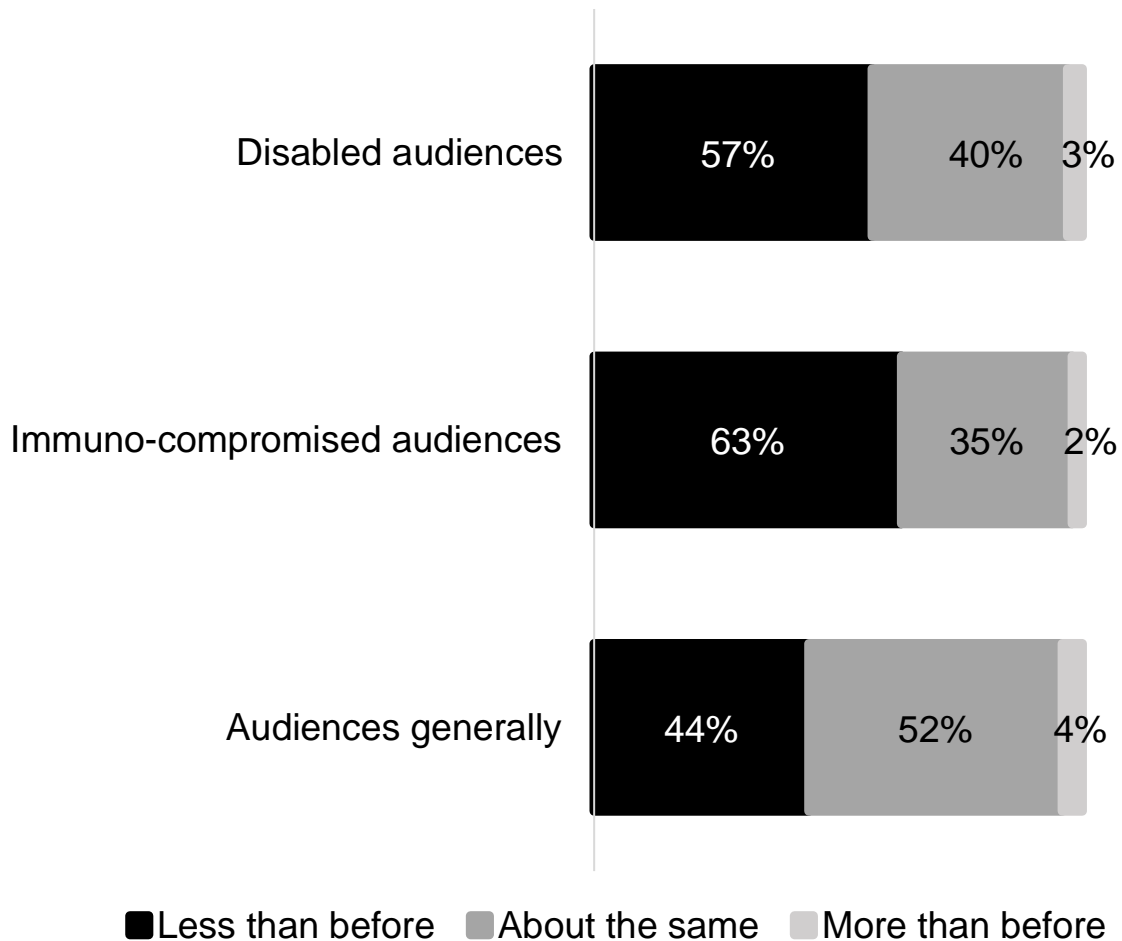
Attendance in the current context has been impacted more greatly among audiences with access needs, compared to audiences without access needs.

Among disabled performing arts audiences, 57% are attending less than they used to, pre-pandemic — compared to 44% of non-disabled performing arts attendees (Figure 4).

This disparity is even more pronounced between immunocompromised audiences and non-immunocompromised audiences.

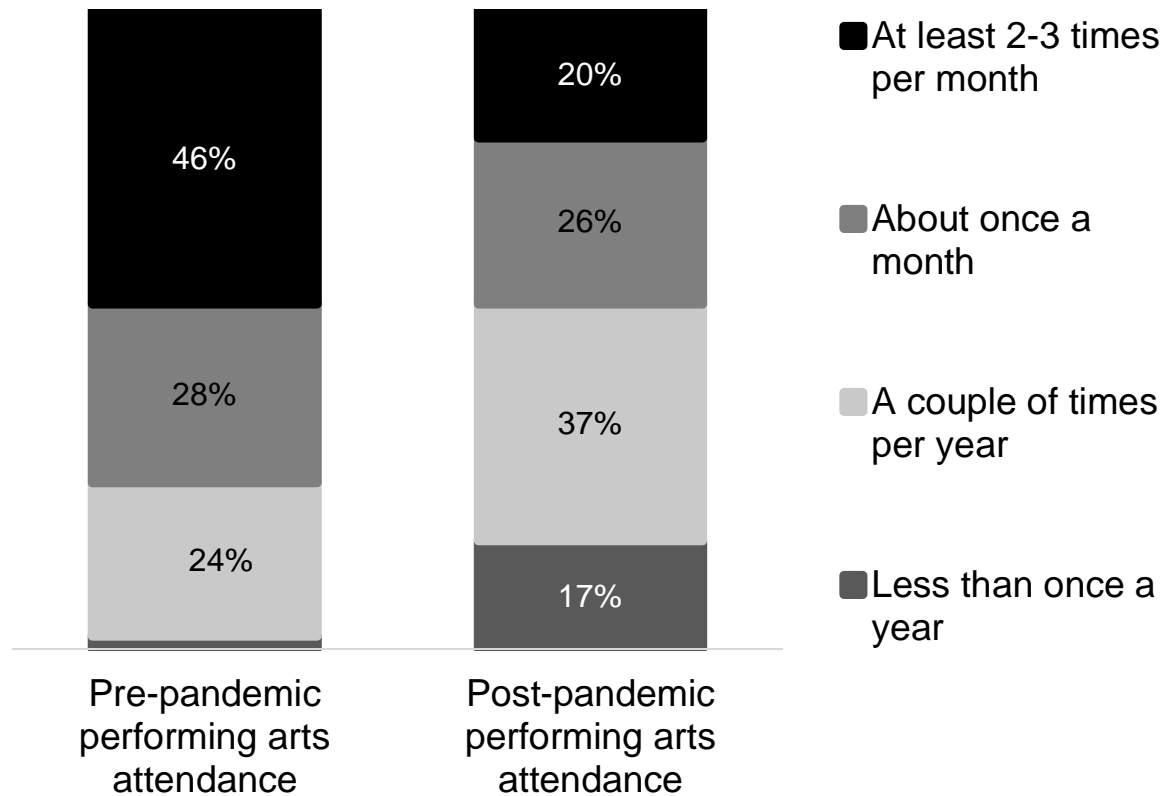
Among this segment, 6 in 10 performing arts attendees (63%) are attending less than they used to, compared to 37% of non-immunocompromised performing arts attendees.

Figure 4: A stacked bar graph showing the current attendance frequency relative to pre-pandemic attendance frequency. On average, disabled and immunocompromised audiences are attending less than before to a greater extent than audiences generally. Disabled audiences (n=537), immunocompromised audiences (n=534) and audiences generally (n=5,326).



