



Building Disability-Centred Creative Futures in East London



Findings from a participatory
research with disabled creative
practitioners in East London.

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About This Research

Why does this research matter?

The Olympic & Paralympic legacy made East London a hub for inclusive growth. Policymakers aimed not only to deliver what the Greater London Authority called “the most accessible Games ever” (GLA, 2009) but also to use the event to “drive forward the cause of disability equality by changing attitudes, improving access and opening up new opportunities across sport, culture and business” (DCMS, 2013). The London Legacy Development Corporation embedded inclusion as a core principle, carrying this commitment into the area’s long-term governance.

More than a decade later, the promise remains largely unrealised. While 81% of the public believed the Games improved attitudes toward disabled people (UK Government/Mayor of London Office, 2013), Scope’s post-Games study found the opposite: 81% of disabled respondents reported no improvement, and 22% said attitudes had worsened (Scope, 2013). Recent research shows positive shifts in non-disabled viewers’ attitudes after Paralympic coverage (Channel 4, 2024). Yet no comparable study has examined disabled people’s perspectives since Scope’s 2013 report, a significant gap in itself.

When the legacy was promised, culture was explicitly named, alongside changing attitudes and new opportunities. Yet, more than a decade later, that part of the promise has gone largely unexamined within East London’s creative sector. Disabled people’s participation in cultural life remains largely unmeasured and unrecognised within institutional frameworks. We know the infrastructure was built. What we do not know is whether disabled creative practitioners found genuine opportunity there, or the freedom to shape their own creative paths.

This study provides rare empirical evidence of disabled creative practitioners’ lived experiences in East London, over a decade after the Paralympic Games. It documents the barriers they face and what genuinely inclusive practice would require. This report does not stop at identifying barriers; it also provides a starting point for action.

What makes this report unique?

Community voices at the centre: This report draws on direct evidence from 78 disabled creative practitioners across four East London boroughs. Rather than relying on institutional accounts or proxy measures, it asks disabled creatives themselves about their experiences, making it a rare source of empirical evidence from within the community.

Designed to be accessible: The survey was written in plain language and distributed both digitally (via email and social media) and through printed flyers across East London, to ensure those less present on digital platforms could participate. Alternative formats were also offered throughout.

Framework for action: This report does not stop at documenting barriers. It offers the Building Blocks for Disability-Centred Futures: a set of principles and a practical tool for organisations ready to move from intentions of inclusion to actual change.

Full research methodology and findings from the participatory design sessions are available in the dissertation or on request.

About the researcher:

Aksana Berdnikova is a visually impaired practice-based designer and a researcher holding an MSc in Disability Design & Innovation from UCL. This research emerges from both lived experience and academic inquiry. Grounded in participatory design methods and Disability Justice principles, it explores how disabled creative communities can shape East London's creative futures.

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Part 1: What Disabled Creatives Experience

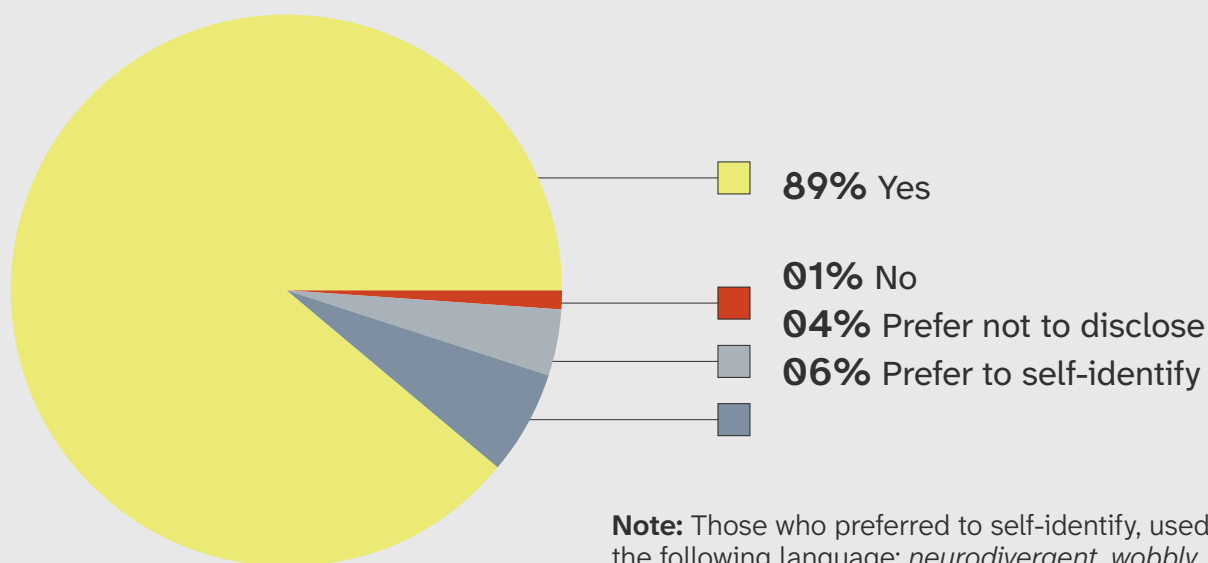
Introduction to Part 1

This section presents findings from an online survey of 78 disabled creative practitioners in East London. The findings are presented with minimal interpretation, allowing community voices and data to speak directly.

Survey Findings → 78 Disabled creatives completed the survey

Question 1

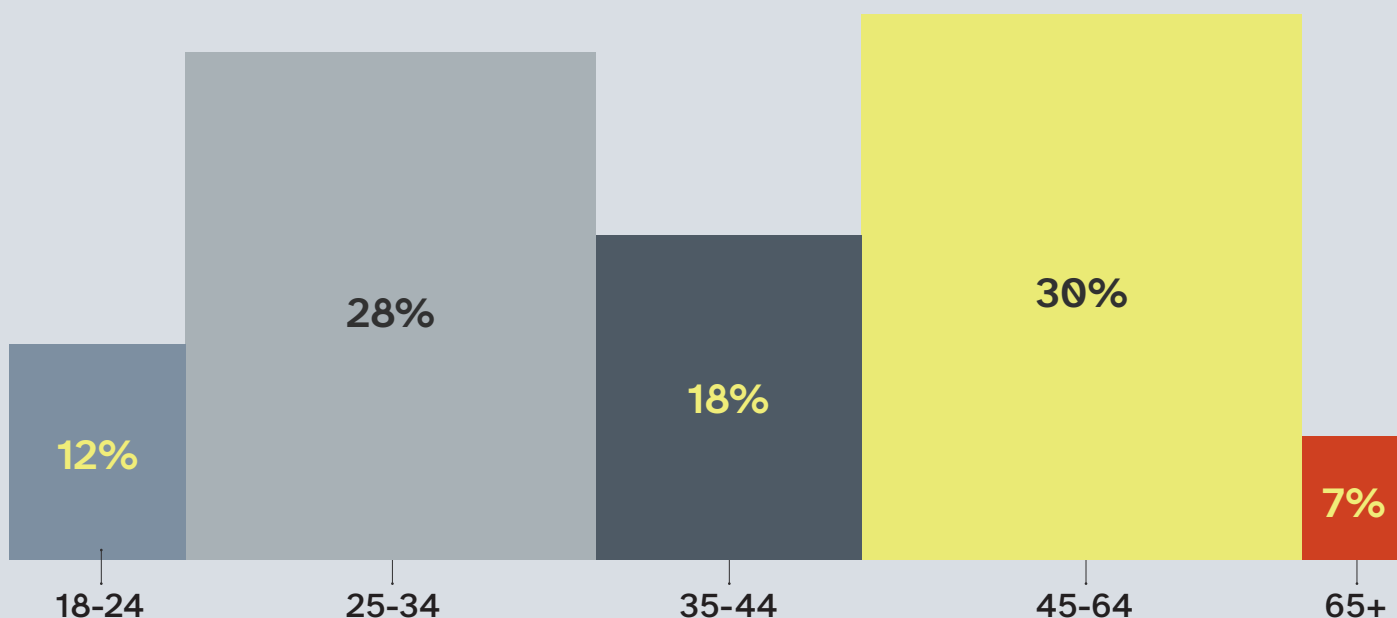
Do you identify as disabled?



Note: Those who preferred to self-identify, used the following language: *neurodivergent, wobbly, disabled by society, mixed-ability, and parent carer of a disabled child.*

Question 2

What is your age group?



Question 3

How do you describe your gender?

Note: Gender identity was collected through open-text responses rather than predefined categories. Terms are presented verbatim as written by respondents, listed once if repeated.

A male or a chap or a man or a queer individual	cisgender woman exploring nonbinary	I'm a trans man	non-binary woman
AMAB Man	Fem	Heterosexual	Queer
As I please	Female	Male	Straight
Cis female	Female (she/they)	Man	Straight Male
Cisgender Female	Female with a hint of bloke	Mostly female	Trans male
Cish woman (not a typo)	Genderqueer /woman	Non binary	Woman
		Non binary she/they	

Question 4

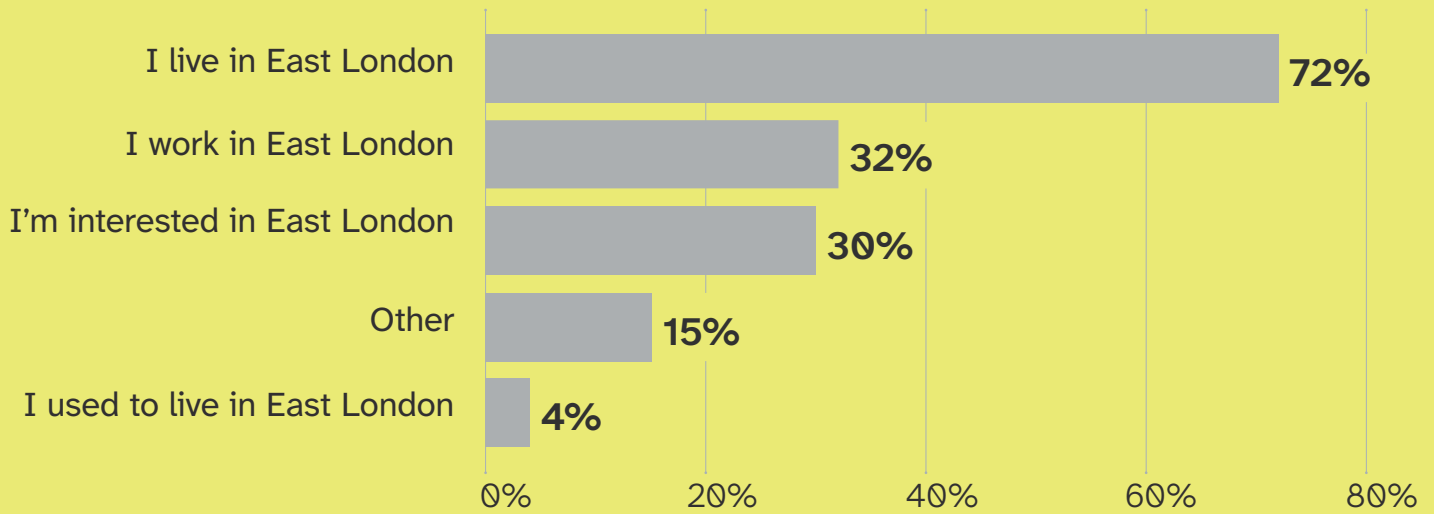
How do you describe your ethnic background?

