

# SHOW ME THAT YOU THINK OF ME

A challenge to those who host and deliver leisure and  
cultural activities in Shetland

Research with those living with a disability reveals the  
challenges and reality of trying to be part of Shetland's rich  
and varied cultural and leisure opportunities.

## Executive Summary

The report describes research findings from a community-led action research project in Shetland, funded by the Knowledge is Power Programme.

### Research question

The research sought to understand the reality of attending social and cultural events or spaces for disabled people, their families and carers in Shetland, and how their experience can be improved.

### Key findings from the research

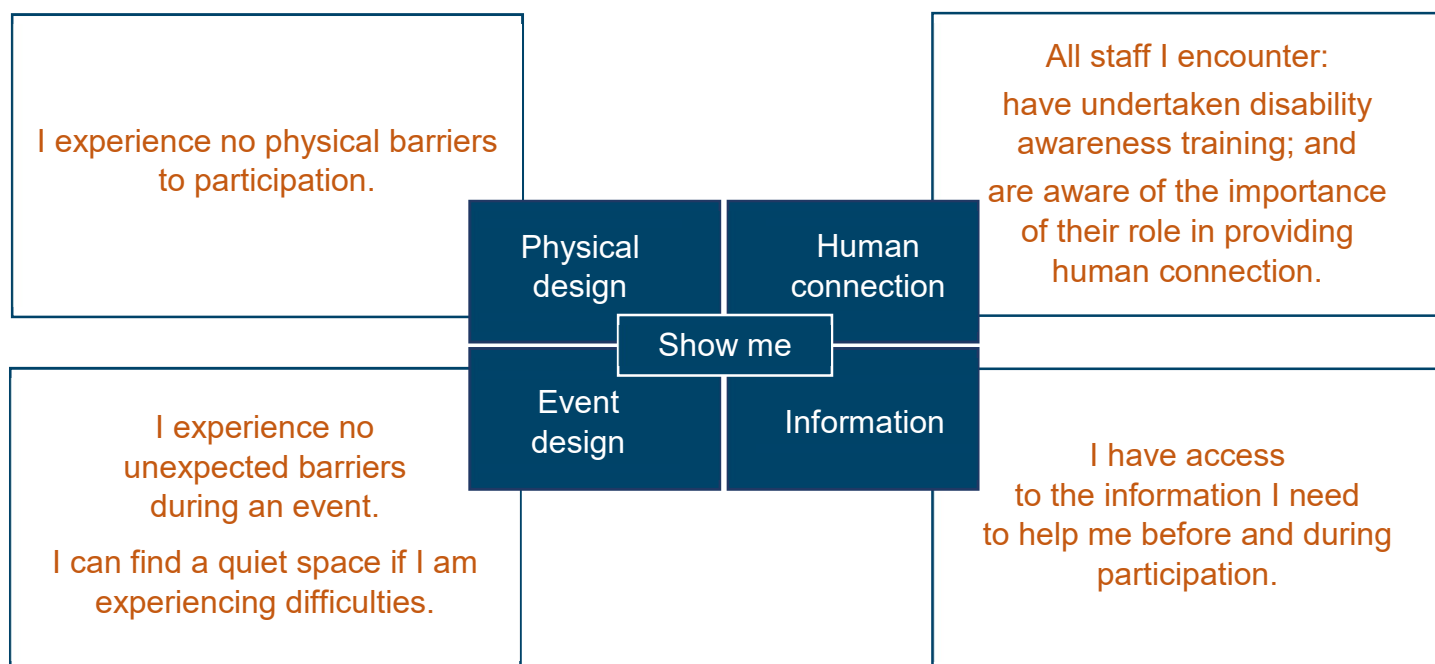
- Two-thirds of respondents who identified as a disabled person said they never or rarely attend social events or venues in Shetland.
- More than half (58%) of disabled respondents said there are events or venues that are difficult to access.
- Almost half (47%) of all respondents stated that they are not confident to attend social events and venues in Shetland.
- Three-quarters of respondents (75%) said they thought organisers and venues need to improve their planning to support disabled people to attend equally.