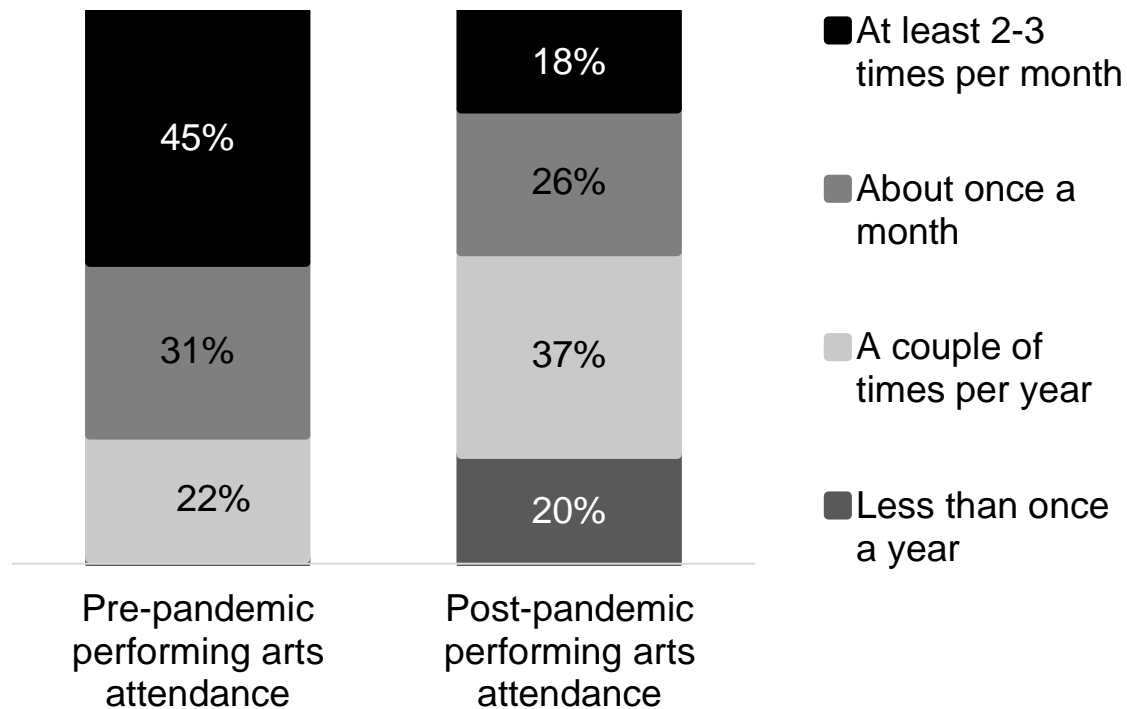
In terms of frequency, pre-pandemic, 74% of disabled audiences attended performing arts once a month or more. Now, 46% attend once a month or more (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Two stacked column graphs comparing the frequency of attendance at performing arts events among disabled audiences, pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. In October 2022, disabled audiences are attending less frequently than they used to, pre-pandemic. (n=491)



Similarly, pre-pandemic, 76% of immunocompromised audiences attended once a month or more. Now, 44% attend once a month or more (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Two stacked column charts comparing the frequency of attendance at performing arts events among immunocompromised audiences, pre-pandemic and post-pandemic. In October 2022, immunocompromised audiences are attending less frequently than they used to, pre-pandemic. (n=534)



Spending levels are steady among audiences with access needs, and continue to be lower than average

Reported spending on arts and cultural activities among audiences with access needs has remained relatively steady since March 2022.

Among those who attended a cultural event in the fortnight before data collection (12-16 October 2022), 6 in 10 (58%) disabled audience members spent \$50 or more, consistent with 58% in March 2022. This is lower than non-disabled audiences (64%); a trend that has remained consistent throughout the pandemic.

Spending rates are similar between immunocompromised audiences and non-immunocompromised audiences who attended recently – and have remained stable in recent months. Two-thirds (63%) spent \$50 or more recently (stable with 66% in March), relative to 64% of non-immunocompromised audiences.

Many say they expect to attend more in the next year – but 1 in 10 say their attendance level will decline

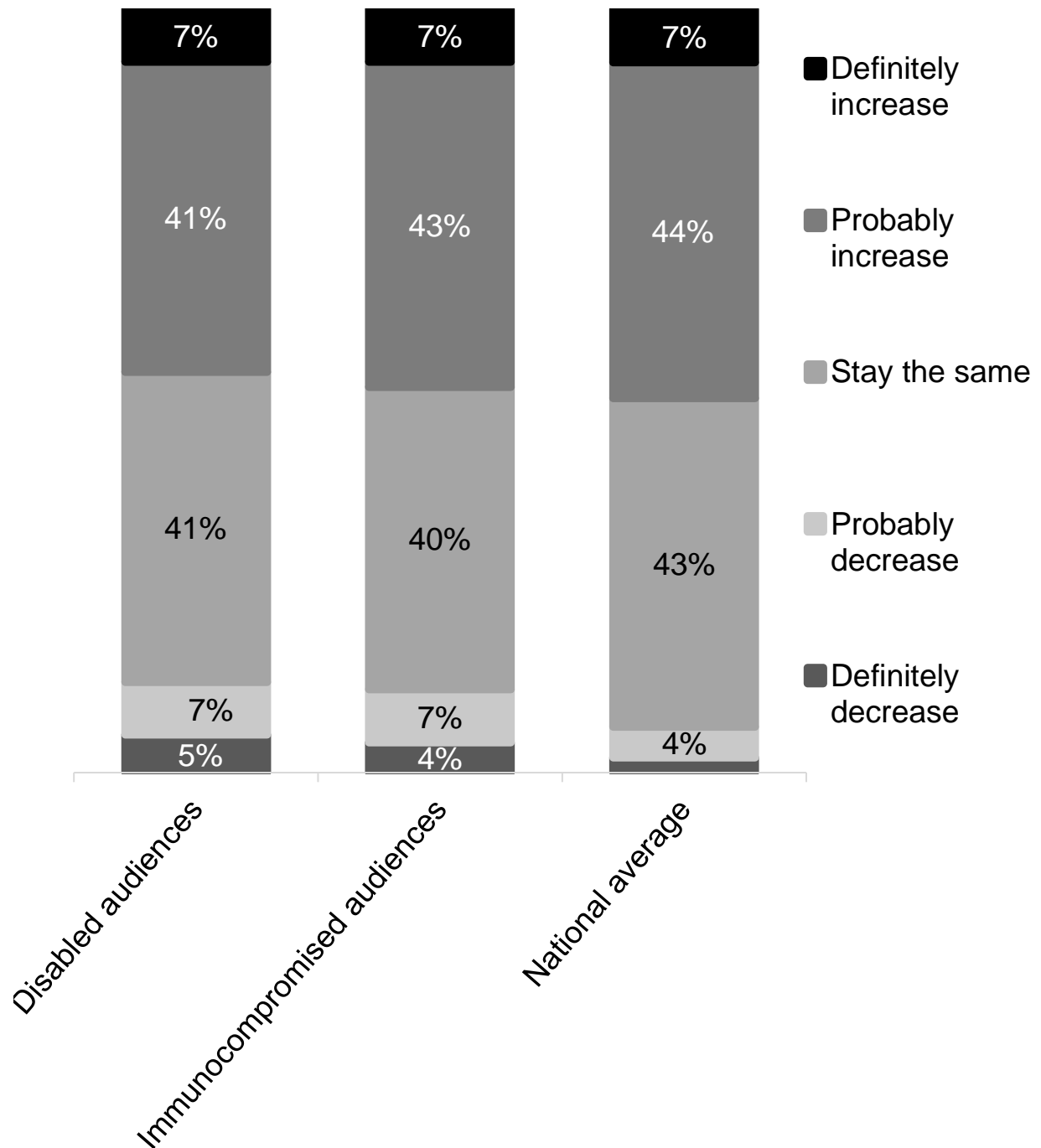
There are signs that things are slowly improving and, like national trends, audiences with access needs are much more likely to be increasing their attendances rather than decreasing them over the next year.

Though plenty will be maintaining their current levels, audiences with access needs appear slightly less optimistic about their future attendance outlook than audiences without access needs.

9 in 10 (89%) disabled audience members say they expect their current level of attendance to stay the same or increase in the next 12 months — slightly lower than non-disabled audiences (94%). Meanwhile, 1 in 10 (12%) say it will decrease, compared to just 6% of non-disabled audiences (6%).

Immunocompromised audiences are also more likely to say their attendance will decrease (11%), compared to non-immunocompromised audiences (5%) — although a majority say it will stay the same or increase (90%).

Figure 7: Three stacked column graphs showing audiences' predictions for future attendance over the next 12 months. Disabled and immunocompromised audiences appear slightly less optimistic about their future attendance outlook than the national average.