Note: Ethnic background was collected through open-text responses rather than predefined categories. Terms are presented verbatim as written by respondents, listed once if repeated.

A mix of Ashkenazi jew, German catholic, and Irish	British	Mixed but white passing	Welsh, British
African	British + east asian	Mixed race	West African
Asian other	British/Male	Mixed. British / Asian	White
Australian born East Asian	English	Multi faceted	White and Asian
Black	I am Latino (Brazilian) of mixed black, indigenous and white background	Multiple backgrounds	White English
Black African	I don't	Scottish	White European
Black British	Jewish american transplant	South African	White mixed nationality
Black British - Caribbean and African	Korean	South Asian	White Scandinavian
Black South -Asian (Pakistani/ Somali)	Latino	Swedish/ Scandinavian	Swedish/ Scandinavian
	M. People	Uk black	White British
		Uk Caribbean	

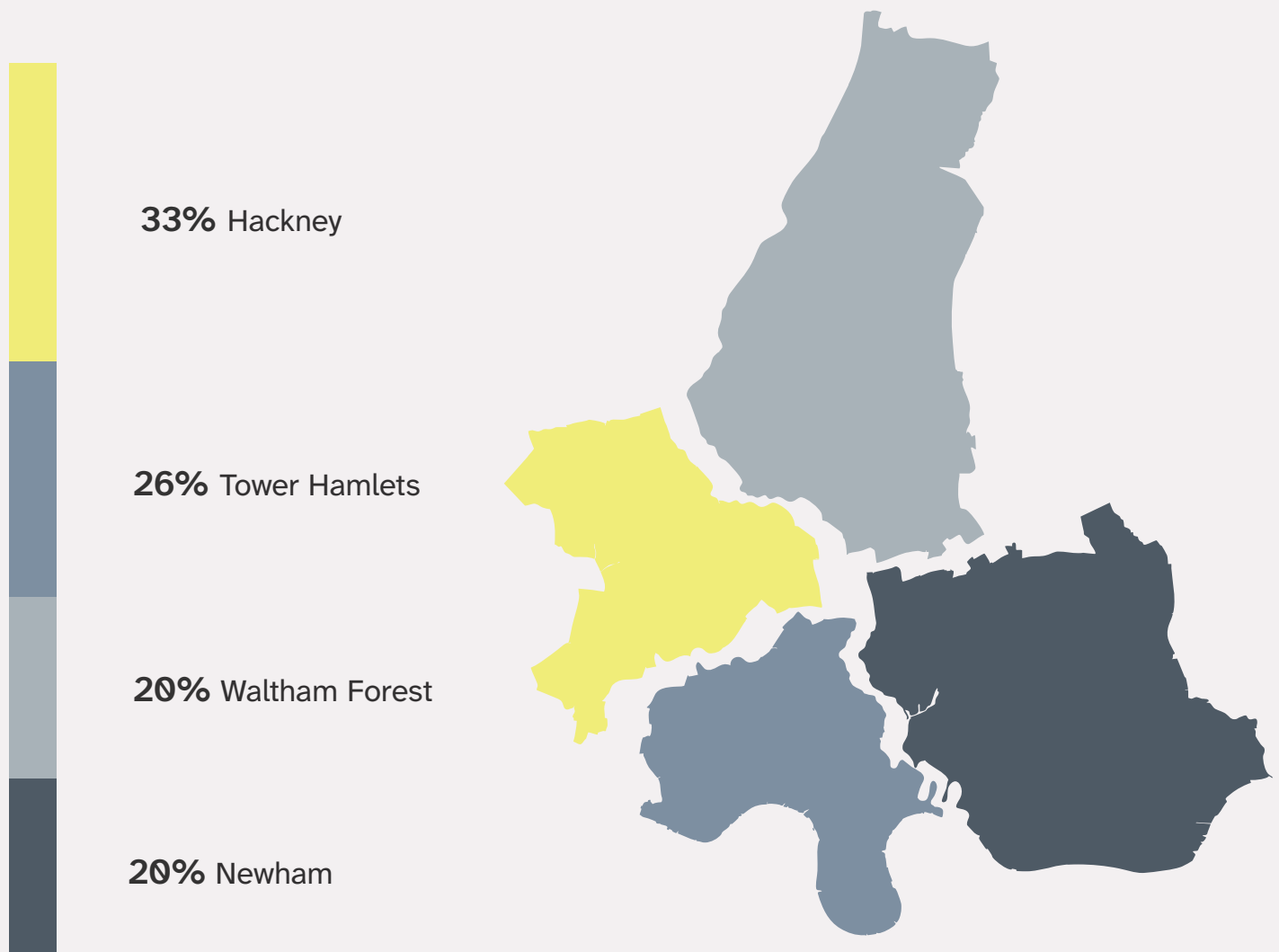
Question 5

Where do you live and work?



Question 6

If you live in East London, which area?



Question 7

Are you actively involved in creative community or practice?

37%

Yes, I'm actively developing my creative practice

28%

Yes, I regularly engage with the creative community

24%

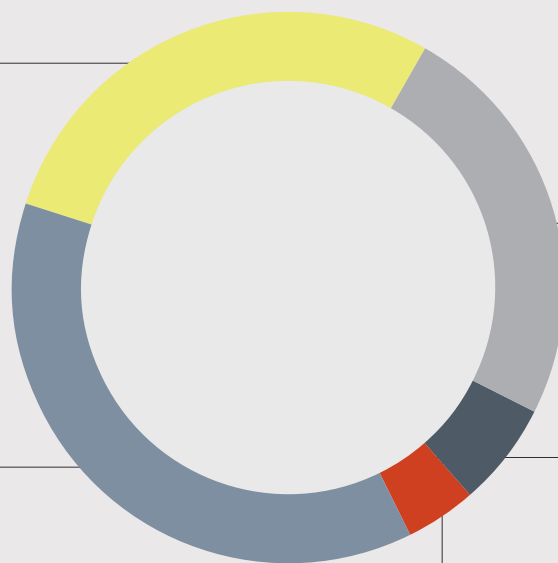
Yes, I'm a professional creative practitioner