### A challenge to those who host and deliver leisure and cultural activities in Shetland

The report issues a simple plea on behalf of disabled people and their families and carers to those who host and deliver leisure and cultural activities in Shetland:

**“Show me that you think of me”**

The research findings include detailed recommendations, but analysis indicates there are four areas where those who host and deliver leisure and cultural activities can enhance participation for all Shetlanders. When the experience of disabled people at events and venues in Shetland can be described in the terms shown below, significant progress will have been made.



It is hoped that promotion of the research findings can lead to meaningful action including in the first instance: collaborative working through the third sector forum; the development of common methods for sharing accessibility information, including symbols; and the promotion of organisations who can provide support to events and venues.

# 1. Introduction

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A research project was undertaken to better understand the reality of attending social and cultural events and spaces for disabled people, their families, and carers in Shetland. Importantly the research also sought to explore how their experiences can be improved.

The project was led by members of the community. A group of eight individuals came together following a call for interested parties to work on an action research project, with the support of [Shetland Community Connections](#) (SCC). The group was free to discuss and agree the focus of the research, which was supported with funding from the [Knowledge is Power](#) Programme.

It is our hope that key agencies, those who own and operate venues, and those who organise events will use the findings to inform their own decision-making and act to improve the experiences of disabled people and their families and carers in Shetland.

## Research methodology

The Knowledge is Power Programme connected the research group with a researcher from [The Poverty Alliance](#) who provided expertise and advice around research methods, ethics, and data management.

The majority of the research was conducted in 2021 and concluded in January 2022. The methods included:

- an online survey, supported by an easy read version available by post;
- one-to-one consultations, the findings from which were subsequently transferred to the online survey; and
- group discussions.

The consultations and group discussions were undertaken by Inclusion Shetland, MS Shetland – supported by MS Society and Macular Degeneration Society, and Supported Living and Outreach.

## Research participants

The online survey was completed by, or on behalf of 96 individuals in Shetland. Of these individuals, 39% of respondents indicated they would describe themselves as a disabled person, and 61% stated they are a person who supports a disabled person to access spaces and events.

## Report structure

The second section of the report shares the experience of research participants of participating, or not participating, in events and venue. The third section of the report describes the improvements respondents would like to see, and the final section proposes actions for consideration by key partners in Shetland.

### Language

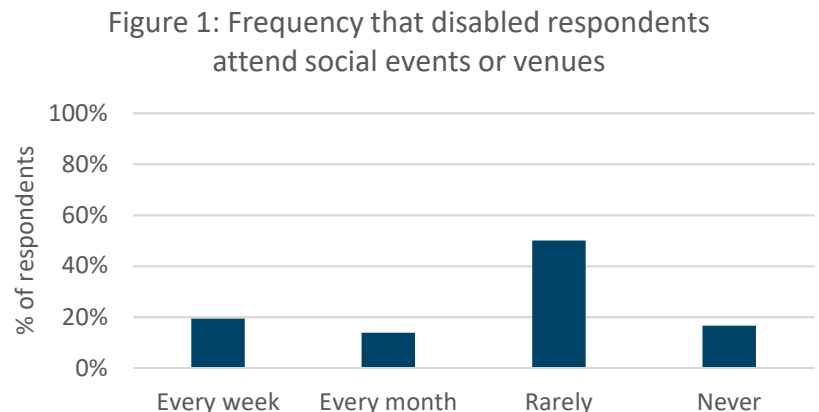
For the purposes of the research, each respondent was informed:

‘We use the term Disabled People in line with the understanding that people are disabled by barriers in society not by impairment, difference, or illness. Society creates the barriers, and those barriers can be changed.’

## 2. Lived experience

### Survey question: How often do you typically attend social events or venues in Shetland?

Respondents were asked to consider their rate of attendance at social events or venues before the pandemic. Two-thirds of respondents who identified as a disabled person said they never or rarely attend social events or venues in Shetland. Almost a fifth of disabled respondents said they attend a venue or social event every week (Figure 1).