Barriers

Disabled and immunocompromised audiences will face heightened barriers to attendance in the next 12 months

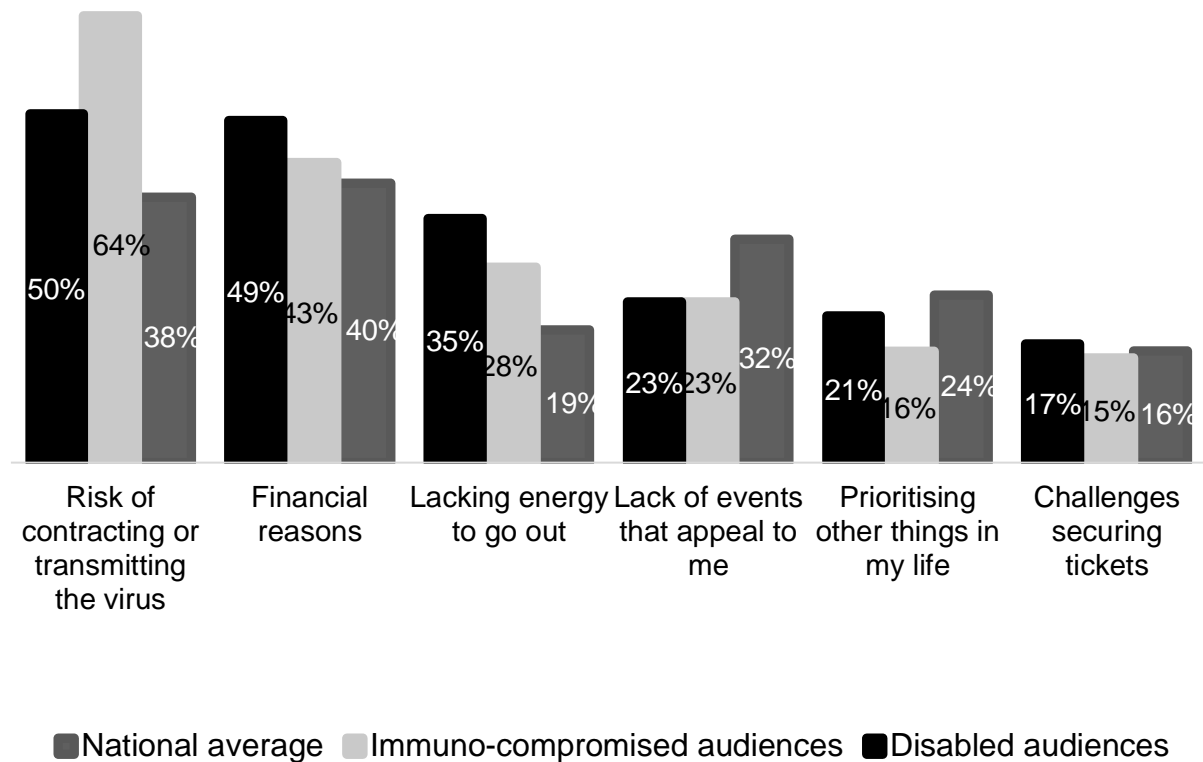
When asked if anything on a list of pandemic-related experiences was likely to prevent them from attending as they used to over the next 12 months, audiences with access needs were more likely to select one or more barriers (96%) than non-disabled audiences (87%).

While financial reasons are now the top barrier for audiences overall, the risk of the virus continues to be the number one barrier among audiences with access needs. In October 2022, it affected 50% of disabled audiences (compared to 36% of non-disabled audiences) and 64% of immunocompromised audiences (compared to 28% of non-immunocompromised audiences.)

One respondent shared,

'Please be mindful that people with disabilities love performances and the arts too. Please make your events as accessible as possible. Keep in mind that people with disabilities are very anxious about getting COVID. The pandemic is not over for us!'

Figure 8: A column chart showing the top barriers preventing audiences from attending cultural events over the next 12 months. In October 2022, the top barrier for disabled and immunocompromised audiences is the risk of contracting the virus, followed by financial reasons. The top barrier for national audiences is financial barriers.



Financial barriers are now impacting half (49%) of disabled audiences, up from 32% in August

In light of inflation and other economic pressures, audiences with access needs are more likely to be impacted by the rising cost of living, compared to audiences without access needs.

[Research from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) indicates that 28% of adults with disability experienced worsening household finances in the year up to February 2021 (compared to 18% without disability).

Survey data shows that half (49%) of disabled audiences and 43% of immunocompromised audiences cited financial reasons as a barrier to attendance — compared to 40% of audiences generally.

One disabled respondent shared,

‘With cost of living rising, it is difficult to afford live arts. Find a way to make it more financially accessible to the public while still paying artists what they deserve.’

Another said,

‘Currently [I have] less money available for entertainment and cultural exhibits due to increased cost of food, fuel, mortgage and living expenses.’

One-third (35%) of disabled audiences are experiencing fatigue or a lack of energy to attend events

The October 2022 results reveals a range of complex factors affecting attendance in the current context.

From a list of factors included in the October survey, a ‘lack of energy to go out’ was the most highly-selected option among disabled (35%) and immunocompromised audiences (28%) after the virus and financial reasons. This compares to 19% of audiences generally.

Commenting on the notion of travelling to events, one said,

'To be able to attend an event in the city district is difficult due to my access needs. I have fatigue and even travelling on public transport makes it a challenge to go to the venues, unless I plan exceptionally well and sometimes enlist supports where I can or factor in days of recovery. Let alone the time that events often happen is when I am most fatigued.'

Another said,

'I want to support arts organisations and I want to go back to live cultural events, but a mix of COVID-unsafety (the Government's fault from my POV, not so much arts organisations'), financial restrictions, and fatigue are prohibitive at the moment.'

Seating options are crucial for 3 in 10 audience members attending cultural events – and a lack thereof can be a disincentive

When asked what access requirements would be important for them to attend cultural events, the largest proportion of respondents selected 'seating available' (30%).

One highlighted that the added option of seating was a valuable improvement during the pandemic:

'If anything, my attendance experience was made better by the provision of seating at venues.'

Another suggested that these aspects of accessibility should not be forgotten.

'My experience did change since the start of the pandemic as fixed and distanced seating made it possible for me to engage with events in the same

way as everyone else, even being able to see the stage! But as venues have withdrawn those measures it has largely gone back to how it was, where either seating was not provided, or disability seating was an afterthought or not provided at all, and assistance for people with communication issues non-existent.'

Another said that knowledge of seating, along with other measures, are now integral to their decision-making.

'I have gotten 'more' disabled over the course of the pandemic, and simultaneously my tolerance for fatigue and pain have gone down due to lockdowns. I am severely immunocompromised, and I now consider mask mandates, spaced seating, access to sanitiser, frequent cleaning etc. to be issues of accessibility. The energy I can expend is limited, and I'm being very cautious in all I do.'

Behavioural trends

Audiences with access needs are twice as likely as those without, to say their attendance preferences have changed

When asked whether there has been a change to their preferred attendance locations, days or times of cultural events, audiences with access needs are more likely than other audience members to say there has.

One-third (32%) of audiences with access needs say their attendance preferences have changed, compared to 17% of audiences without access needs.

Some indicated that they are now more vigilant in prioritising COVID-safe settings for themselves and their family, as one said,

'More comfortable in smaller venues. More comfortable in venues that support health measures.'

Others are preferencing earlier attendance times to avoid burnout and fatigue, as one said,

'I like things earlier now because my social battery runs out earlier than before.'

Some mentioned that the pandemic impacted their experience of travelling to events – impacting their attendance decisions:

'Public transportation in Brisbane was altered during the pandemic and is less accessible.'

One in five (22%) carers to older adults say their preferences have changed, a slightly larger proportion than non-carers (19%).