6%

I'm interested, but not currently active

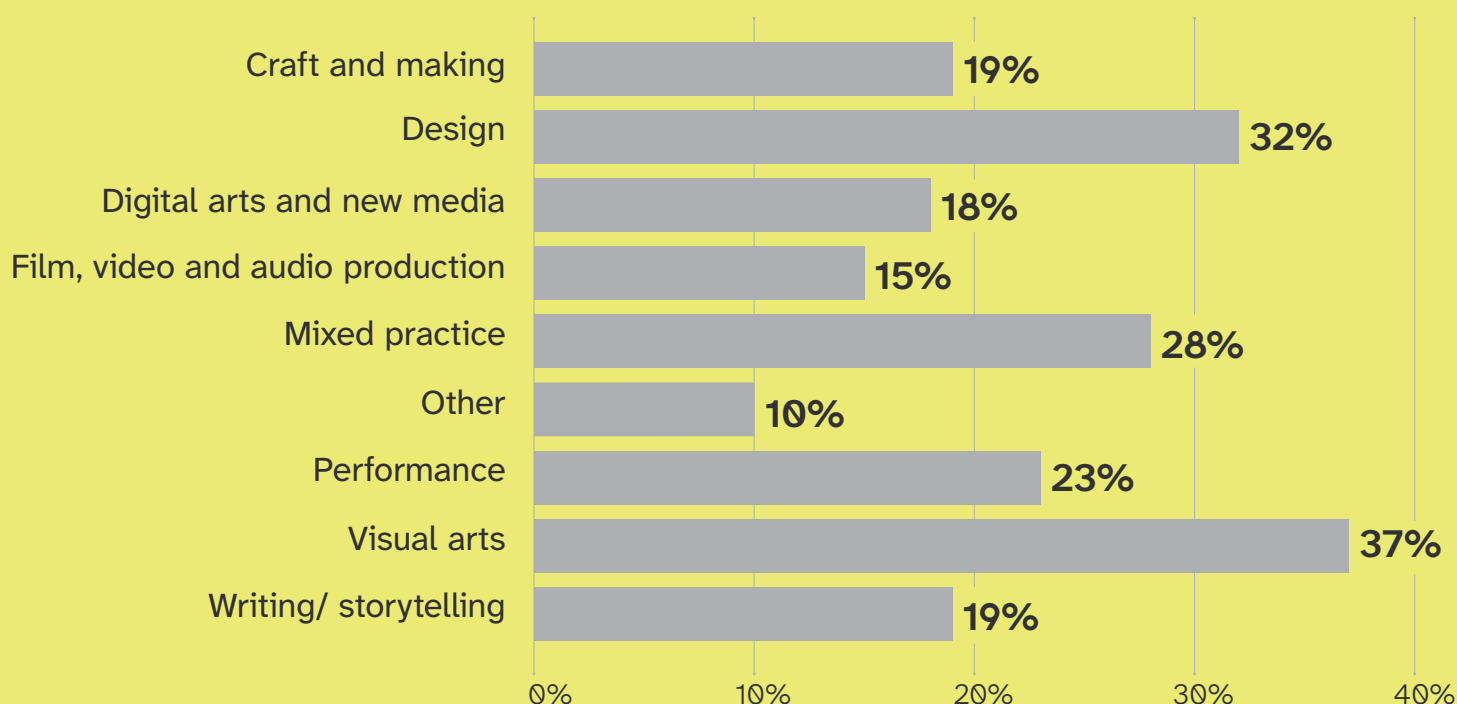
4%

No, but I'm interested in getting involved



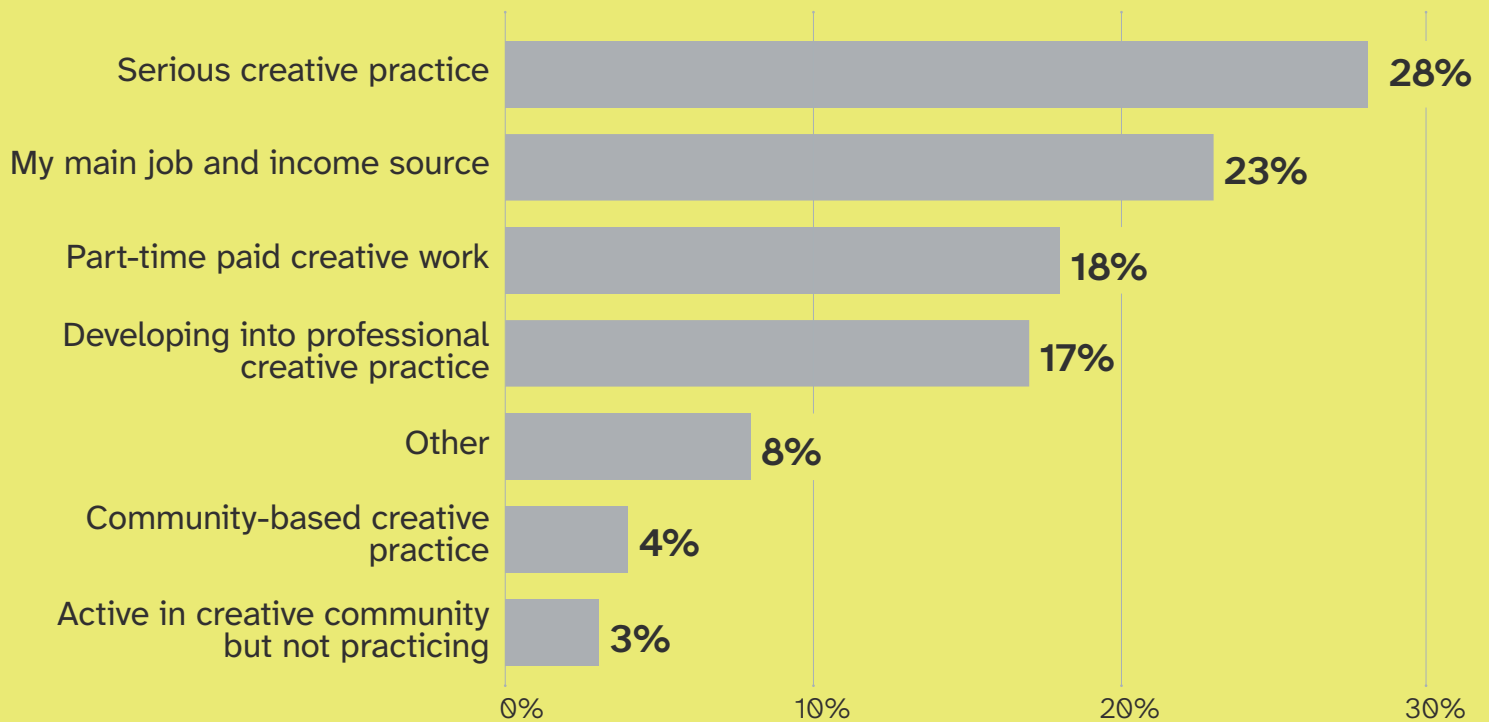
Question 8

What type of creative work do you do?



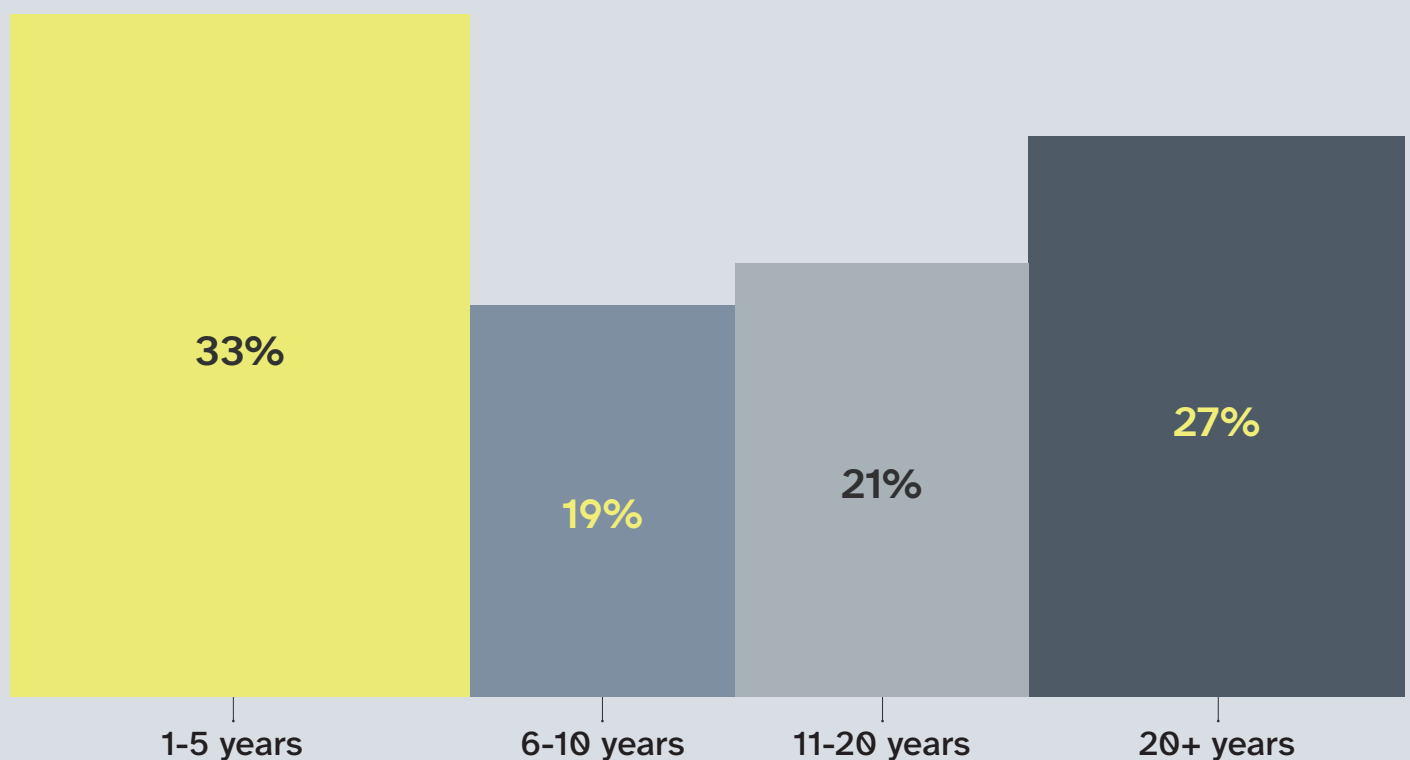
Question 9

How would you describe your creative work?



Question 10

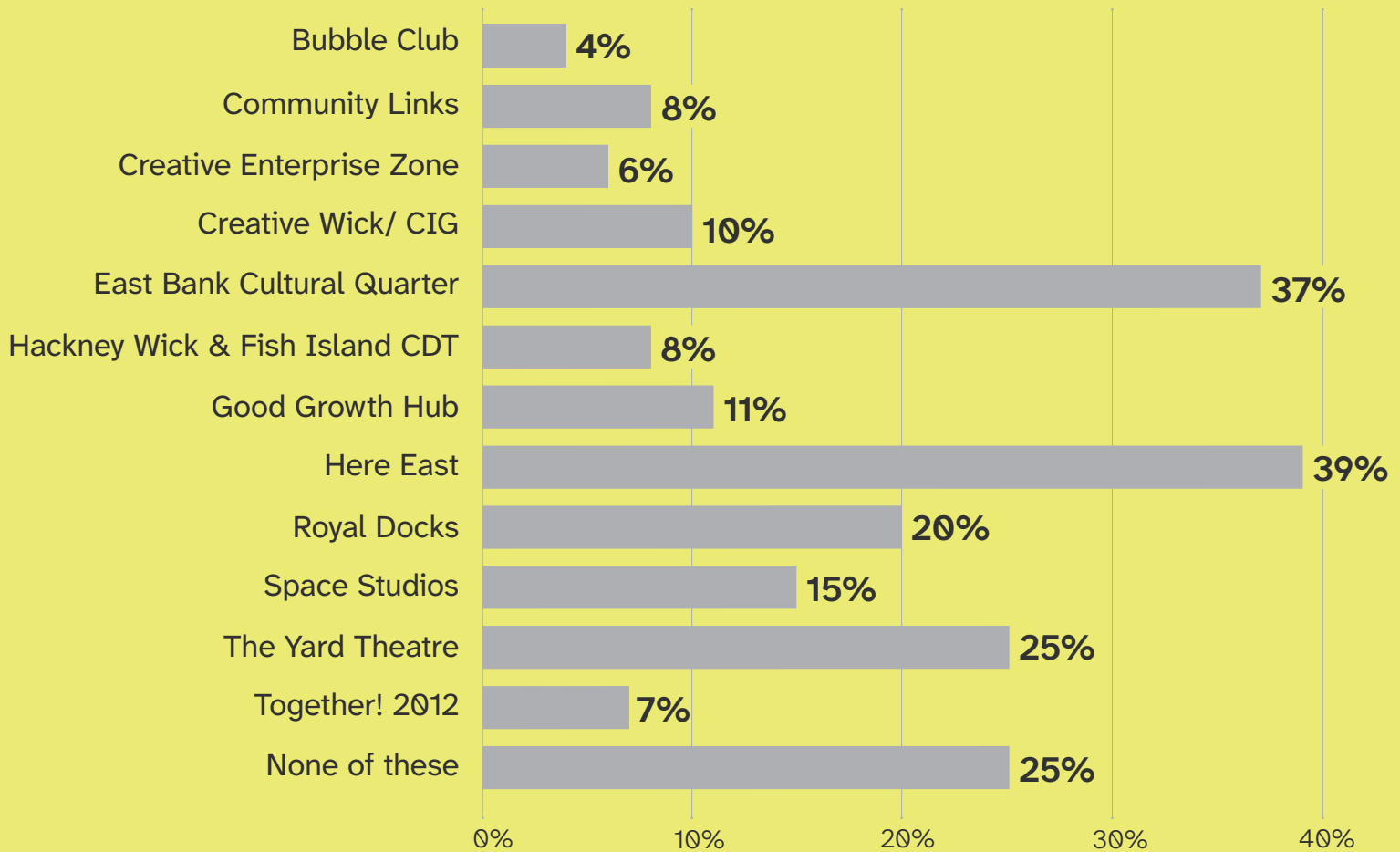
How long have you been doing creative work?



Question 11

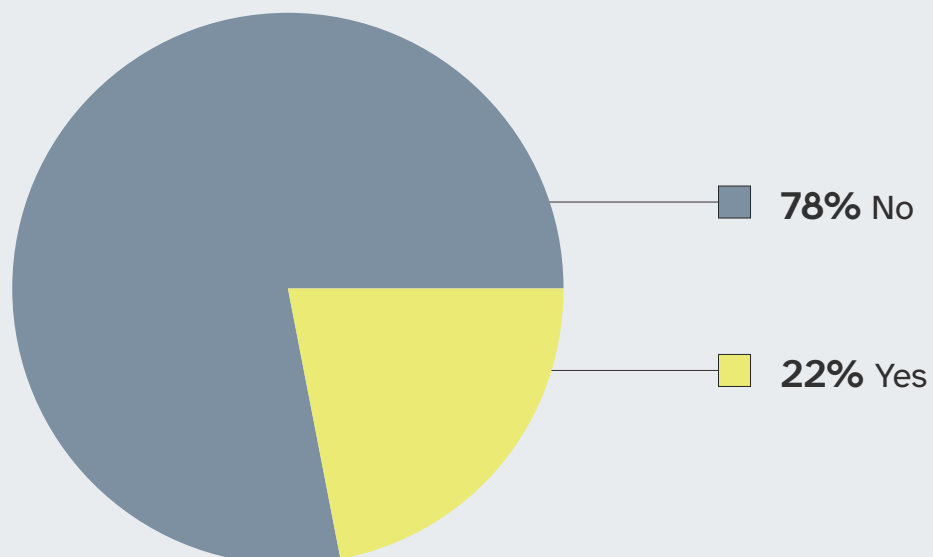
Which of these East London creative initiatives do you know about?