### Survey question: Are there any events or venues in Shetland that are difficult for you to go to?

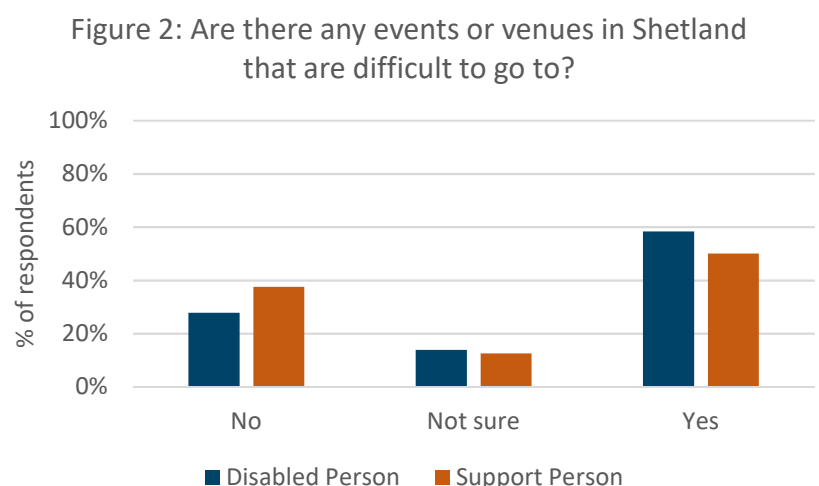
Respondents were asked about difficult to access events or venues. More than half (58%) of disabled respondents said there are events or venues that are difficult to access, and a further 14% said they are not sure (Figure 2).

Respondents were asked to add comments and some respondents have interpreted venues to mean a wide range of premises as they have highlighted problems associated with access to the Sheriff Court, some hairdressers, and stairs in retail premises.

**Transport** – Respondents comments highlighted several issues related to transport which can restrict access to events and venues. These included: people parking in disabled spaces without displaying a blue badge, how difficult many buses and the bus station are for people in wheelchairs, including restrictions on the number of wheelchairs allowed on-board, and how dependent disabled individuals can be on others for support with transport. Transport related comments include “Poor parking close to a venue is a big concern” another comment “there seem to be less and less disabled parking spaces - or perhaps more people with Blue badges”.

**Venue facilities and design** – Comments specifically referencing issues once inside an event or venue highlighted problems in venues including toilets that are accessed via stairs, a lack of changing places toilets, challenges associated with internal stairs and steps generally, problems encountered with queuing, and the challenge of heavy doors that are difficult to open. Examples of comments received are:

- “It’s not simply about level access for wheelchair users, many disabilities are hidden. Once at a venue many are too crowded or have different levels accessed by a couple of steps. For me the big issue is somewhere to sit and rest, there are never enough chairs!”
- “Some hospitality venues have only stepped access which is impossible to negotiate for



people with poor/slow mobility or in a wheelchair, some have disabled access that can be used on request, but this is sometimes far away from the parking area and then it takes a long walk inside the building, or is a long way to push a wheelchair on carpeted areas, to get to a dining area or social event”

- “Restaurants have opened up with no access to toilets that are in basements, I have been told in a restaurant to go to the [external] public toilet. I think that is awful.”
- “Doors at local halls not wide enough for electric wheelchairs. Also can't get into some venues as there is a lip into the entrance. This is fine for a manual wheelchair as they can be leaned back slightly to get over the lip but you can't do this with an electric chair.”

**Advance information** – Respondents also highlighted issues associated with a lack of information available in advance about events and venues which makes it difficult for individuals with a disability to understand if an event or venue might be accessible or suitable for them, for example “I need to plan ahead of time as my condition is variable, I cannot take the risk of just turning up to an event. I find there is very little information online about venues accessibility which makes my planning difficult.”

**Sensory experiences** – Sensory issues associated with the lighting and volume of events were also raised. These include the lack of quiet spaces at venues where people can withdraw to if they are experiencing sensory issues. For example, “I'm autistic and I generally struggle with the lack of a safe space within venues, down south some venues have a designated room catered for Autistic people and other disabled people that may struggle with sensory issues.” Another commented “use of flashing lights, excess noises can be very triggering.”