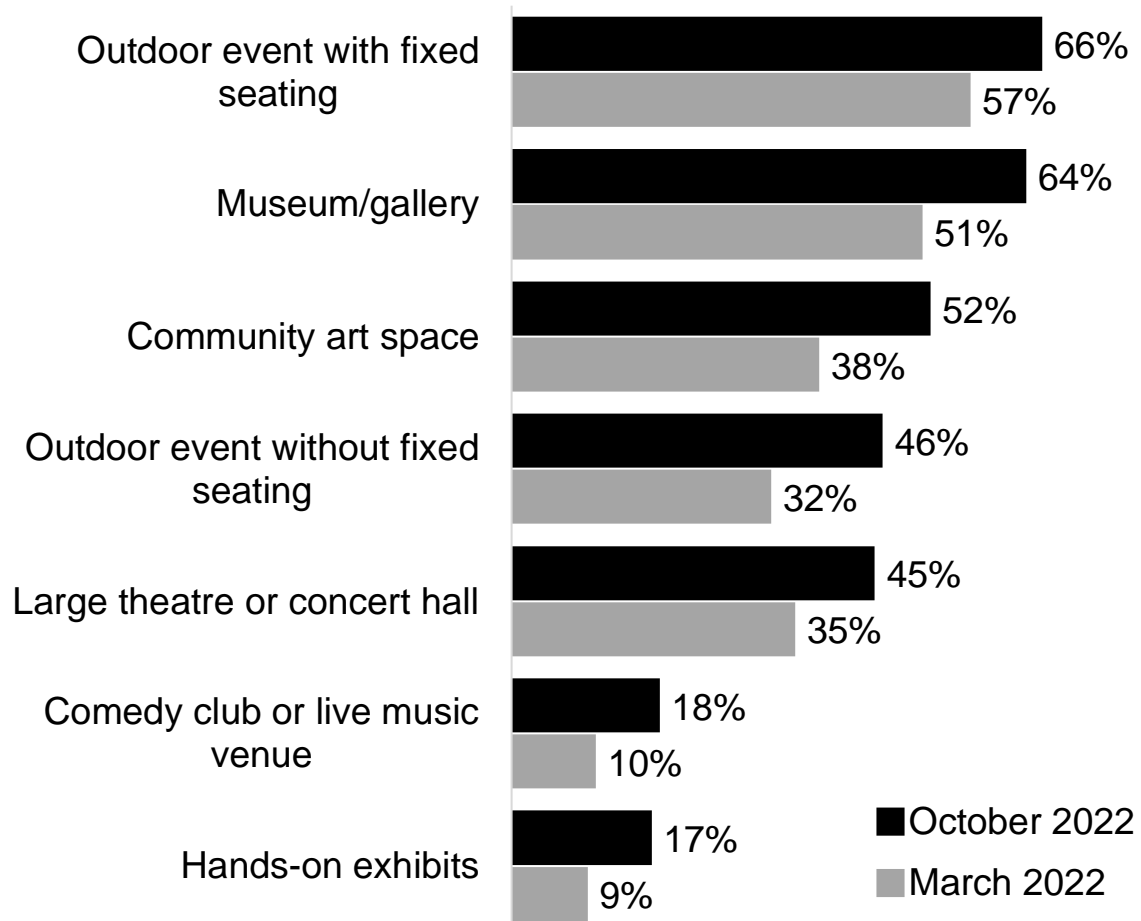
Comfort and COVID-safety

Among audiences with access needs, comfort levels at arts venues is increasing gradually – but remain lower than other audiences

Consistent with national trends, comfort levels attending cultural venues has also been increasing among audiences with access needs. However, the proportion who are comfortable remains slightly lower than audiences without access needs.

The proportion of 'very comfortable' disabled audiences has increased for all venues, including a museum or gallery (64%, up from 51%), an outdoor event without fixed seating (46%, up from 32% in March 2022), and a large theatre or concert hall (45%, up from 35%).

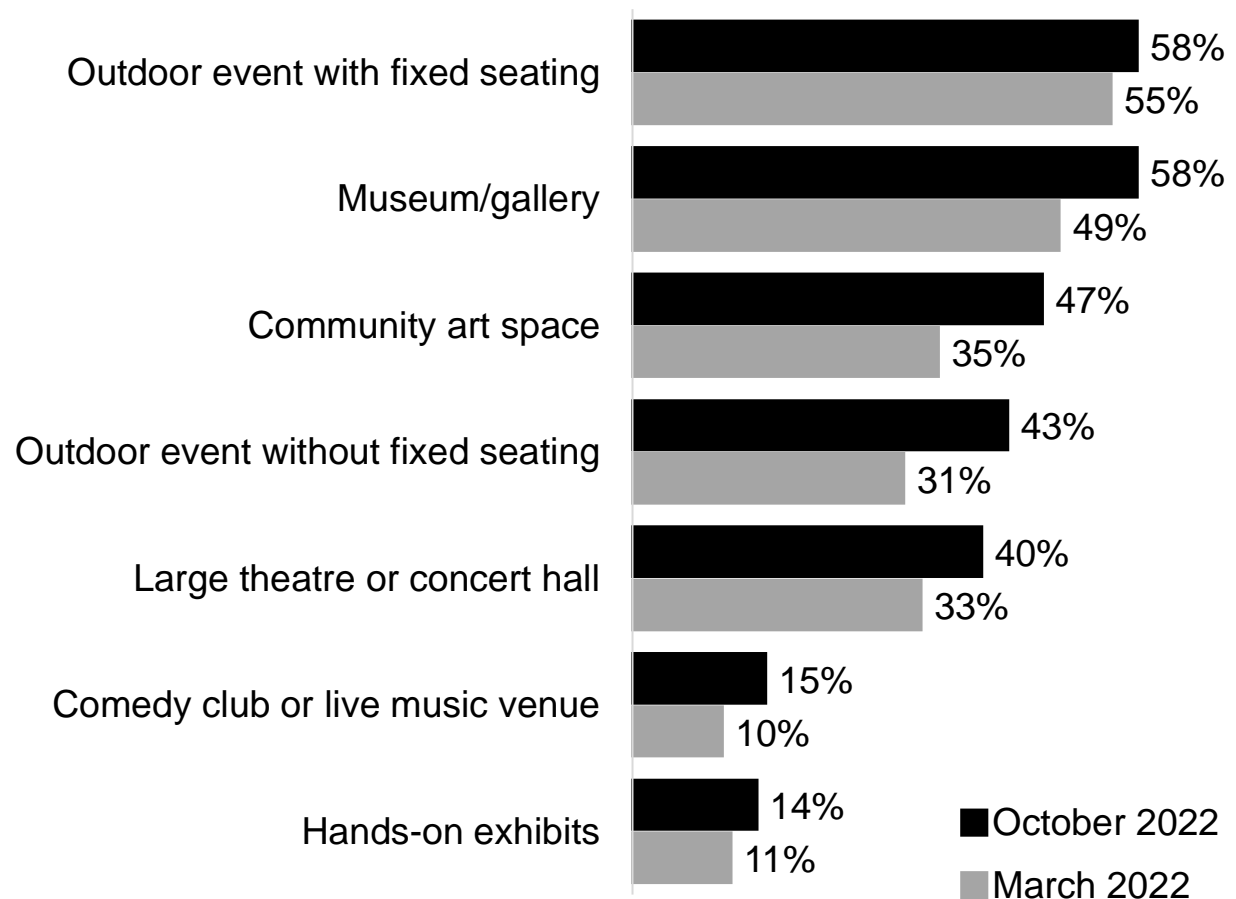
Figure 9: A stacked bar graph showing comfort at key arts venues among disabled audiences. The proportion of those ‘very comfortable’ has increased at all events from March to October, with outdoor events with fixed seating the highest, followed by museums and galleries. March 2022 (n=504) and October 2022 (n=554).



More people are now very comfortable using hands-on exhibits at interactive museums (17%, up from 9%) and attending comedy club/live music venues (18%, up from 10%) – two types of venues that have been typically seen as riskier throughout the study.

Immunocompromised are slightly less comfortable overall – though the proportion of those who are ‘very comfortable’ has also increased since March, including at: an outdoor event without fixed seating (43%, up from 32% in March 2022), a large theatre or concert hall (40%, up from 33%) and a museum or gallery (58%, up from 49%).

Figure 10: A stacked bar graph showing comfort at key arts venues among immunocompromised audiences. The proportion of those 'very comfortable' has increased at all events from March to October, with outdoor events with fixed seating the highest, followed by museums and galleries. March 2022 (n=983) and October 2022 (n=541).



Comfort levels generally decrease with increased proximity to vulnerable people. For instance, 57% of carers are 'very comfortable attending' a large theatre or concert hall right now, compared to 63% of non-carers.

Audiences with access needs are more likely to be wearing masks at the moment – though they are not suitable for everyone

Mask wearing is more common among disabled audiences than non-disabled audiences. Most disabled audiences said they ‘may or may not wear a mask’ (57%) – and 33% ‘always wear a mask’ compared to just 18% of non-disabled audiences.

Just 1 in 10 (10%) said they ‘never wear a mask’, compared to 18% of non-disabled audiences.

Similarly, mask use is even more common among immunocompromised audiences: 46% ‘always wear a mask’, compared to 13% of non-immunocompromised audiences.