Note: These initiatives were selected based on location, stated inclusion missions in public documentation, and connection to post-Olympic creative sector development. This is not an evaluation of specific organisations.



Question 12

Have you participated in or benefited from any of these initiatives?



Question 13

If you have participated, please share:

"Together 2012 and the cultural bank. The place I volunteer at is part of the yearly exhibition. And same group (Art For Fun) also is collaborating on workshops with UCL East specifically the special collections dept."

"By doing partnership work with young people"

"Olympicopolis, Together2012! and Yard Theatre with work before my creative practice."

"Exhibitions and theatre."

"Fashion Show one of my creatives had in Hackney Wick."

"I briefly shared a studio at space but had to leave due to disability. I never saw another disabled person. I have tried applying to Things but not been accepted."

"I've gone to school at UCL and LCF."

"Working with and being commissioned by Eastbank partners and The Good Growth Hub."

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

"I run [a collective], have worked at Arcola for years, worked at the Yard, member of tower theatre."

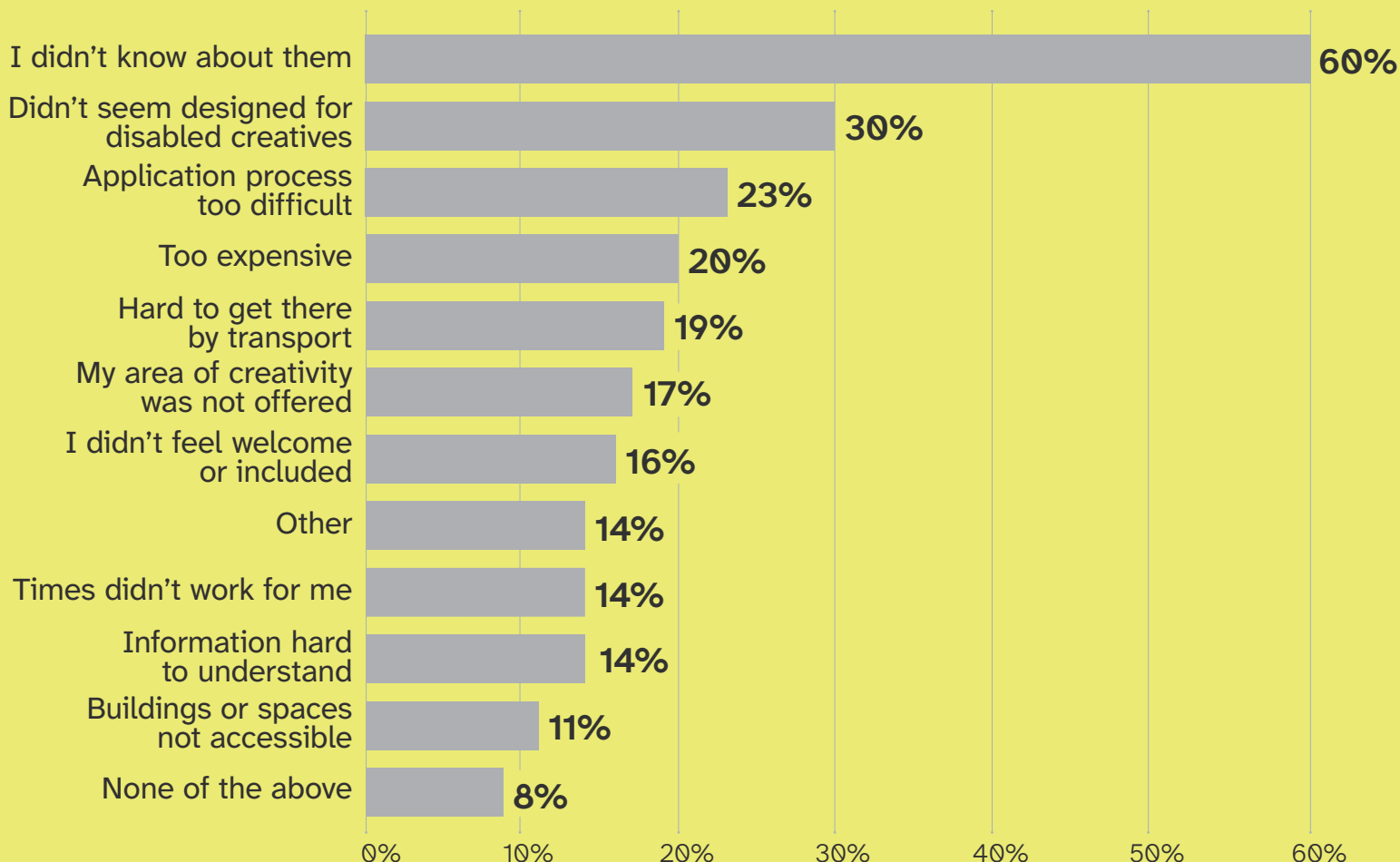
"I sing at headway events."

"I have had many opportunities with Together! 2012."

"Hosting a disability podcast. Involved in the senior leadership conference design. Part of different creative initiatives such as disability policy and reasonable adjustments standard operating design."

Question 14

If you have *not* participated, what stopped you?



Question 14a

“Other” replies to: If you have *not* participated, what stopped you?

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

“Applied for schemes under the good growth hub and nearly didn’t apply the second time around because communication between them and Newham works was dreadful- got told I got through to the second round when I didn’t.”

“No accessibility for Sign language user.”

“It was hard to know where the money was officially going. For example, the BBC did not seem to want to put active time and money into making the space or projects fully accessible, and they also are biased when it comes to other topics.”

“Didn’t seem designed for emerging.”

“I’ve applied for work in the East Bank yet was rejected despite meeting the person spec and applying under the disability confident scheme.”

“I haven’t heard much about creative activities for families with an autistic child who also has hemiplegia.”

“I find I have to travel into central London for opportunities that work for me.”

“I’m largely housebound.”

Question 15

If you know about any other creative initiatives in East London, please share:

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

Act Up! Newham

Bow Arts

The Mill community centre in Walthamstow runs a lot of creative community events

Actors East

Centre for Better Health

Arcola Theatre

Culford Collective

Numbiartes

Barts health NHS trust creative hubs

Headway East (Brain injury) charity day centre

Poetry open mics that became Community like at Biddles & Mascara

Beehive poetry meetup

Jazanne Arts

St Margaret’s House

Blue Sky Actors (Face Front)

Mediorite

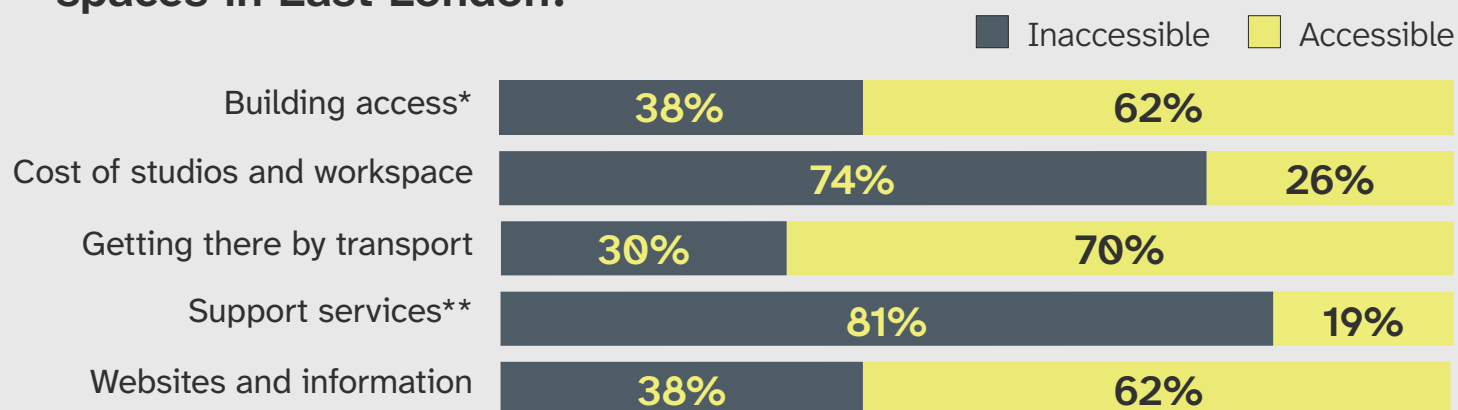
Through My University

The BSL cafe

Tower Theatre

Question 16

How accessible do you find creative spaces in East London?

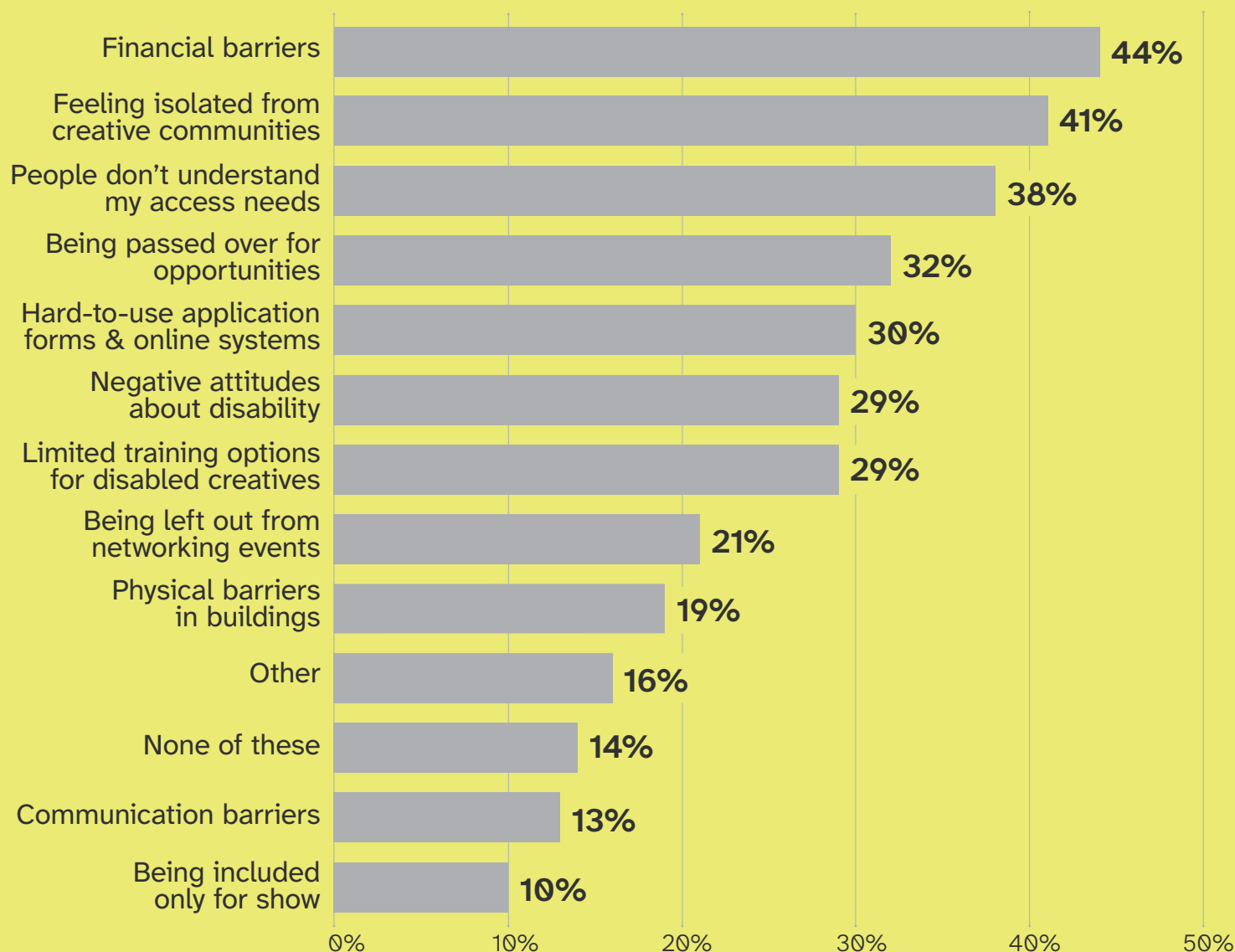


* Ramps, lifts, accessible toilets, hearing loops, clear signage, lighting, quiet spaces

** Interpreters, assistants

Question 17

Have you experienced any of these barriers in East London's creative spaces?