Almost a third of respondents who have a disability stated that there are not any events or venues they found difficult to go to (Figure 2). However, half of these respondents said they rarely went to events so for some their lack of difficulty might be through lack of attendance.

“As a person with a disability you just want to live your life and for things to work for you.  
Sadly they often don't.”

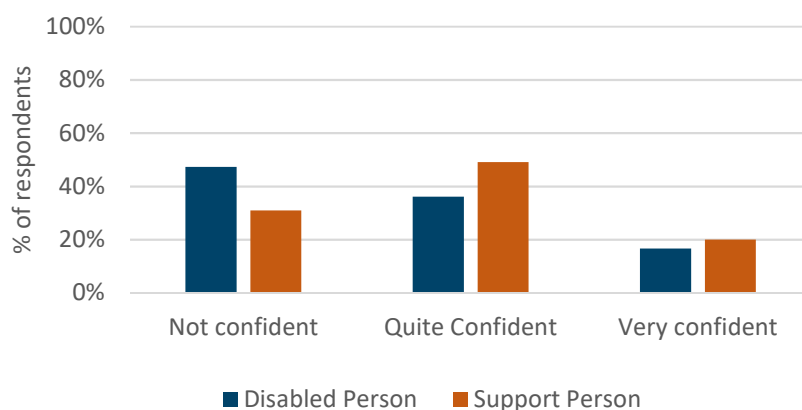
Respondents who support a disabled person were slightly more likely than a disabled person to say they had no difficulties (Figure 2).

### Survey question: How confident are you to attend social events and venues in Shetland?

Almost half (47%) of all disabled survey respondents stated they are not confident to attend social events and venues in Shetland. The percentage was lower amongst support persons (31%). Overall, 37% of all survey respondents stated they are not confident to attend social events and venues in Shetland (Figure 3). One respondent shared “I am unable to attend social events because crowds and the inevitable noise etc drain my energy. This isn't something that could be changed. But I could attend the cinema if there were 'quiet' viewings with restricted numbers of folk. But that's a big ask and probably not feasible.”

One positive finding in the responses received is that almost a fifth of all respondents (19%) stated they do feel very confident in attending social events and

Figure 3: Confidence to attend social events and venues in Shetland



venues, with a relatively similar proportion of disabled (17%) and support persons (20%) sharing this perspective.

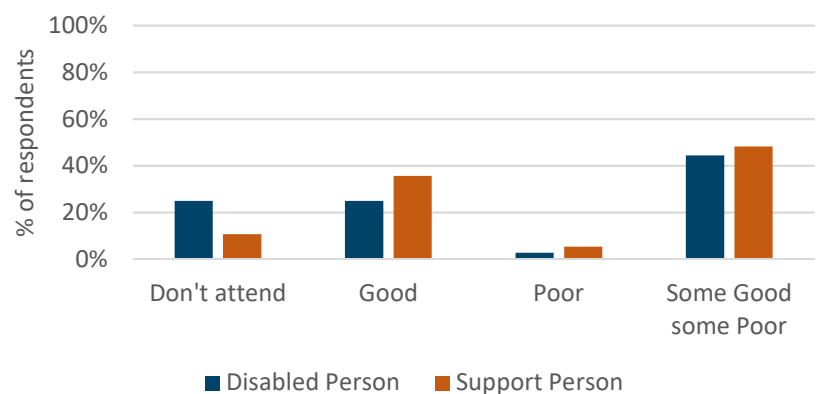
## Survey question: What have been your experiences of attending or supporting a Disabled Person to attend an event or venue in Shetland?

Respondents were asked about their experience of attending or supporting a disabled person to attend a social event or venue. A quarter (25%) of disabled respondents said they had good experiences of attending social events or venues in Shetland (Figure 4). However, the most common response, provided by 47% of all respondents, was that they had some good and some poor experiences.