Some respondents with access needs encouraged more widespread mask-wearing, even when not mandated by government. One said,

‘It seems there is widespread lack of care for people with invisible illnesses, and people are unwilling to wear masks now - indicating they are happy to be responsible for the death of such people. Even if it is not a government requirement, I would love to see compassion from the arts sector to enforce mask-wearing at their events while there are any cases of COVID. It is such an easy requirement that can save lives.’

Some indicated that the removal of these restrictions has meant they cannot see themselves returning to arts events. One said,

‘The removal of mandatory community protections (masks/isolation etc.) has meant that I rarely leave the house anymore. I am desperate to be able to attend live theatre again, but cannot see a time when this will be achievable.’

Another said,

‘Yes. My child has a disability affecting his respiratory system. It's not possible for me to attend events without a mask, and now that others aren't required to wear masks, there are many venues that are too risky for me to attend.’

However, among some segments, the preference to not wear a mask is linked with other access considerations. [Many people have qualified for exemptions](#) during periods of mandatory mask-wearing if they are d/Deaf or hard of hearing, have a physical or mental health condition, skin conditions or breathing difficulties.

Programming preferences

Among audiences with access needs, there is an appetite for new, uplifting, or challenging cultural experiences

In terms of content, over the next year audiences with access needs generally agree they want to attend things that they used to attend in the past (79%) – relative to 84% of audiences overall.

However, there is also appetite to engage with new content. A sizeable proportion of disabled audiences (53%) and immunocompromised audiences (50%) agree that they would like to try things they haven't experienced before – compared to 58% of audiences overall.

Around three-quarters (72%) disabled audience members and 67% of immunocompromised audience members agree that they'll be most attracted to fun, uplifting things over the coming year – compared to 73% of audiences overall.

This is a widespread trend that suggests strong demand for connective, morale-boosting and light-hearted experiences.

Meanwhile, 45% of disabled audiences and 39% of immunocompromised audiences agree that they'll be drawn to topical, challenging content – signalling that while uplifting content offers reprieve from a difficult few years, offering variety and balanced programs is key to engaging audiences with and without access needs.

Online participation

Online arts activities are a key form of cultural participation for audiences with access needs

Digital events have provided vital accessibility for audiences with access needs, and they continue to participate at a higher rate than other audiences.

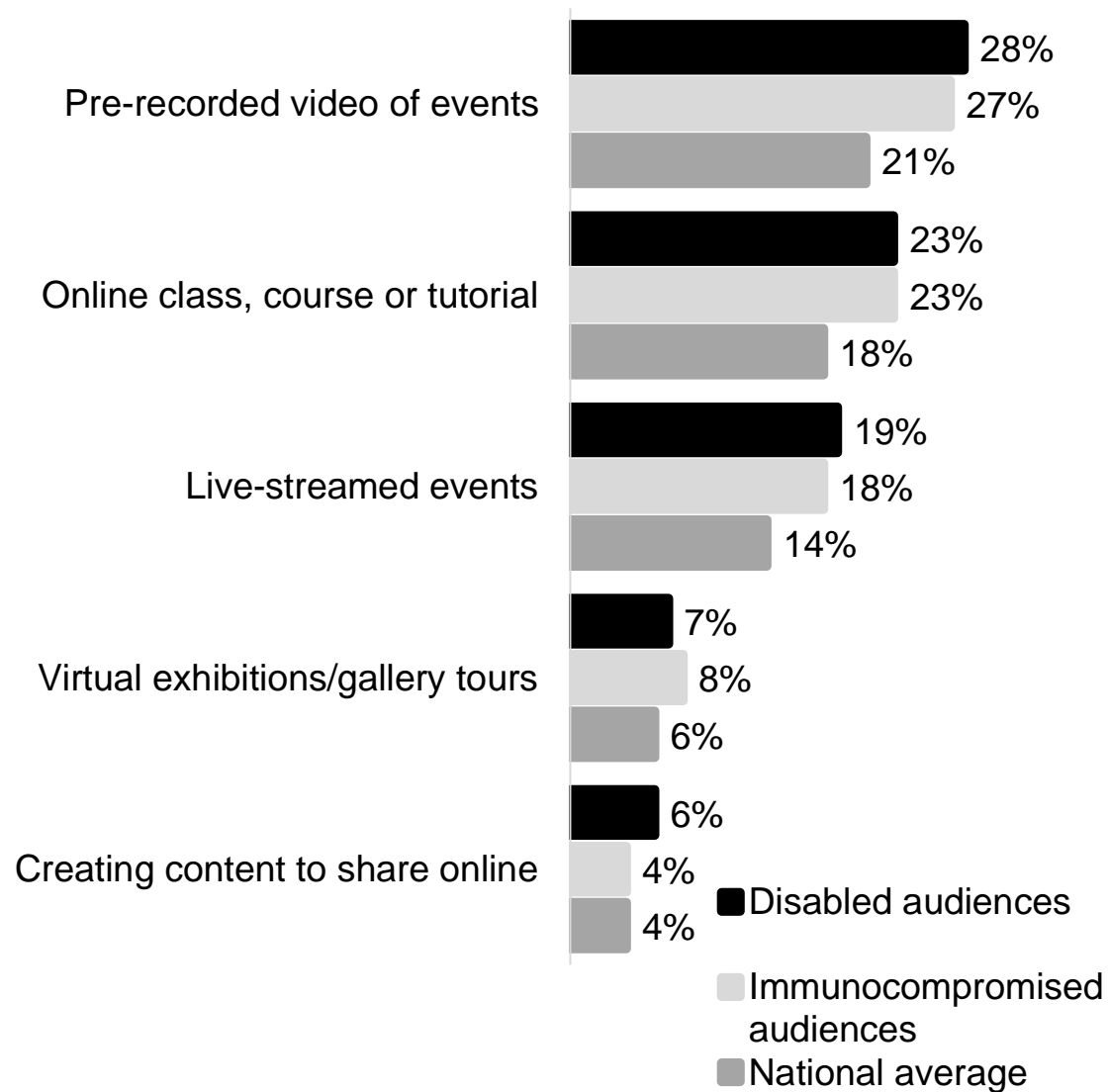
In October 2022, half (49%) of disabled audiences participated in an online activity recently, down slightly from 53% in March 2022 – compared to 39% of non-disabled audiences.

A similar proportion of immunocompromised audiences (47%) participated recently, stable with 46% in March — a higher rate than non-immunocompromised audiences (37%).

Of the 49% of disabled respondents who participated in an online activity in the fortnight before data collection, activities included watching a pre-recorded video of a performance or event (28%), doing online classes/courses/tutorials (23%) and watching a live-streamed performance or event (19%).

A small proportion attended a virtual exhibition or museum/gallery tour (7%), or created content to share online (6%).

Figure 11: A stacked column graph showing the proportion participating in online activities in the fortnight before data collection, October 2022. Disabled and immunocompromised audiences are participating in online activities at a higher rate than the national average. Disabled audiences (n=556), immunocompromised audiences (n=542) and the national average (n=5,438).



Spending online is stable, and more than 4 in 10 of those participating are paying for digital arts activities

Audiences with access needs are more likely to be paying for online arts experiences – a trend that has continued throughout the pandemic. Among those participating online, 42% of disabled audiences paid for an online activity in the fortnight before data collection (stable with 43% in March) — a higher proportion compared to 32% of non-disabled audiences.

Similarly, 45% of immunocompromised audiences paid for something recently (up from 37% in March 2022) — higher than 31% of non-immunocompromised audiences.

However, consistent with national trends, the level of spending online has decreased.

Among those paying, 38% of disabled audiences spent more than \$50 online in the past fortnight (down from 45% in March 2022) — a similar proportion to non-disabled audiences (39%).

Immunocompromised audiences are spending the same amount as before (45% spending \$50+, stable with 46% in March). This is a higher proportion than non-immunocompromised audiences (38%).

Three-quarters of audiences with access needs see a role for digital arts experiences, confirming their importance in overcoming barriers

When asked about online arts and culture, overall, a significant proportion continue to say that these experiences will play some role in their life. This proportion is greater than audiences without access needs, confirming digital options as a vital form of accessibility.

Three-quarters of disabled audiences (77%) and immunocompromised audiences (75%) see a role for digital, compared to 68% of audiences generally.

Audiences who know an immunocompromised person were also more likely to see a role for digital, compared to those who are not immunocompromised nor know anyone who is. One said,

‘Being able to access learning, exhibitions and events 100% online has enhanced my life, and I intend to continue accessing these for the foreseeable future.’