Question 17a

“Other” replies to: Have you experienced any of these barriers in East London’s creative spaces?

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

“Depends on where you go. Art for fun is easy to get to and inclusive, UCL east is easy to get to. Good growth hub is easy but finding info on the website is a nightmare. Studio spaces seem limited and probably expensive.”

“I haven’t tried to access creative communities.”

“Able bodied fit people being given priority and given more time and support. Favouritism of non-disabled people.”

“Lack of awareness that disabled people might want to attend or take part and lack of access provision.”

“Similar lack of info what’s on offer and lack of response to inquiries that explain my situation.”

“I’ve not even known of them.”

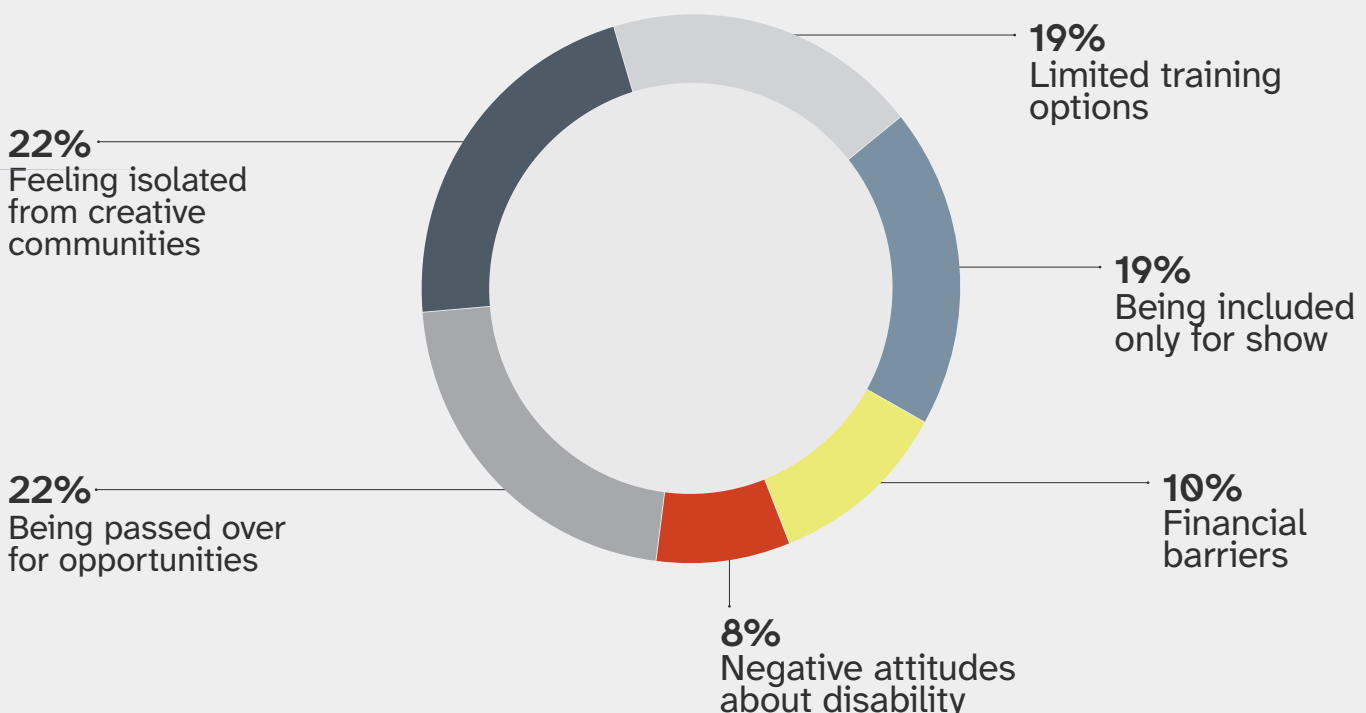
“I’m looking for something that can expand my child’s creative experience in an accessible way thats beyond the basic craftsplaces often offer”

“As a neurodivergent person, to have a quiet space to work or discuss collaboration is very difficult. Hackney itself is not very quiet, so when the space also is not, it makes being there quite uncomfortable. The attitudes around disabilities are somewhat improving, but it is clear to see that the movement of extremists (men) is also creeping through and they continuously attempt to make my work seem less legitimate because i have a mobility aid.”

“Not been.”

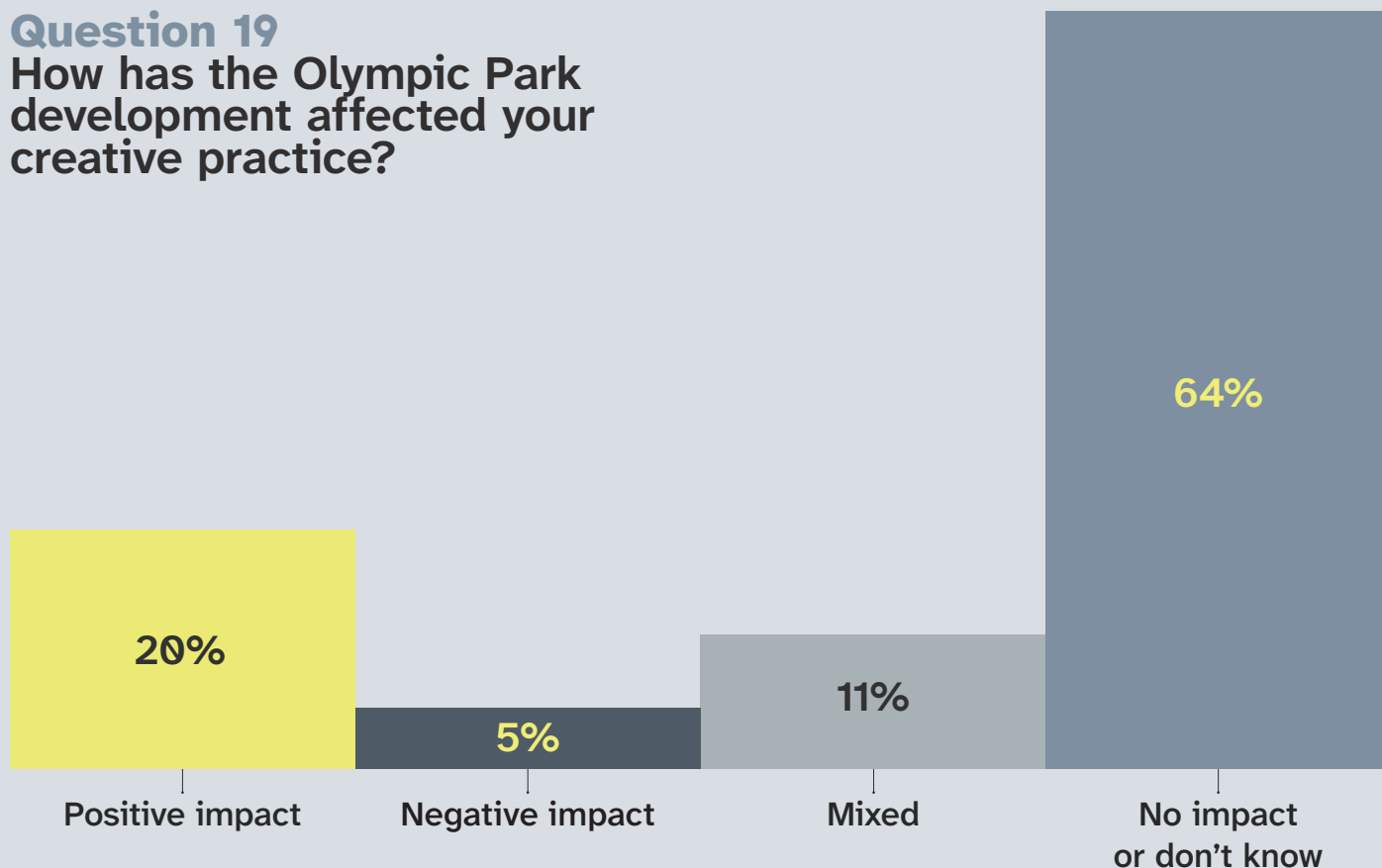
Question 18

From the barriers you experienced in Question 17, which is your biggest concern as a disabled creative practitioner in East London?