The comments provided give an insight into how disabled people experience difficulties and can still feel excluded even once they've been able to access an event, examples of the comments received are:

- “We have often been welcomed and people are kind but they often don't seem to know much about autistic people and we've also been laughed at. We're almost always stared at a lot but nobody has been openly hostile to us in Shetland (as they have elsewhere).”
- “I've attended my local up helly aa my entire life and I sometimes struggle with everything but there's a part of the hall that is quieter so I can hide out there if it gets too much. Most of the time I am not so lucky.”

Figure 4: Experience of attending or supporting a disabled person to attend a social event or venue



## What is the reality of attending social events and venues in Shetland?

All the questions and responses described above present a mixed picture of what accessing Shetland's venues and social events can be like for disabled people, and their friends, families, and carers.

Hidden within these statistics are individual stories, sharing lived experiences of trying to participate in public life in Shetland; some of which are positive, but too many are negative with stories highlighting discomfort, isolation, and frustration.

There are also stories of when things are already difficult, a passing comment, being made to feel like a nuisance, or a missing human connection can have a lasting negative effect beyond the event.

The findings clearly indicate there is room for improvement so that Shetland's venues and social events can be accessible to all Shetland residents who wish to participate.

The next section addresses what survey and focus group respondents believe could be done to improve access and participation.

## Survey question: Do you feel organisers and venues need to improve their planning to support Disabled People to access events and venues equally?

Respondents were asked whether they feel that those who organise or manage social events and venues need to improve their planning in order to support disabled people to access events and venues equally.

Three quarters of respondents (75%) said yes, a fifth of respondents (20%) said no, and 5% stated they don't know.

However, the challenge is more than just physical access as one respondent highlights "I don't know, I want to be social, but I just don't fit into society. I'm just different and I think it's a whole attitude and culture problem. I think it starts at school. It needs a massive culture shift."

## Survey question: Do you feel that disabled people should be part of planning for inclusive events and spaces?

An overwhelming majority of respondents (88%) said that they do feel that disabled people should be part of the planning process for events and spaces. Four percent said no, and eight percent did not know. The responses are similar between disabled and support persons (Figure 6).

The comments received included:

- "Having someone who is challenged in their abilities to 'reality' check what is being proposed is a great idea"
- "I think getting input from disabled folk is crucial when organising events. I know you can't accommodate every person's needs."

Figure 5: Do events and venue organisers need to undertake better planning to enable equal access

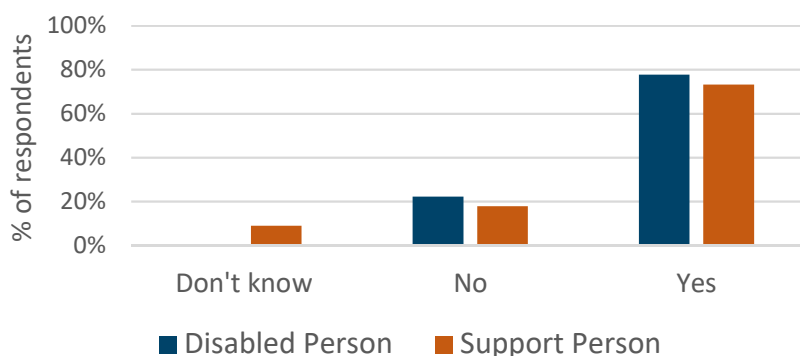
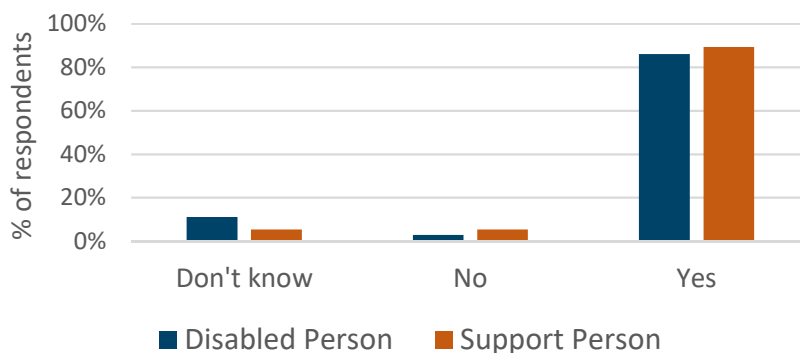


Figure 6: Should disabled people be part of planning inclusive events and spaces?