One respondent shared that online experiences provide a pivotal way for arts and culture to be enjoyed in the home:

‘When I am sick/tired/have familial caring responsibilities/want to enjoy something in the comfort of a private space, online experiences facilitate that. They are tremendously important, for all people, not just those who identify as disabled.’

Another mentioned the flexibility of having a digital option when they are not able to attend in person,

‘Depending on my health state on the particular day, I may be quite ill or can't obtain a carer, so I would not be able to attend. Having an online event would be great and I could watch it from the comfort of my lounge room.’

Another said,

‘Hybrid or digital events are a great way for me stay connected to the arts and culture since I have a disability and chronic illness.’

There is a case to explore sustainable models for digital productions – such as hybrid events. See [Alex Craig's case study](#) for more insights into the impact of digital work.

Recovery and access

The pandemic has heightened the needs of audiences with access requirements – and shed light on the ongoing importance of improving conditions

In the October 2022 survey, audiences with access needs were asked, 'Has your experience of accessibility changed since the start of the pandemic? Can you tell us how and if there's anything you'd like arts and culture organisations to know?'

Some respondents mentioned that they were able-bodied prior to the pandemic and now have access needs. One said,

'It has, as I was able-bodied prior [to the pandemic]. I think it's important for organisations to ensure they always include accessibility as a normal part of how they operate, rather than an add-on. This includes for ALL accessibility needs.'

Another highlighted that they and their family have felt left behind, commenting,

'Yes - arts and culture are completely inaccessible to my family and [I], and our lives are poorer for it. This is one of the things I miss the most, more than dinners or travel. We are completely forgotten, ignored, irrelevant, unworthy of effort to include us. It is devastating.'

The pandemic has demonstrated what can be achieved in terms of offering accessible cultural experiences

Among a list of options, 8% of all respondents in the October survey selected relaxed and sensory-friendly interactions as an important form of accessibility when attending cultural events.

Qualitative data suggests that some audiences will be more actively seeking out these types of experiences, which became more available during the pandemic. One said,

‘As an autistic adult, I have in the past 'put up with' the sensory discomforts that are par for the course when engaging with most cultural activity. I'm not going to do that anymore. COVID has demonstrated it is entirely possible for a community to collectively accommodate drastic change in social organisation for its own well-being - if a venue ignores my sensory requirements, I will no longer support it financially or creatively.’

Another mentioned that more people may be less tolerant of overly stimulating experiences, as a result of the pandemic:

‘Being aware of sensory experiences is important. Particularly since people didn't go out as much during the pandemic and so their ability to cope with sensory overload may be reduced.’

Effective communication from arts organisations empowers those with access needs to make decisions

Some respondents encouraged better communication from arts organisations about what to expect at cultural events — especially in a time of [relaxed COVID-19 restrictions](#). One said,

‘Yes. Even when restrictions were in place, I found venues did little or nothing to enforce things like proof of vaccination, mask wearing and social distancing. This was despite frequent emails/marketing stating that ‘COVID-safe’ measures were in place. It was largely lip-service.’

Another suggested improving messaging around seating at the time of booking, and how seating can address concerns for more risk-averse attendees:

‘Yes. Become more aware of potentially dangerous environments. I just realised recently that I should have requested to book and sit in a box overlooking the stage and away from the general audience.’

Effective communication and inclusive language is integral to a safe, welcoming, on-site experience. [Maree Jenner](#) shared insights on how front-of-house staff can be well-equipped to handle requests.

Facebook, websites and eNews are key awareness channels for audiences with access needs

When asked how they found out about the most recent show or performance they attended in the past fortnight, 82% of audiences with access needs were likely to cite online channels, particularly direct emails from arts organisations (58%), websites (49%), and word of mouth (37%) – consistent with national trends.

Disabled audiences tend to be relying on Facebook more than non-disabled audiences (27%, compared to 22%). This is the same for immunocompromised audiences (24%, compared to 21% of non-immunocompromised audiences).

Progress is underway, but for some, there is a long way to go

While there is some way to go, several audiences shared messages of optimism and encouragement for arts and cultural organisations navigating the next chapter.

One expressed their appreciation for the work that organisations have done over the last few years,

‘Generally, I’ve found my local institutions have done a thoughtful and coherent job making me and my older vulnerable relatives safer in the public setting. Thanks for surveying me.’

Another suggested that a greater proportion of people may experience access needs as a result of the pandemic – expanding the impact of work done in this area:

‘More people are now living with disability in the world than perhaps ever before. Long COVID disables, and it’s not going away. We need more accessible performances – in-person AND online. We need more disabled actors and creatives on and off stage. We need more disabled people in management in arts and cultural orgs. It’s not rocket science. One in five – that would be a baseline accurate reflection of our community. Use it as a quota.’

Another said,

‘Disability access shouldn’t be an afterthought, instead, it should be built around the disabled.’

Audience Accessibility Case Studies

About the case studies

These case studies emerged from a series of four structured qualitative interviews with arts audience members who identify as d/Deaf and/or disabled. Their purpose is to augment the findings from the Audience Outlook Monitor with lived experience and to highlight the diversity of perspectives, experiences and access needs of arts audience members.

Key insights from these case studies are:

Alex Craig says online events have been a valuable advancement in the accessibility of arts and culture – but they're concerned the sector is trending away from digital.

Maree Jenner is a regular arts attendee who goes to events of all kinds, and says that a proactive approach to accessibility at in-person events is key.

Sue Jo Wright believes that awareness of Deaf audiences is growing, but would like to see Deaf audience members have access to the same range of works as other audiences.

Sarah Korte says the pandemic showed a more inclusive approach to the arts was possible – and that the challenge will be for organisations to stay committed to accessibility.

Methodology

In parallel to the October 2022 Phase of the Audience Outlook Monitor, Patternmakers liaised with disability arts services to recruit four participants with a variety of access needs and experiences.

In November 2022, Patternmakers conducted four 45-minute structured interviews, via phone call or Zoom, to understand how each interviewee's experiences with arts-going had changed over the course of the pandemic. Sue Jo Wright's interview was conducted in Auslan and interpreted by Alisa Blakeney, via Sweeney Interpreting. All interviewees were provided honoraria as compensation for their time.

These case studies have been reviewed and approved by their respective participants.

Patternmakers and the Australia Council acknowledge Alex Craig, Sue Jo Wright, Maree Jenner and Sarah Korte for their time and generosity in sharing their knowledge and experiences. We also acknowledge Sweeney Interpreting, Alisa Blakeney and Chevoy Sweeney for their Auslan Interpretation services.

Alex Craig



Alex Craig says online events have been a valuable advancement in the accessibility of arts and culture – but they're concerned the sector is trending away from digital.

About Alex

Alex Craig (they/them/their) is an attendee of dance and other forms of live performance, such as theatre, music, live performance art, and experimental art. Professionally, they are an independent dance artist and performance maker, whose work 'is very much based on my experience as a Blind person, using sound and audio description to create ways for people to experience dance beyond the visual.' In terms of access requirements, Alex requires audio description to participate in or attend the arts.

Accessibility and the arts

When asked about the importance of arts attendance in their life, Alex says, 'As an artist, the arts are kind of everything for me. They're such a tool for self-expression,

and human connection, and community-building. The world would be a worse place without art.' However, they say that the availability of audio descriptions often limits the range of performances they can attend.

They say, 'There's always a big barrier for access to live performance for me, in terms of things not being audio described. Particularly dance: it's getting slightly better, but often artists don't know audio description for dance is a thing, so I'm very limited in the dance performances that I'm able to go see.'

They also note that audio descriptions are more likely to be available for large-scale or mainstream theatrical works – rather than the independent productions they're personally more interested in. As an arts attendee, and artist themselves, they're passionate about experiencing works that experiment with form, explore social issues, and push boundaries – but these experiences aren't always accessible.

What has the pandemic changed?

Right now, Alex attends an arts event once or twice every six months – but say they were attending more during the pandemic, when online productions were more readily available. They say digital events made it easier to simply 'jump online' and participate, unlike in-person events which require more extensive pre-planning.