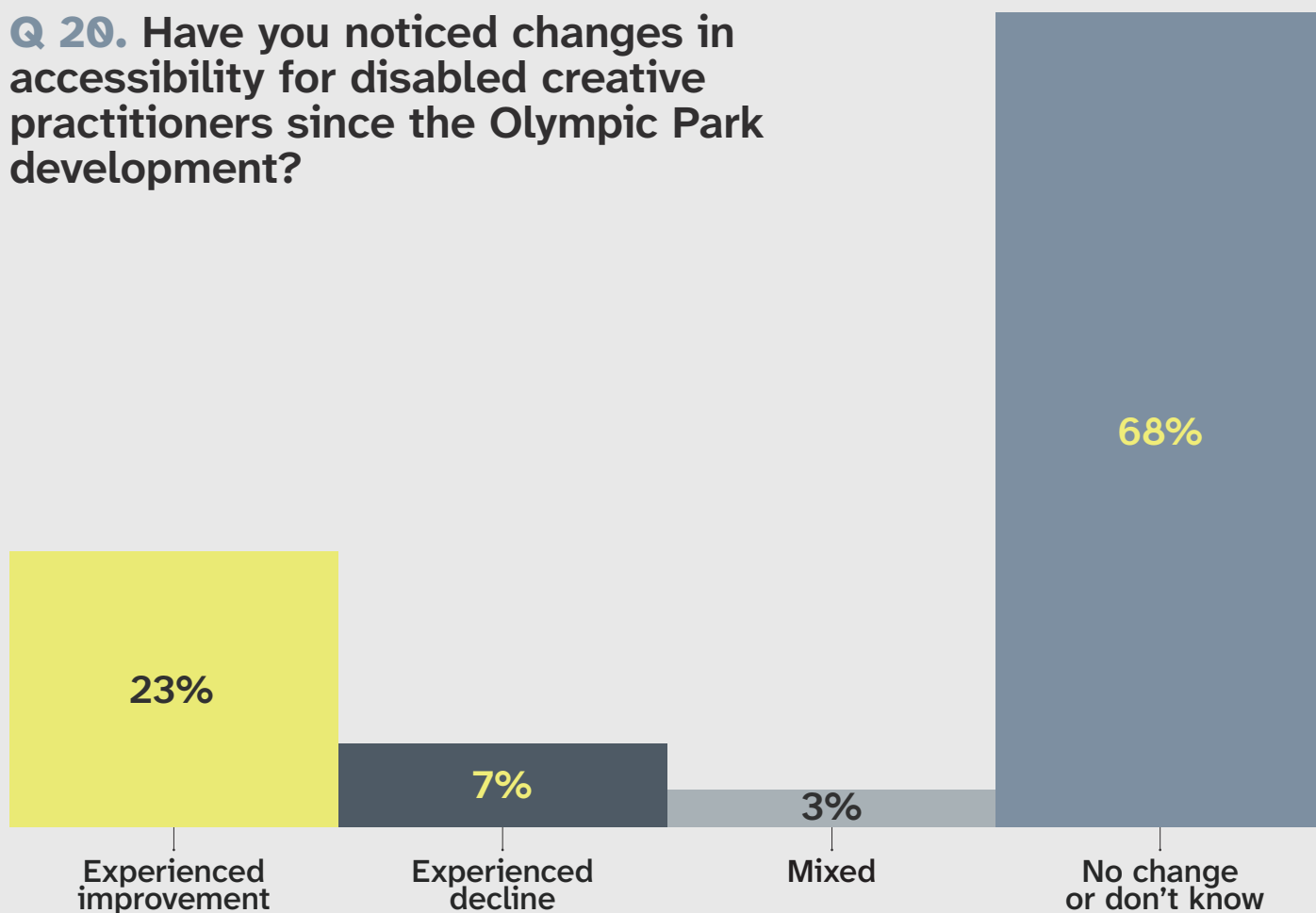


Question 19

How has the Olympic Park development affected your creative practice?

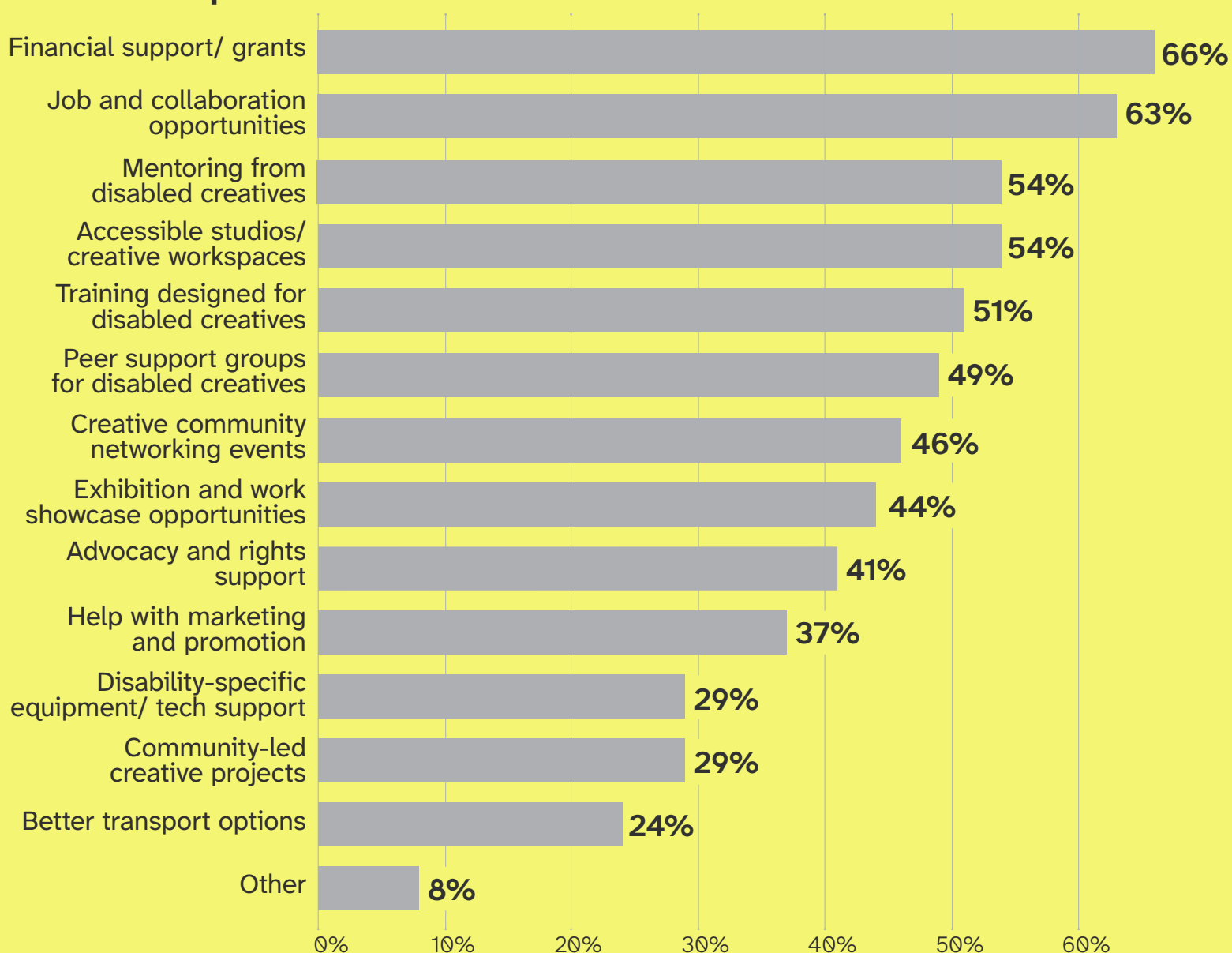


Q 20. Have you noticed changes in accessibility for disabled creative practitioners since the Olympic Park development?



Question 21

What support would help your creative practice most?



Question 21a

“Other” replies to: What support would help your creative practice most?

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

“To not be so easily passed up for job opportunities in this sector especially within the local area.”

“Making sure that information about access parking other assistance is easy to find when going on line/booking Most adverts donot readily give this info. It then involves further contact to see if booking is possible.”

“Ways that show my son he can make great art one handed and doesn’t have to be good at realistic drawing”

“East London can be extremely monocultural in some respects, for example every single event has to be accompanied by a DJ at horrendous volume. As an autistic person I can’t even enter spaces that are super loud, let alone function effectively when I getinto them. If your needs (or even just preferences) are for anything other than the prevailing electronic music with heavy bass, you are excluded from a lot of what goes on around here.”

“Provide the communication access.”

Question 22

What would successful inclusion look like for disabled creatives in East London?

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

"More awareness of what's out there for creatives. Also transport and huge financial barriers are a huge issue as well. Also putting accessible info on websites would help. As reasons I don't go to creative events 9/10 times is due to not knowing the accessibility of an area and I'm at a point where if it's not stated I'm just not going to bother going I should not have to do the work for this info in 2025. If it's not accessibility its getting to the area. I also think there needs to be options for doing stuff online."

"For me, would be successful if they provide the communication access for the sign language creative users."

"Not having to ask about accessibility. Not having to ask if they work and support disabled people. Truly being able to show up and be present and not having to be turned away or looked at or made to feel we are "inspirational" just for showing up. We are people first and our needs should have to be addressed to be able to make sure we know we can attend it should be mandatory. I want to work with all kinds of people and my disability should but a barrier for that."

"I really don't see other disabled people in creative spaces in East London. There are lots of rich white abled people dominating spaces and a total lack of support and accessibility for disabled people and minorities. I and many people I know spend a large part of our lives trying to survive and involvement in wider creative culture feels impossible when you can't even access the bus."

"There would be avenues to help disabled creatives to seed fund and develop their own space and programmes that collaborate with institutions on their own terms as a means of developing an ecology of practitioners rather than tick boxes."

"Intergration and Understand of Disabled People."

"Mutual aid regarding food expenses and solidarity and mutual aid for basic aid equipment."

"Feeling welcome and valued by creative communities and organisations, through accessible communication, spaces, events, and services (such as training and classes)."

"Representing the disabled community doesn't mean to speak on behalf of them, but rather to include them in spaces and give them platforms to express themselves. Ask disabled creatives with a range of disabilities how to make those space more accessible. For example. Having braille, large fonts and audio description for visual impaired creatives. Or having ramps/lifts for wheelchair user. Renting venues and space close to station with wheelchair access ability. The most important way to create spaces for disabled creatives is to involve us in the decision making/ planning. Not just invite us to spaces we cant access."

"Where creative works by disabled people or not taken lesser then they're able-bodied counterparts."

"Being the first port of call for work rather than the afterthought. We work just as hard as any other non-disabled person. We bring inclusivity and accessibility to the table, and we are a shining example of what art can do to help people. More contact and consideration for accessibilities, especially regarding physical barriers and audio interpretations. A fair wage for doing the same work is crucial to allow us to continue working."

"Successful that look like accessibility being in every way possible. For example: ramps, lifts, accessible toilets and disabledfriendly language etc."

"It would look like disabled artists having full access to studios, galleries, rehearsal spaces, and events, spaces designed with inclusion at their core, not as an afterthought. It means accessible communication, programming, and funding structures that don't require disabled people to constantly justify their needs or experiences."

"No discrimination."

"A dedicated organisation that serves all disabled people that is not limited to creative communities like Fish Island etc."

"Joy and ease. Depth. Kindness. Humanity. Honesty. Fun. Love."

"Successful inclusion means disabled artists can develop and share their work without risking their survival. I can't sell my art without losing the disability benefits I rely on to pay rent. I've been homeless before, and I live in fear of going through that again as I would not survive it. Real inclusion would mean income-safe opportunities, access to funding that doesn't threaten benefits, and recognition of the barriers created by class, disability, and systemic exclusion. We need spaces that support us practically, not just perform diversity. Right now, I am condemned to make art in isolation with zero chance of ever seeing my work being shared with the public and becoming a viable source of income to help me get out of poverty and improve my quality of life and living conditions.?"

"Empathy and communication are followed by action."

"Access being thought about by all grass roots initiatives not just those specifically for Disabled People. Pro active approach to programming Disabled artists and Disabled led projects, consultation with Disabled people paid."

"A case study showing improvement. I recently went to Sadlers Wells East - a lovely new build (helpful), and far more accessible and what seemed a 'disability welcome' feeling. They had a show by a disabled led company and had some fantastic access resources. I don't know if these resources are available for every show (script/lyrics/access desk/quiet space). And ofcourse mainstream cast and staff representation matters too. Interestingly the f-o-h staff were probably trained in disabled customerservice but the bar staff (likely managed by St John's) didn't seem as welcoming. I guess wha I'm saying is that a warmmainstream welcome and good attitude is a hugely important first step in inclusion. And one I feel is often overlooked."