### 3. Improving experience

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In the group discussions, consultations, and in direct response to the survey question 'What changes to social events or venues would have a positive impact on your attendance', research participants have suggested ways in which event organisers and venue providers could improve disabled peoples access to and enjoyment of social events and venues. Responses are grouped under the following headings:

- Physical access to facilities
- Practical assistance
- Advance information
- Safe spaces
- Knowledge and awareness
- Incentives to act

The suggestions from participants are shared below and describe the improvements sought under each of the headings.

#### Physical access to facilities

The following suggestions were made to improve physical access to facilities for disabled people:

- "Consideration to people with reduced mobility or wheelchair users, step free access, good parking facilities nearby, accessible toilets or changing places."
- "Accessible toilets"
- "No sills on door frames"
- "Disabled parking spaces on a level place would help, as would better access to toilets."
- "Step free access, good parking facilities nearby, accessible toilets or changing places."

#### Practical assistance

The following suggestions for practical assistance were made:

- "Handrails on both sides of any steps would be helpful, as would better handrails near outside doors."
- "An understanding that for some people standing in queues before events start is very difficult, early entry system?"
- "More room to move between tables and chairs in wheelchair."
- "Minimum queuing."

And finally, a suggestion for practical assistance which tackles affordability barriers:

- "Discounts for events for people who live with only benefits for an income."

#### Advance information

A significant number of comments were received on the ability to access information in advance, and how important this can be for someone living with a disability. The following suggestions were made:

- "Better information like times of different parts of event."
- "To be stated what kind of disability friendly a venue is. If it's in a Listed Building to be upfront about whether it is suitable for those with limited mobility, vision impairments etc"
- "Simple things about letting folk know in the beginning if a venue will be accessible to what kinds of disabilities."



- “More reviews of places on Euan’s Guide, real life experiences from other disabled people gives me the best information when planning to attend.”

## Safe spaces

The importance of feeling safe was a common theme throughout the survey and focus groups, and the following suggestions were made by respondents:

- “Relaxed sessions are good as people there know what to expect and are supportive”
- “Gym - we need sessions available for people who need less of a crowd, less noise (like supermarkets and cinemas do).”
- “Having somewhere within the venue i can go if everything gets too much.”

## Knowledge and awareness

The negative impact on individuals from being made to feel unwelcome or being treated poorly was clear across the survey and focus groups. Individuals who lack confidence or are wary of entering uncertain environments can have their experience massively affected, for better or worse, by the human interactions they experience.

It appears clear that the actions and attitudes of other people can have a significant impact on how people living with a disability, and the people who accompany them, experience an event, and as a consequence how they feel about attending future events. The following suggestions relate to improving knowledge and awareness of disabled people and their needs.

- “Mandatory training for staff on disability awareness”
- “Consideration to people with reduced mobility or wheelchair users.”

## Incentives to act

A final suggestion is made to ensure owners and operators have an incentive to act:

- “We need a commitment by planning department to only license premises and renew licenses to places that actually are committed to being accessible, [and provide] lifts, ramps, stair lifts.”

## Conclusions on Improving Experience

Many of the suggestions for change do not appear to place significant demands on events or venues. Many of the research participants are simply asking for disabled visitors or audience members to be treated as valued and welcome customers through information and practical considerations that help them negotiate planning and attendance at an event or venue. Strikingly, several of the suggestions also have the potential to benefit other customers. The alternative to showing this consideration is for events and venues to simply ignore the barriers which exist, making disabled people who have additional challenges or needs effectively unwelcome.

Perhaps the more challenging suggestions for operators are around providing physical access to facilities in buildings where there

are constraints created by existing infrastructure. However, the challenge that is posed to venues and events is – are you sure you’ve really tried?