Unfortunately, Alex says they have noticed a shift away from digital programming, after lockdowns ended and live performances became widespread again: 'As a generalisation, people haven't taken lessons from being in lockdown and having to do things differently. For the most part, things have gone back to how they were pre-pandemic. There haven't been big shifts in the way people operate, like having a sizeable online footprint still.'

To make sure that advances in accessibility persist into the 'new normal', Alex says venues and organisations can do the following things:

Online

- Include image descriptions and alt text in all communications.

Alex says that alt text and image descriptions are a question of equity: 'Whoever has created that marketing copy has put those images there for a reason. By not giving alt text or image description, they're denying access to that visual information for people who can't visually access it.'

In addition to providing important information, the presence of image descriptions indicates the venue is committed to inclusivity: 'It's not currently standard practice to have alt text and image descriptions. If I come across marketing copy with this, it shows me that this organisation or artist has some awareness, and is actually trying and making an effort to be accessible. That's very attractive to me.'

- Continue supporting digital productions (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case study).

As Alex points out, there's a risk that advancements in accessibility brought about by digital alternatives could be lost as the sector returns its focus to in-person events. Consider what a sustainable model for digital outputs could look like.

On-site

- Provide as much information as possible, ahead of performances (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case study).

Whether about the performance or venue itself, providing more information about what to expect will help audiences with access needs plan their attendance.

- Provide Front of House staff with disability awareness training (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**, and **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case studies).

Alex says that having staff who are prepared with disability awareness training makes a significant difference to their enjoyment of in-person events, ensuring they feel welcome and that the experience is seamless.

Organisationally

- When producing new works, engage access service providers as early as possible.

Alex says that, ideally, planning for access has to happen at the very beginning of the production, rather than once the work is complete: 'Access isn't something you tack on at the end. You need to include it from the very beginning. In your funding applications, in the process of organising your event.'

- It's important for organisations to think about how a work is going to be made accessible, and to engage access service providers, as early as possible.

This will promote works where access is organically and thoughtfully integrated into the work as a whole – and means that people with disability can feel like they're getting the work as the creator intended, rather than a mediated or 'lesser' version.

- There is a need to balance 'own voices' activism with institutional change.

Alex says, 'Right now, a lot of the work towards accessibility is still being done by disabled people: being on panels, giving organisations their lived experience and knowledge. That's obviously the right thing to do, but we haven't gone beyond that, to having good access policies in place.'

Alex says:

'What would be lovely to see more widely is people without disability being more open to hearing about the changes that need to be made. And where possible, making those changes, implementing new policies, and having more openness and transparency. There needs to be an equal partnership between people with disability providing their experience and knowledge, and allyship from the non-disabled artists.'

Maree Jenner



Maree Jenner is a regular arts attendee who goes to events of all kinds, and says that a proactive approach to accessibility at in-person events is key.

About Maree

For Maree Jenner (she/her/hers), arts participation is an integral part of life: 'You hear something, or you watch something, and it can entertain you, make you feel good, relax you, make you want to do more, inspire you.' Maree is a passionate attendee of arts and culture in all forms, saying that, among other things, she seeks out painting, sculpture, drawing, performing arts, recitals, book launches, and cinema.

Accessibility and the arts

In terms of accessibility, Maree says she's found she often has to ask for access services at arts events: 'In relation to accessibility, I have dwarfism - I'm in my 60s, but I'm the height of a child. It does have challenges in terms of exhibition viewing.'

While this is something that she's gained confidence doing over time, she recognises that it might not come easily to younger people with disability. She says, 'The younger I was, the less I would ask for things. As I got older – and that's part of getting older, "I wish I knew then, what I know now" – I gained that confidence and ability.'

However, this means that venue staff need to have the training and experience to handle access requests appropriately. Maree shared the following anecdote to make this point: 'When I saw [a singer] on the Central Coast, she was in a stand only venue. I contacted them and explained, "I'm the height of a child, I don't want to stand down the front – I'll need a bar stool.'" Maree says the initial response by the venue staff was 'quite negative', and that it took time and negotiation for her request to be recognised. She says this points to the importance of venue staff having Disability Awareness Training and experience with audiences with access needs – saying, 'hopefully, they'll be more flexible straight up, next time they get asked a question like that.'

What has the pandemic changed?

When asked how her experiences at arts events changed over the pandemic, Maree says it's actually had a silver lining in terms of normalising one's right to personal space in venues:

'I suppose the big change [around attending events now] is the proximity. When you're packed in, you're conscious of the health risks. You're thinking about people all being on top of each other. Personally, I love the 1.5m apart rule. People tend to take my airspace and lean over me. COVID showed us that we had that space. I've actually said to the Short Stature community [that] I use it to my advantage. I didn't like it before, but now I say "please stand back, you're hanging over me".'

On-site

- Ensure front-of-house staff are adequately trained and proactively offering support (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case studies).

In terms of in-venue support, Maree recommends having trained staff available at foyers, bars and other locations, during pre-show and intermissions, to assist with access requirements and field any questions that arise. She says it's important not to make any assumptions about any one individual's needs, but rather:

'Disability inclusion and awareness training is really important. It means organisations become aware of the kind of help they can offer. The most important thing is to say, on the web or in the foyer, "tell us what your needs are" Organisations should have a rover walking around the foyer, asking, "can I help you?" Rather than waiting for people to ask, be more proactive.'

- It's important to provide the option to order food or drinks via QR codes.

Maree says that the option to order food or drink via QR codes at her table can be extremely helpful for individuals with physical and other access needs.

Online

- Highlight accessibility in digital advertising, communications, and booking systems (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case study).

Maree says, 'I think it would be wonderful if, right from the very beginning, the venue's advertising, their promotion, their booking systems were accessible. Put accessibility right up front. Encourage people to tell you their needs right

up front. Have different ways for them to contact you, allow you to book online, use the National Relay system, for example.'

- Maintain a range of in-person and online options for participation.

Personally, Maree prefers to attend events in person, but she recognises the importance of maintaining different options for participation when it comes to accessibility: 'If I can be there in person, I'd prefer to be there. The downfall of online events is [that] you're not there in the room, feeling the energy. But if you can't be there, [online events are] a great option. It's one way to support the arts. I know for some of my fellow artists, who are immunocompromised, it was meeting their needs during the pandemic.'

Organisationally

- Connect with different disability networks and recognise varying access needs.

Maree says organisations need to be making connections with networks and communities with lived experience – and recognising that access is not 'one-size-fits all.' She says it's important to be utilising different formats, different platforms and different approaches to be meeting a diverse range of access requirements.

- Ensure accessibility is always front-of-mind.

Maree says she hopes that eventually, 'It's just automatic. That physical barriers as well as other barriers, visual, hearing, the way they communicate, to the audience types, are all taken into consideration.'

Sue Jo Wright



Credit: Serena Siow

Sue Jo Wright believes that awareness of Deaf audiences is growing, but would like to see Deaf audience members have access to the same range of works as other audiences.

About Sue Jo

Sue Jo Wright (she/her/hers) is an audience member with a particular interest in visual art – saying, ‘I think the arts, to me, are visual. I’m a visual communicator, and that’s why I relate to it so well.’ Professionally, Sue Jo is an artist who works primarily with photography, video and textiles to explore her identity as a Deaf person. She is also a theatre consultant and Creative Director of Handshapes, an organisation which hosts Deaf-led art workshops for Deaf adults, people who are hard of hearing, Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) and Auslan students.

Accessibility and the arts

When she engages with the visual arts, Sue Jo's preference is to participate in Auslan tours led by Deaf guides. She says, 'I participate in Auslan tours at different galleries, preferably if it's led by a Deaf person signing. By incorporating Deaf culture in the tour, we can interact and ask questions in our ways without worry or anxiety. It's not the same experience with interpreters, where they are hearing; they are there for translation from English to Auslan and Auslan to English'.

What has the pandemic changed?

Reflecting on how accessibility has changed throughout the pandemic, she says that interpreters at press conferences have helped grow public awareness of Auslan, and the fact that live captions can be inaccurate. She believes the arts and culture sector is making progress in incorporating accessible elements like Auslan and captions into the development process, rather than treating them as something to be added at the end. Integrating these elements from the beginning means they are more likely to be creative, thoughtful, and part of the vision for the work.