"A wider and more nuanced understanding of disability."

"Better understanding and awareness of disability, inclusion and accessibility."

"Clear and easy accessible as well as widely shared."

"That everything needed was there. And wouldn't have to ask about access. Unfortunately, it's still not possible to assume access eg Museum of the Home Hackney had a big up grade. Now it is less accessible for me as a wheelchair user."

"Just a world where there was more opportunities for Disabled to showcase what they are capable of because those chances aren't there you feel excluded from society. It's not a special favours, it's about a chance to shine and show there's Ability in Disability."

"On a hievement. Not just in the background."

"Some point of contact that can point you in the right direction since often programmes have limitations to who they serve with an aim to help you whatever your situation. Mentorship and Meetups would be amazing especially with a positive disability focus. There feels like a class divide with quite exclusive high end things having opportunities and encouragement but not others. This is also a part of being shut out - even if a event is free it doesn't mean you are welcome there. I'm a copywriter and writer and would love to take more advantage of living in the area but the programs I know either don't respond to me or aren't for me."

"More variety in terms of ambience - don't assume that everyone is a 20 something raver with cast iron eardrums."

"Disabled creatives would be present and respected at all levels — as artists, curators, producers, educators, and decision makers. Their work would be commissioned and celebrated not just for its relation to disability, but for its artistic value, innovation, and impact."

Question 23

What kind of support do you need for participation?

Note: Answers are presented verbatim as written by respondents.

“BSL interpreter.”

“Somebody to go through it with me over the phone if my PA isn't there to help.”

“Non apart from good seating.”

“Difficult to know without more information about the location etc.”

“Advance notice, printed documents in colour.”

“Large font for anything written. I am also a student so i may not be able to part take if I am not available.”

“High or perching stool.”

“Neurodivergent”

“Flexible meeting date and time, but not a necessity.”

“Ample time to make sure I'm not at my day job.”

“Better online. if in person will need to come by taxi need close to entrance with step free access and not long walk.”

“Patience.”

“Support worker to attend, zoom is easier but I can travel With notice but may need a cab.”

“extra time to read or audio versions of text, an environment without background noise, if writing is involved access to or the option to use my own computer.”

“AuDHD - so just need information in bite sizes and the ability to use transcription software to help get things done.”

“Wheelchair access/toilet. Easy access by public transport.”

“Wheelchair user.”

“No [face covering] need to read lips.”

“Flexibility and understanding around fluctuating health, as I live with multiple unpredictable physical and mental health conditions that impact my daily functioning. Patience and understanding with communication differences related to neurodiversity, including enthusiastic, detailed-oriented speech and non-linear conversation style due to reciprocity challenges. I am autistic with ADHD, I speak with passion and detail, which some people find overwhelming, and others find fascinating. I have lived on the edge of conversations most of my life which is quite profoundly isolating and alienating.”

“Smiles.”

“Time to process information and appointments option to meet virtually; payment for my time; wheelchair access for anything in person; space for my PA to attend.”

Part 1 Summary:

Disabled creatives in East London experience the post-Olympic legacy as accessible physical infrastructure without genuine social inclusion. The vast majority have never participated in flagship programmes, often because they did not know they existed. Financial barriers, absent support services, and the persistent labour of having to ask for basics remain their common experience.

Part 2: Understanding the Pattern

Introduction to Part 2

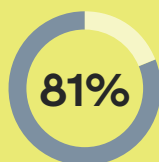
This section analyses the survey findings through four interconnected themes, each revealing not only what barriers exist, but how they reinforce each other to create a self-perpetuating cycle of exclusion. The themes build on each other: structural inaccessibility limits participation, economic precarity deepens that exclusion, isolation follows, and absent leadership ensures the pattern remains unchanged. Understanding this pattern is essential for breaking it.

Note: These patterns were identified through analysis of survey responses.

Theme 1:

Structural and Systemic Barriers

Despite East London's celebrated Paralympic legacy, disabled creatives report that accessibility remains inconsistent and inadequate across multiple dimensions.



found support services inaccessible (Q 16)



identified transport as a barrier (Q 14)



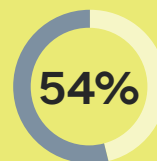
found application forms & online systems difficult to use (Q 16)



found building access inaccessible (Q 16)



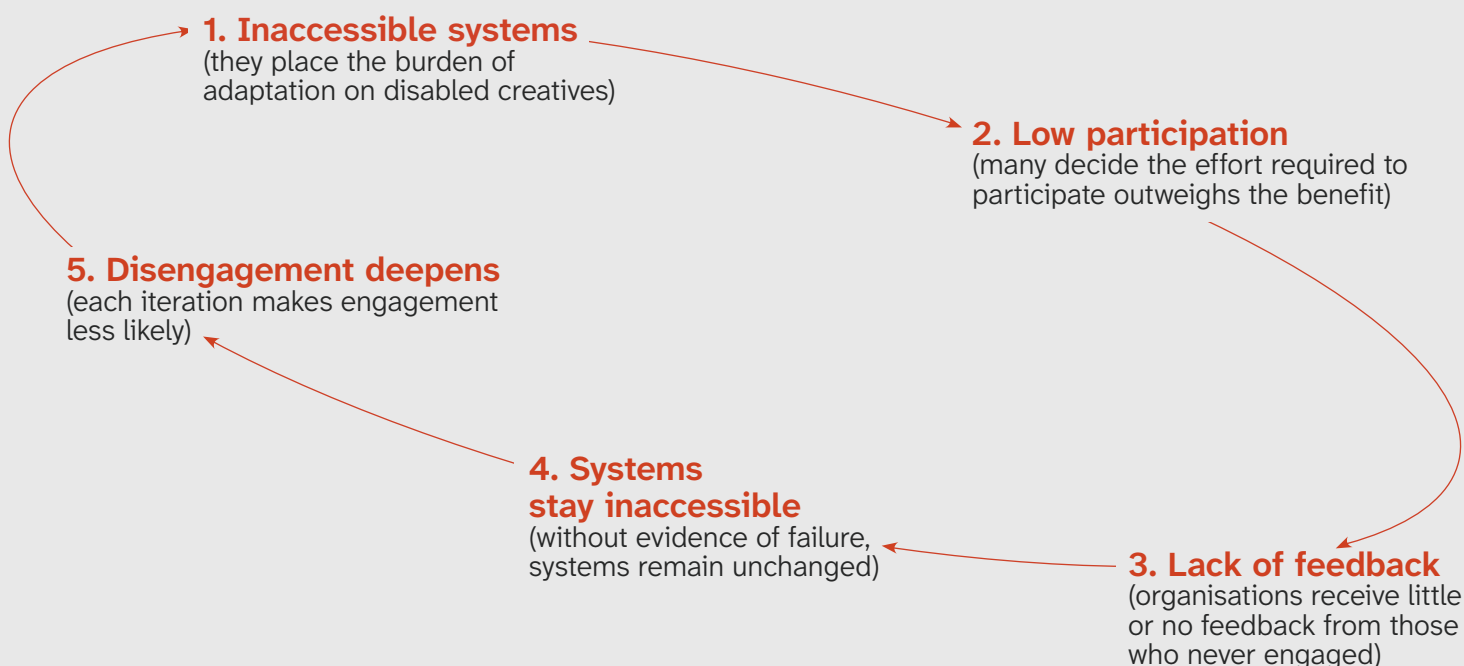
found websites inaccessible (Q 16)



wanted accessible studios & creative workspaces (Q 21)

How do these barriers perpetuate exclusion?

These barriers create a pattern that makes engagement progressively less likely.



Community voice:

"Not having to ask about accessibility. Not having to ask if they work & support disabled people. Truly being able to show up and be present."

Theme 2:

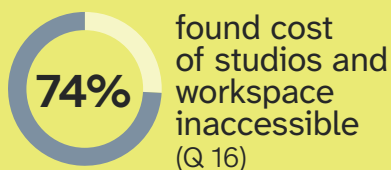
Economic Precarity

Economic barriers emerged as one of the most significant obstacles disabled creatives face. This isn't simply about being "low income" - disabled creatives face a triple economic bind:

1. Higher costs: Equipment, assistive technology, and care support aren't luxuries; they're requirements for participation

2. Benefits trap: Earning above thresholds triggers loss of support, forcing choices between survival and creative work

3. Exploitation: Unpaid "exposure" opportunities assume financial privilege that many disabled creatives don't have



How do these barriers deepen exclusion?

These barriers create a cycle that pushes disabled creatives out of the creative economy entirely.



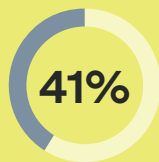
Community voice:

"I can't sell my art without losing the disability benefits I rely on to pay rent. I've been homeless before. Real inclusion would mean income-safe opportunities, access to funding that doesn't threaten benefits."

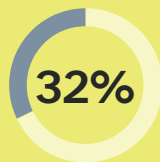
Theme 3:

Exclusion and Isolation

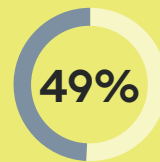
Isolation emerged as one of the biggest concerns for disabled creatives. This reflects systematic exclusion from the networks, opportunities, and peer communities that sustain creative careers.



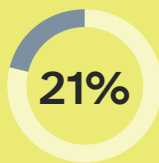
felt isolated from creative communities (Q 17)



experienced being passed over for opportunities (Q 17)



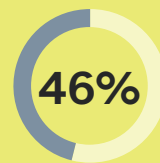
need peer support groups for disabled creatives (Q 21)



felt left out of networking events (Q 17)