Many research participants are simply asking for disabled visitors or audience members to be treated as valued and welcome customers through information and practical considerations that help them negotiate planning and attendance at an event or venue.

Are decision-makers really considering the impact of their choices? For example:

- has someone really thought about the impact of carpets on wheelchair users;
- have they really considered the route from disabled parking space to activity;
- have they really taken seriously their ability to provide a changing places toilet, and
- are they really thinking of all their customers comfort when they plan permanent or temporary seating layouts?

Whilst these challenges are fair questions based on the experience of disabled people, many respondents also recognise there are already pockets of good practice and that some challenges are difficult for venue operators to overcome. Which is why this report issues a simple plea on behalf of disabled people: **“Show me that you think of me”** even if challenges remain so that everyone can feel a welcome participant in Shetland’s public life.

The following page provides a summary which describes what individuals would be experiencing if they are thought of in the design and delivery of a leisure or cultural event or venue.

The final section of the report contains a short-term action plan which seeks to develop mechanisms that stimulate and motivate event and venue operators to act.

## Four elements that show me that you think of me

Paying attention to these four elements, alongside the more detailed recommendations made above, will significantly improve the experience of an event or venue, reduce anxiety and distress, and importantly enhance participation opportunities for all Shetlanders.

### I experience no physical barriers.

Physical barriers to participation can begin upon leaving home with transport issues and from that point forward physical design has a vital role to play in enabling access and participation.

Common barriers include inaccessible or no buses, parking access, poor/no pavements, kerb drops, doorways, steps without handrails, inappropriate seating, inaccessible toilets, and limited space to manoeuvre.

### All staff I encounter have undertaken disability awareness training.

### All staff I encounter are aware of the importance of their role in providing a human connection.

Venue and event operators with staff aware of how to respond to individuals who have additional challenges will greatly improve experiences; and bridge the gap between a lack of confidence to participate and positive participation.

Physical  
design

Human  
connection

Show me

Event design

Information

### I experience no unexpected barriers during an event.

### I can find a quiet space if I am experiencing difficulties.

Designers of one-off events must avoid inadvertently reducing access in poor temporary design decisions. Cramped seating, blocked or reduced access, or complex and noisy entry points can all create significant barriers.

Designing in some element of quiet space will help many. However, no place can be expected to guarantee a feeling of personal safety as each individual is different.

### I have access to the information I need to help me before and during participation.

Issues around a lack of appropriate information both before and during participation are commonly raised. If helpful information about an event or venue is not readily available, it can be very challenging to access – it's rarely as simple as 'just ask'.

An added benefit of good quality information in advance is that it can make people feel welcome.

## 4. Taking action

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The action of doing the research has shone a light on the issues and acted as a catalyst for meaningful discussions. Since beginning the Knowledge is Power project, some services and venues in Shetland have made commitments to act on the issues raised with some having made practical improvements and a willingness to seek lived experience advice.

As a group of community members who came together to conduct the research, we know that improvement is largely in the gift of others. We know it will take a combination of numerous individual actions, community actions, and business actions to ensure all those who wish to, are able to participate in public life across Shetland.

We sincerely hope our work acts as a catalyst for partners in Shetland to come together to plan and implement coherent and meaningful improvement. With this in mind we have proposed a programme of actions which we hope collaboration with interested parties can deliver for Shetland.

Actions to consider
1. Launch and Promote research report across Shetland media platforms.
2. Discuss with third sector forum the findings of report and potential for collaborative action plan.
3. Collect, publish, and promote a list of organisations who can support events and venues to improve their practices and facilities in support of greater inclusivity. An approach of pragmatic partnership working will be encouraged.
4. Explore creation of an agreed set of symbols for advertising events to provide pre-attendance information.
5. Link with Shetland Directory developments to incorporate accessibility information and use a events information format to provide consistency of venue and pre event advertising.
6. Compile a list of the many practical suggestions that respondents provided within the responses then publish and share. This will be highly valuable to make useful change.