

Away Fan Survey 2022 results summary

(accessible text-only version)

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Survey Overview:

As the leading charity for disabled sports fans in England and Wales, Level Playing Field receives hundreds of comments, enquiries, complaints, and match reviews from disabled supporters each year. Through reading and responding to these comments, we've seen time and time again how different the matchday experience often is for disabled away fans, compared to home fans.

We wanted to hear more from disabled supporters about their experience of attending away matches and investigate how widespread the discrepancy between the home and away matchday experience is.

The survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey and was sent out to disabled supporters through Disabled Supporters Associations (DSAs), through club contacts and also via social media. The survey was live for a month, running from Thursday 6th January through to Sunday 6th February 2022. Responses were anonymous unless the respondent chose to give their name.

The results presented in this survey summary will be used to advise clubs on how best to support the disabled away fans who visit their stadiums. It will also be used to advise governing bodies, DSAs and non-disabled supporter groups.

Key findings

Barriers to attending - 48% of respondents said that a poor view of the match was a barrier for them attending away matches.

The next two most common barriers for disabled fans were not being seated with their own fans (28%) and difficulty purchasing tickets (25%).

Disability Abuse - 43% of the disabled respondents said they had experienced some form of abuse or negative attitude at an away game in the last 5 years.

Declining attendance - Over half of the disabled fans who don't currently attend away games said that they had done previously. The number one provision these fans said that they needed to be available was better/more accessible parking.

Toilet Facilities - On average, respondents rated 'toilet quality' as being between poor and adequate for away matchdays - notably lower than other categories.

About the respondents

The survey was completed by 634 disabled sports fans. Respondents answered a slightly different set of questions based on their response to 'how often they attend away games' (specifically, those who said they don't attend away games).

We asked respondents what they consider their disability to be and also asked their age. These are the results, which show that a wide range of disabilities are represented by the survey, with wheelchair users and ambulant disabled fans being the most represented, and a fairly even spread of ages of the respondents:

Figure 1: Disabilities represented

Wheelchair users - 34%
Ambulant disability - 38%
Hearing disability - 11%
Sight disability - 9%
Learning disability - 10%
Neurodivergent - 16%
Neurological condition - 7%
Mental health condition - 17%
Pain or nerve related - 13%
Motor skills/speech related - 8%
Fatigue/low immunity - 10%
Other unseen disability - 17%

Figure 2: Ages represented

Under 18s - 11%
18 - 29 year olds - 20%
30 - 39 year olds - 13%
40 - 49 year olds - 14%
50 - 59 year olds - 20%
60 - 69 year olds - 16%
Over 70s - 6%
Prefer not to say - 1%

Supporter feedback

As part of the survey, we gave respondents the opportunity to provide feedback on their matchday experience. Some of the comments were positive, such as:

"I find that staff and fans of stadiums that I have visited are considerate to my needs as a disabled supporter."

Of those comments that were positive, most were about the friendliness and helpfulness of staff and other supporters.

However, the large majority of the fan comments overall were negative in tone, and highlight some of the barriers that disabled people face when attending sport:

"As a wheelchair user I don't want to sit at the pitch side where I can't see the whole game and we are open to the elements with no easy access to toilets or refreshments."

"I find it harder to buy tickets than it should be. I always have to phone for disabled tickets (waiting 30+ minutes on the line), unlike non-disabled fans who can buy online."

"Fans stand in front of you and when you advise them you cannot see, I have had verbal abuse from my own fans."

"Stewards at away games tend to think that disability only means people in wheelchairs."

Away match ratings

We asked respondents to rate various aspects of their away matchday experience on a scale of '0' to '5', with '5' being the best. These are the results:

Ease of travel: Average rating – 3.53

Stadium accessibility: Average rating – 3.21

Support from staff/stewards: Average rating – 3.11

Toilet quality: Average rating – 2.53

Overall matchday experience: Average rating – 3.27

Four of the categories above, including the overall experience, were rated on average between 'adequate' and 'good' by respondents. However the remaining category, Toilet Quality, rated notably lower - between adequate and poor. This is something that clubs should acknowledge and look to improve moving forward.

The overall matchday rating of 3.27 is also significantly lower than fans rated their 'home matchday experience' in our 2021 annual survey - 3.81.

Barriers to attending

We asked respondents to identify the barriers they have faced when attending away matches as a disabled supporter. Below are the ten biggest barriers:

Poor view of the match – **48%**
Not sitting with the other away fans – **28%**
Difficulty purchasing tickets for away matches – **25%**
Fixture rescheduling – **24%**
Lack of disability awareness from other fans – **23%**
Lack of support or disability awareness from club staff – **21%**
Inaccessible public transport – **19%**
Inaccessible journey from station to stadium – **19%**
Stadiums often don't meet my access requirements – **19%**
Anxiety or lack of confidence – **17%**

By a large margin, 'poor views' was the biggest barrier for disabled fans when attending away matches, affecting almost half of respondents. It simply isn't acceptable for clubs to expect fans to pay for tickets and travel when they are unable to view the match.

Abuse and attitude barriers

One of the questions within the survey asked participants about the types of abuse they may have experienced when attending away matches. Incredibly 43% of disabled fans said they had experienced some form of abuse or negative attitude at an away game in the last 5 years.