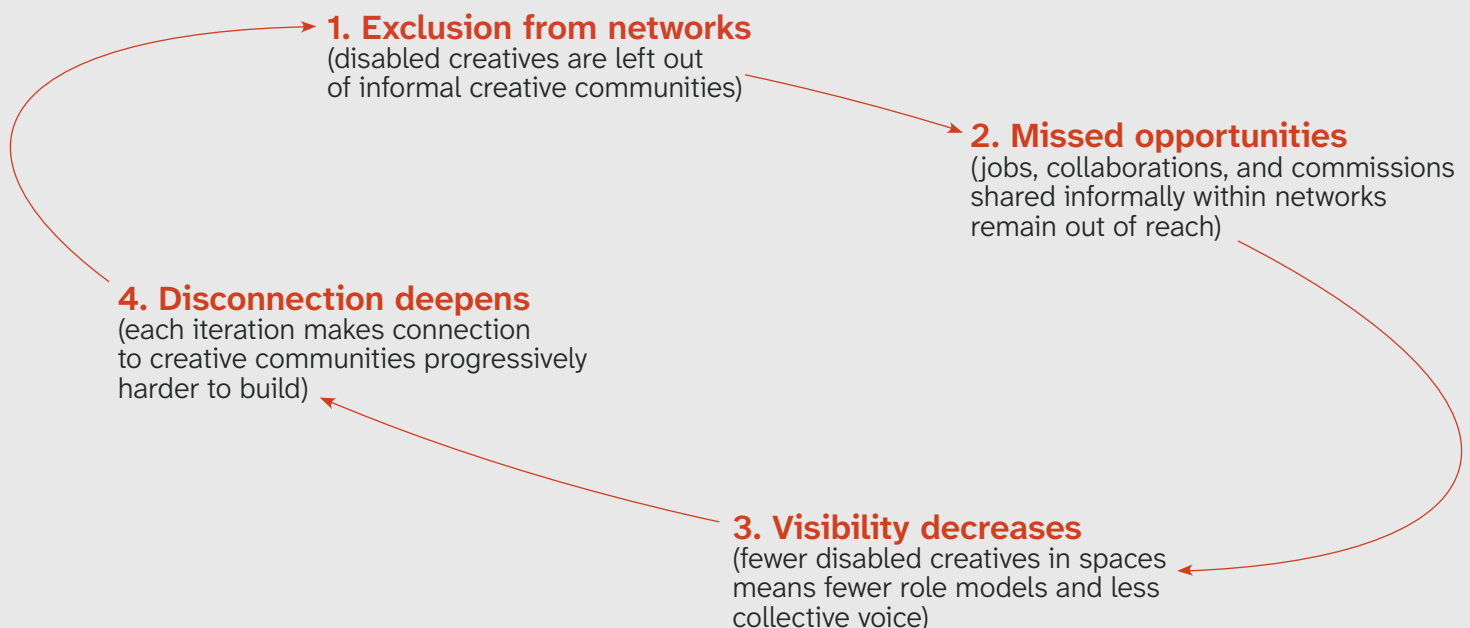
need mentoring from experienced disabled creative practitioners (Q 21)



want creative networking events designed for disabled practitioners (Q 21)

How does isolation deepen exclusion?

These barriers create a cycle that makes belonging and professional advancement progressively harder to achieve.



Community voice:

"Often it's a problem of feeling disconnected... the city is large, looming and impersonal. There's little space where you can just go and be part of a community."

Theme 4:

Exclusion from Leadership and Decision-Making

Survey respondents described being visible in programs and marketing while excluded from strategic decisions and governance. The data reveals a pattern: poor disability awareness and tokenistic inclusion are not simply attitude problems, they are the direct consequence of disabled voices being absent from leadership and decision-making.



reported people don't understand their access needs (Q 17)



experienced tokenistic inclusion/ being included only for show (Q 17)



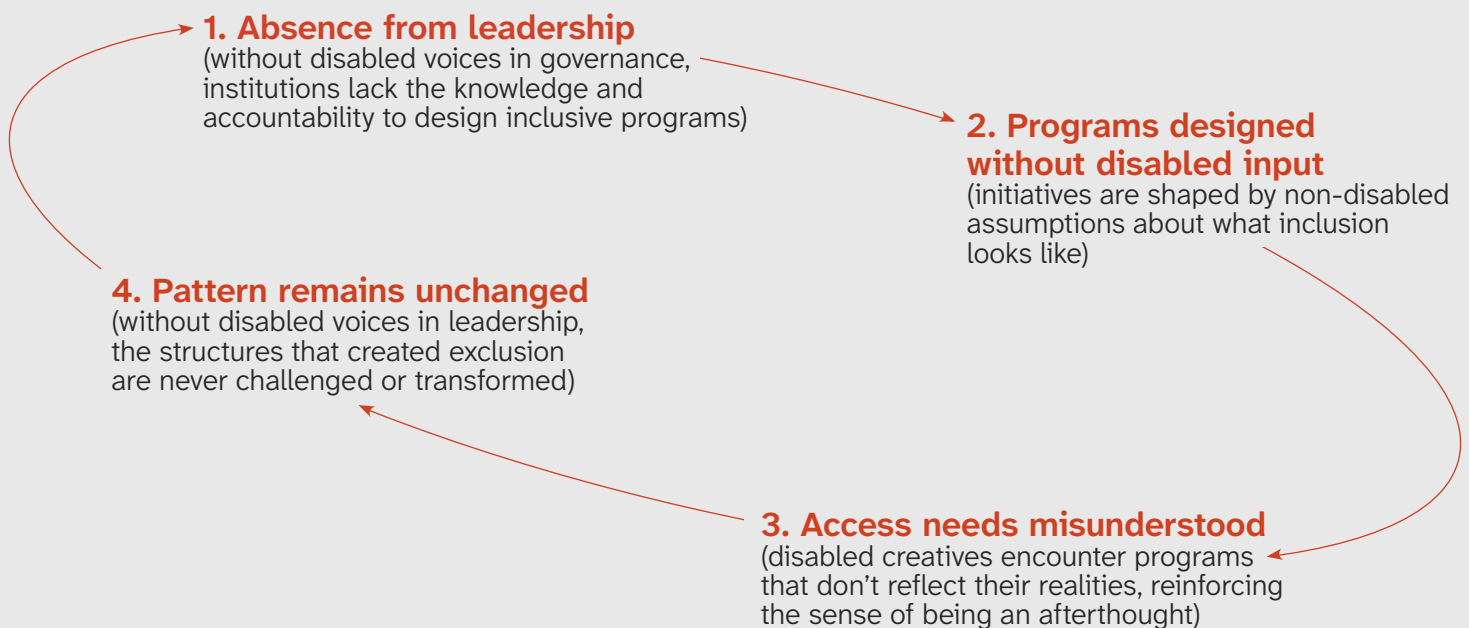
encountered negative attitudes about disability (Q 17)



felt programs weren't designed for disabled creatives (Q 14)

How do these barriers perpetuate exclusion?

These barriers create a cycle in which disabled voices remain excluded from the decision-making processes that shape their own inclusion.



Community voice:

"Disabled creatives would be present and respected at all levels - as artists, curators, producers, educators, and decision-makers."

Part 3:

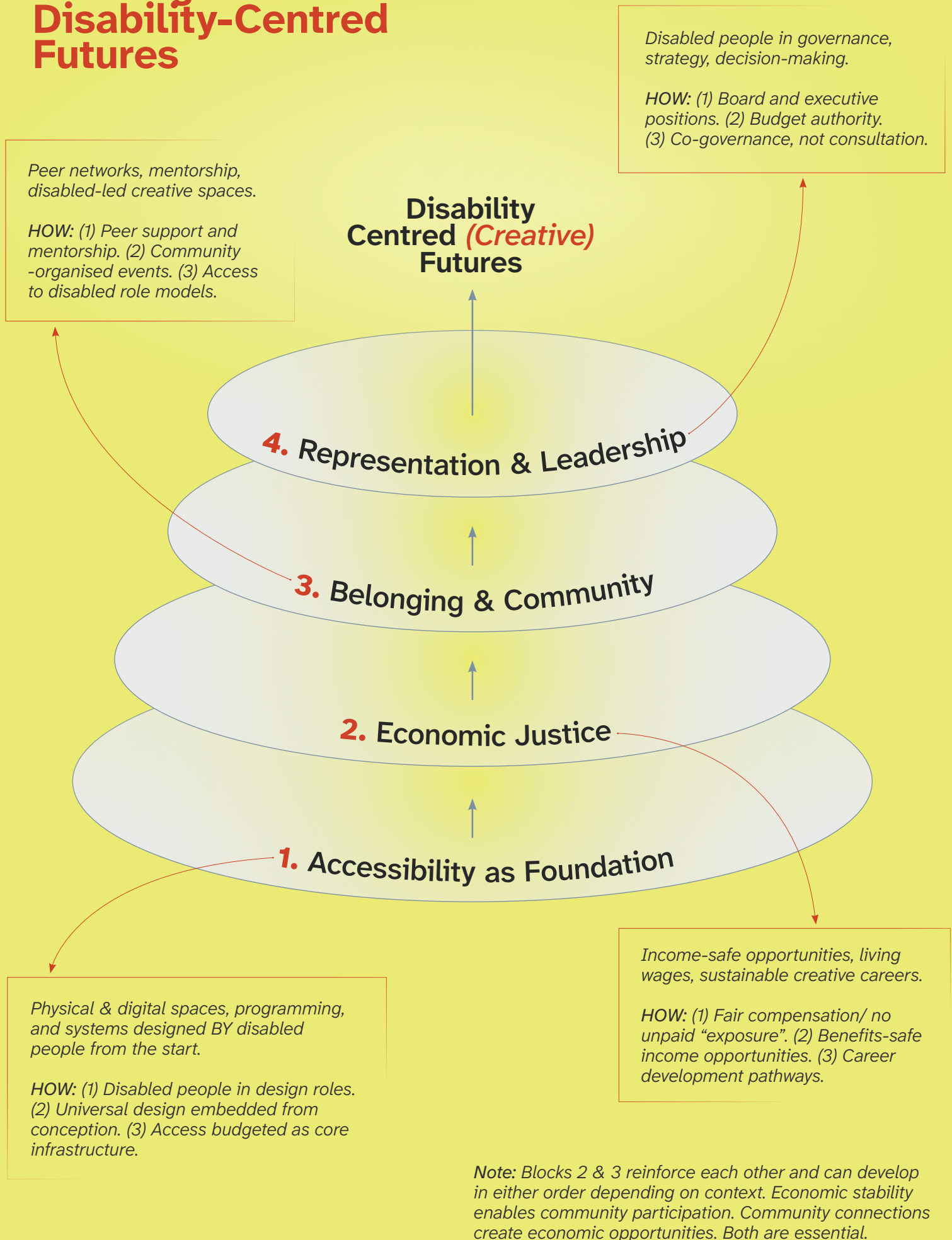
Towards Disability

Centred Futures

Introduction to Part 3

The previous sections explored the barriers disabled creatives face in East London. This section moves from understanding the pattern to action by presenting the Building Blocks for Disability-Centred Futures: a set of principles for organisations that are ready to move from intentions of inclusion to actual change.

Building Blocks for Disability-Centred Futures



Beyond the Paralympic Legacy

The report provides pathways, but the disabled communities must lead the way.

This report documented what 78 disabled creative practitioners in East London are experiencing (*Part 1*), analysed why current inclusion efforts aren't working (*Part 2*), and introduced four interconnected Building Blocks for Disability-Centred Futures (*Part 3*).

What matters now is action.

Accessibility and inclusion aren't achieved through perfect implementation; they're achieved through genuine partnership with disabled communities, willingness to learn from mistakes, and commitment to sharing power.

The question is: If not here, then where?

East London has the Paralympic legacy. It has vibrant disabled creative communities. It has institutions committed to inclusion. Everything is in place. Now it's time to move from infrastructure to shared leadership: to build disability-centred creative futures where disabled people don't just participate, but lead.

Next Steps:

For organisations, funders, and policymakers. This research can inform programme design, strategic planning, funding criteria, and cultural policy development.

For disabled creative practitioners. Your knowledge shaped this research. Your leadership will shape what comes next. This report is a tool for advocacy. Use it to demand the resources, power, and recognition you deserve.

If you would like to collaborate, give feedback, or learn more

please reach out to

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This research is an act of collective imagining by disabled community members: adapting the present and designing futures that benefit us all.