However, she says that there are still times where access is 'an afterthought':

'I remember an instance where an artist wanted to avoid adding captions because they said it would be distracting from their artwork. It's not just Deaf people who need captions – CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults), hard of hearing people, families, friends, older adults, foreign tourists, and people who have just moved here wanting to learn English. We had to negotiate, but it was exhausting as this is how we've faced barriers daily. Art should welcome all Access, no matter how it looks.'

Sue Jo says that to ensure accessibility is welcomed by the arts, venues and organisations can do the following:

On-site

- Ensure staff have Disability or Deafness Awareness Training (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.**, and **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case studies).

Like other case study interviewees, Sue Jo says Disability Awareness Training is an important way to make arts attendance more inclusive and enjoyable. She says that when she encounters staff without disability awareness training, it puts her in the position of having to explain her access requirements.

- Insituting Access Coordinator positions with lived experience.

Sue Jo says it would be a major victory for accessibility if every organisation had an Access Coordinator to facilitate conversations around different forms of access. She says it's 'so easy', as an artist and audience member, to communicate with Access Coordinators when they themselves have lived experience.

Online

- Use Auslan-friendly digital marketing and communications.

Sue Jo says she rarely sees arts events marketed in Auslan – and that arts venues can look to organisations like Deaf Connect as an example of Auslan-friendly communication. This includes offering Auslan interpretation via video, and using Plain English to ensure information is easily understood.

She says that Auslan-friendly marketing provides her 'the same information as everyone else, at the same time' – rather than requiring her to click through or seek out further information.

- Include visual aids when providing venue information.

While some organisations might provide a map or written guide to finding and accessing their venues, Sue Jo says it's important to provide as much visual information as possible. She says, 'Auslan is a visual language. Deaf people rely on gestures and body language. So for promoting venues, it's essential to include other visual aids, like Auslan videos, graphics, pictures and Google Maps for directions.'

- Allow online audiences to interact with Auslan interpreters.

Overall, Sue Jo says she strongly prefers face-to-face participation rather than digital arts experiences: 'Face-to-face is better in the Deaf community than digital online. Meetings like Zoom are much more fatiguing, and you need more time for natural rest. People who can hear have auditory input and have the luxury of taking their eyes away. As a Deaf person, you're constantly staring, you might miss seconds, and that's all it takes to miss the context.'

However, one thing that would make the online experience more enjoyable is making Deaf audience members visible to interpreters, to allow them to adjust their signing style (e.g. Southern vs. Northern dialect) depending on who's in the audience.

Organisationally

- Keep increasing the range of works that are accessible to Deaf people – recognising diverse interests and tastes.

The range of works made accessible to Deaf people also needs to be improved, says Sue Jo. She says, 'it would be fantastic if all shows were Auslan accessible. Currently, we have limited options, and like everyone else, many deaf people have different tastes. I understand there's a budget

problem for Access. However, if you want Deaf people to be there, truly make all venues/shows accessible. When you invest, you will get something more in return, a larger audience – like CODAs, Deaf people's friends and families, and colleagues – which makes it more rewarding.'

Sarah Korte



Sarah Korte says the pandemic showed a more inclusive approach to the arts was possible – and that the challenge will be for organisations to stay committed to accessibility.

About Sarah

Sarah Korte (she/her/hers, they/them/theirs) mostly attends visual art galleries and museums, an interest informed by her studies in art history. She says, 'I'm an art history student, so I do really enjoy my historical/classical art – if there's a Monet exhibition, I'm there. I love a history museum, I'm a bit of a traditionalist. But I do also love contemporary art.' To enjoy exhibitions without barriers to access, she requires a motorised scooter: 'I'm a walking stick user – if I go to a gallery, I'd like to hire a scooter.'

Accessibility and the arts

For Sarah, staying connected to art is an essential way of ‘feeling part of the world when I’m spending so much time at home.’

In particular, Sarah finds herself drawn to work by artists with disability – saying, ‘I love accessing other disabled people’s art, and seeing those experiences, or similar feelings reflected... Disability has really pushed the importance of art into focus for me. It’s a reflection of experience and sharing that experience of life.’

What has the pandemic changed?

Sarah says that during lockdown, she witnessed the arts become, in some ways, more inclusive: ‘The pandemic was obviously awful for disabled people, but all the things we’ve been asking for many years, were suddenly available.’ Things like visual exhibitions and gallery walkthroughs, which were previously thought to be too difficult or resource-intensive, became the norm.

Sarah shares one example of attending a ‘robot tour’ of a museum in the UK: ‘When it comes to going to galleries, I can’t go out on my own anymore so I have to rope people in and often cater to their tastes. I might get to see things like the Archibald which are more accessible for people who don’t know much about art – but I’d like to see things that are less straightforward. Having the agency to attend what I want to attend would be incredible and the robot tour felt like an amazing step towards being acknowledged and included for the first time.’

Sarah hopes that the popularisation of virtual arts experiences throughout the pandemic will have the effect of making organisations more aware of audiences they hadn’t thought to cater to before. However, she says that online visual arts experiences appear to be becoming less common again. She understands the impulse to return to in-person experiences, because ‘digital isn’t the same’ – but for someone like herself, online arts experiences remain a vital alternative.

On-site

- Disability Awareness Training is essential – and untrained staff may lead people with access needs to feel they aren't welcome (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**, **Error! Reference source not found.** and **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case studies).

Sarah says there's an emotional toll to encountering untrained staff and being forced to push for one's access needs to be met. 'I avoid places where they're not comfortable with disability and their staff aren't trained, or I need to feel especially brave. It makes me think they don't want me there. I'm being a nuisance, they're confused. That's the feeling you get when people aren't trained. They say "oh I guess, I need to call so-and-so, I'm not sure". You're sending a message as a venue that it's a burden, that disabled people are not wanted.'

- Provide multiple options for mobility aids, including motorised scooters.

Sarah says many venues assume a 'one-sized fits-all' approach to mobility aids, often meaning only manual wheelchairs are available. She says, 'A lot of galleries have manual wheelchairs, which I can't use – I have to have my partner or a friend push me around. I don't like it when people only offer the wheelchair. It takes away my agency to look at what I want to look at and that's incredibly frustrating.'

Online

- Ensure digital audiences aren't sidelined at hybrid events, and consider the value of digital-only opportunities.

Sarah observes that it's easy to feel sidelined or forgotten as an online audience member when audiences are also present in person: 'The one thing I find frustrating is if there's a live audience as well, they're often prioritised. You feel a bit left out, e.g. with Q&As. Feeling part of it is really important.'

She says, 'while hybrid is called the best of the both worlds, I do think we need to have Zoom specific events. Everyone's in their lounge room, we're all in it together, it's totally different instead of feeling like an outsider looking in. People should embrace the uniqueness of Zoom as a medium.'

- Establish a dedicated accessibility page on your website, with as much information as possible (see also **Error! Reference source not found.**'s case study).

The absence of clear, complete and detailed accessibility information online is a 'red flag' for Sarah. 'If they don't have an accessibility section on the website, or it's the hardest thing to find, I'm immediately like, oh dear.'

'Previously I've called venues and asked, "can I come, what do you offer?" Sometimes they pull stuff out of the bag, but other times it's clear they don't know much. At this point, that's a giant alarm for me: you're going to experience a bit of ableism.'

Organisationally

- Make it clear that you value and cater for audiences with disability by clearly communicating your approach to accessibility.

Sarah says, 'as an organisation you need to put your accessibility information clearly. If it's not there I'm wondering why isn't it there. Is it not there because you haven't trained staff or even started to consider accessibility? To me that's a sign that I'm likely going to encounter at least subtle ableism and I'm not going to come.'

What's next

You can [read about the story so far](#) on the study's Australian homepage.

There, you can also access a dynamic dashboard to help you explore the results by location, artform and other variables. Instructions and tips for using the dashboard are available in a short video.

To receive future Snapshot Reports, Fact Sheets and resources in your inbox, as soon as they are available, you can opt in to receive Audience Outlook Monitor news [on the study's Australian homepage](#).

If you have a question, or an idea to put forward, relating to this study, you can [email Patternmakers](#).

Acknowledgments

The Audience Outlook Monitor study in Australia is supported by the Australia Council for the Arts, Create NSW, Creative Victoria, the Queensland government through Arts Queensland, Department of the Premier and Cabinet (Arts South Australia), Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC) WA and artsACT.

Patternmakers acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of our land – Australia. We acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation as the traditional custodians of the place where Patternmakers is based, and we pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.