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Time to Act

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

November 2021

**A RESEARCH REPORT AUTHORED BY ON THE MOVE,
COMMISSIONED BY THE BRITISH COUNCIL.**



Time to Act is commissioned by the British Council, within the context of Europe Beyond Access – the world’s largest transnational Arts & Disability project.

Co-funded by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union, Europe Beyond Access supports disabled artists to break the glass ceilings of the contemporary theatre and dance sectors.

The core partners of the project are the British Council, Holland Dance Festival (The Netherlands), Kampnagel (Germany), Onassis Stegi (Greece), Oriente Occidente (Italy), Per.Art (Serbia), and Skånes Dansteater (Sweden).

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Time to Act is the first ever transnational study which robustly evidences that cultural professionals in the performing arts across Europe lack the knowledge and experience needed to support equal access to the cultural sector for disabled artists, disabled arts professionals, and disabled audiences.

Based on a large-scale open survey covering 42 countries, a series of in-depth interviews, and an analysis of existing literature, reports and guidance, *Time to Act* explores the barriers that prevent cultural professionals from learning about and presenting artistic works by professional disabled artists, identifies gaps in their knowledge and confidence, and asks who should be doing more to support equal access. Commissioned by the British Council, the report has been produced by the mobility information network On the Move with input from expert European networks such as Trans Europe Halles and IN SITU, and with feedback from public presentations including a webinar in June 2021 hosted by Acesso Cultura (Portugal) and a live event at the IETM Plenary Meeting Lyon in October 2021 (France).

One of its clearest findings is that professionals in the performing arts need better knowledge of work by disabled artists. More than half of survey respondents rated their current knowledge as poor or very poor. Around 1 in 6 had not seen any productions by disabled artists over a two-year period. Unsurprisingly, lack of knowledge was given as one of their largest obstacles to supporting and programming more work by disabled artists. As things stand, 48% of respondents were not very confident or not at all confident in the accessibility of artistic programmes for disabled artists.

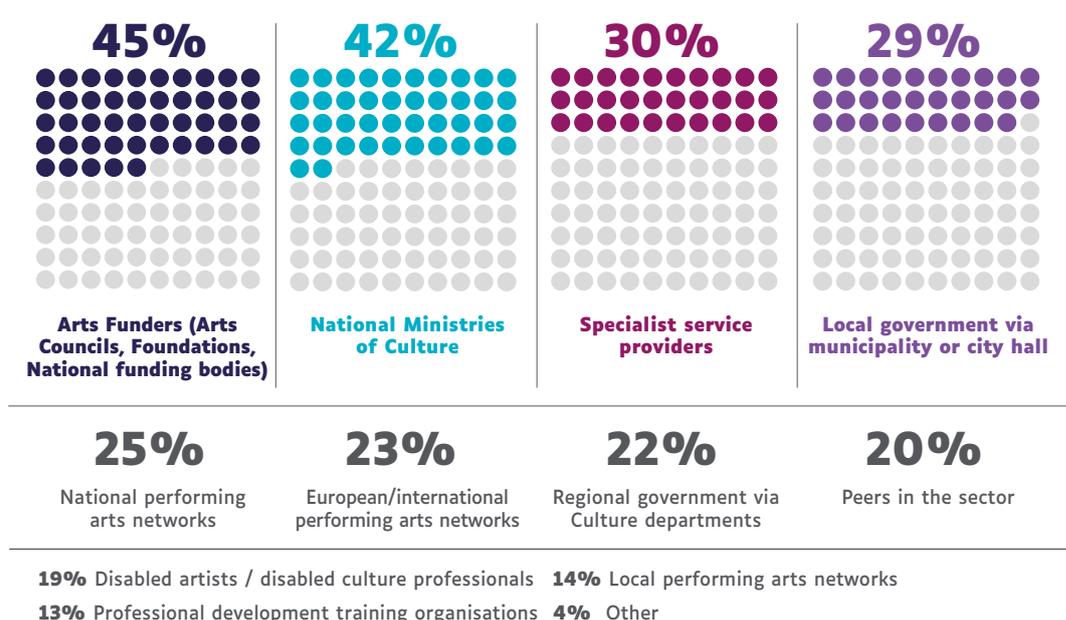
The report shows greater engagement around access for disabled audiences, with a lower figure of 39% not very confident or not at all confident in the accessibility of artistic programmes for disabled audiences. However, there are still major gaps in provision – particularly around online access. Only 19% of venues and festivals surveyed had an accessible website, and only 12% an accessible booking process. The research also found that while some mainstream organisations emphasised they were open to everyone – well connected within the arts sector, and able to identify access needs – disabled artists and companies themselves often felt their specific needs were not well understood.

How then to improve knowledge and build capacity? An extensive literature of reports, checklists, and toolkits is already available to guide cultural professionals in providing greater access – but these are not widely circulated, partly because they are often focused on a single country, or available in only one language. In the absence of more structured forms of guidance and training, disabled artists themselves are often used as informal sources of advice, though are seldom paid for it.

Overall, there is a huge need for more guidance and increased understanding if the cultural sector is to achieve equal access. This need was evident among those who participated in the *Time to Act* research – as well as those who didn't. Many professionals approached for this report did not feel confident answering questions on the topic of disability, suggesting that they lacked the knowledge to voice an informed opinion while at the same time insisting on the importance of the research itself and of accessibility more broadly.

When asked to name their existing sources of information on accessibility, governmental bodies such as ministries of culture and national arts councils were rarely quoted – with the notable exception of public bodies in the UK. Funders themselves also reported poor knowledge of work by disabled artists in the *Time to Act* survey, and had low confidence in the accessibility of their own programmes for disabled artists. This is in stark contrast to the fact that cultural professionals expect national arts councils and cultural ministries to take the lead in providing support: 45% of survey respondents selected arts funders as among the three stakeholders within the sector they thought should be doing the most, and 42% national ministries of culture.

Who do arts professionals think should be doing most to provide guidance, training, and best practice resources? (Up to 3 Choices)



This report was prepared during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the last 18 months have increased online and remote working, and seen a broader turn towards digital approaches that may provide a path to greater access, participants in *Time to Act's* research repeatedly raised concerns that ongoing health risks impact disabled people disproportionately, that tighter resources could push inclusion strategies off the agenda for funders and others in the cultural field, and that disabled people 'will disappear once again from the public space'.

Ensuring this does not happen is a priority and responsibility of the whole of the cultural sector. Securing the progress of the past while working towards an equal future means advocating for better funding and regulation, taking a transnational approach to sharing knowledge, and placing universal inclusion and accessibility at the centre of work for all arts organisations and venues. The cultural sector is poised for change, and knows it's needed. It's time to act.