This includes:

Verbal abuse – **26%**
Physical abuse – **8%**
Offensive songs/chants/gestures (disability-related) – **16%**
Other negative attitudes or behaviours – **16%**

This is clearly unacceptable. No supporter should be subjected to abuse when attending live sport, but sadly this is not the current reality. In fact, 13% of respondents said that 'fear of disability abuse' was a barrier for them when attending away matches.

Given that disability is a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, clubs, as service providers, have a responsibility to ensure that there is a clear process for disabled fans to report abuse, and that these reports are dealt with swiftly and appropriately.

Whilst some of the written feedback in the survey praised the care and effort of stewards and other club staff, sadly there were many more comments relating to inappropriate or insensitive stewarding. These negative staff attitudes add to the barriers that disabled people face, and clubs need to ensure that their front-line staff have the necessary training, ability, and desire to support disabled fans.

Avoiding away matches

We asked supporters how often they attend away matches, these are the results:

- Every match – **15%**
- Most matches – **25%**
- Some matches – **37%**
- One or two matches – **12%**
- I don't attend away matches – **11%**

Those 11% of respondents who answered that they don't attend away matches were asked the follow-up question whether they ever have done. 54% of the disabled fans who "don't attend away games" said they have done in the past.

We also asked these supporters 'what would need to be in place' for them to attend away matches. The 10 most common responses were:

- Better parking/accessible parking provision – **44%**
- More accessible tickets made available – **39%**
- A companion to attend matches with – **37%**
- More information on the away club's stadium/services – **36%**
- More affordable tickets/travel costs – **34%**
- More accessible club/supporter transport – **27%**
- Better support from stewards and staff – **25%**
- More accessible public transport – **24%**
- Protection from abuse – **20%**
- Better sightlines/view of the match – **19%**

Away travel

For the respondents who attend away games, we asked how they usually travel (their primary mode of transport). These were the results:

- Car – **54%**
- Official club/supporter transport – **26%**
- Public bus – **1%**
- Train – **16%**
- Tube/metro/tram – **1%**
- Other – **2%**

Over half of the respondents said that a car is their primary mode of transport to away matches. For many disabled people, use of a car is an access requirement for attending away matches, not a luxury. It may be the difference between being able to attend a match or not. Where possible clubs should look to improve or increase their accessible parking

provision, or at the very least consider what alternative arrangements can be offered (e.g. drop-off points).

The second most common mode of transport is official club/supporter transport. The respondents who said that they travel this way were asked about their experience of bathroom breaks whilst travelling. These are their responses:

60% said they have enough time and opportunity for bathroom breaks.

7% said "Generally there is not enough time and opportunity".

8% felt pressured to continue travelling when they wanted to stop.

6% said they weren't asked or didn't feel listened to when they wanted to stop.

It should go without saying that supporter coaches should not be ignoring disabled fans' basic requirements or pressurising disabled fans not to stop.

Conclusion

Based on the results in this survey summary, there is clearly a disparity between the experience of supporters at home games and away games.

And for disabled supporters it would seem that this disparity is even more pronounced, with many fans opting to simply stop attending away games altogether. We don't believe disabled fans should have to choose between a poor away matchday experience and staying at home.

We know that many clubs work hard to improve their services and facilities for disabled fans, and so our hope is that these results will help to identify some of the most necessary areas for improvement. Level Playing Field will continue to support and advise clubs around the removal of the barriers we've highlighted. In particular, we would encourage clubs to consider the following:

- Engaging with visiting disabled fans to find out about their matchday experience, in particular whether their view was obstructed at all.
- Is there a clear process by which fans can report abusive or discriminatory behaviour against them, and are these taken seriously and followed up on?
- Could improvements be made to the toilet facilities for away fans, in particular the number and quality of accessible toilets?
- Given that many disabled fans have stopped attending away matches and cited 'lack of parking provision' as a reason, are there improvements you can make to your accessible parking or suitable alternatives?

- Fans have clearly expressed the importance of being able to sit with their fellow away supporters, and where possible with their friends or family members too. What steps are being taken to ensure this can happen?
- Can disabled fans buy tickets in the same ways as non-disabled fans?
- Given the numerous comments we received about a lack of disability awareness amongst stewards and other staff, is there a plan in place to ensure they receive appropriate training at your club?

Chair's review – Tony Taylor

"It's a sad situation that the access to live sport, which most supporters take for granted, is clearly not being provided in the same way for disabled supporters at away matches.

The ability to watch a football game without blocked sightlines and fear of abuse or judgment is a basic expectation not being met.

"Clearly, there is a need for greater education within football. Level Playing Field will continue to take the lead in this by raising awareness amongst supporters and sharing best practices with clubs and governing bodies.

We will be looking to these organisations and other fan-led groups to work with us to improve the issues highlighted in this survey, which continue to beset the away fan experience of disabled supporters.

In recent years, there have been significant steps taken by many clubs to improve the matchday experience of disabled fans in general. However, this survey shows that there is still much work to be done and that the away fan experience, in particular, should be an area of focus for improvement by clubs.

The away day experience for disabled supporters needs considerable attention if football is serious about providing 'access for all'."

Tony Taylor - Level Playing Field Chair

Level Playing Field, for disabled sports fans.

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