

**Level
Playing
Field**
For disabled sports fans



European away football disabled fans survey

levelplayingfield.org.uk

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Survey overview



Level Playing Field seeks to improve the experience of disabled fans attending live sport. The charity works with fans, clubs, disabled supporters' associations and governing bodies to advise and campaign for these improvements.

Whilst the focus of our activity is dominated by furthering access and inclusion domestically, a significant number of the fans we serve and staff we work alongside had raised matters concerning their teams' matches in Europe. The purpose of this survey is to gain an understanding of the experiences of disabled supporters from clubs across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland attending these matches, or the reasons why they have not been able to attend.

Unlike most Level Playing Field surveys, which seek to understand the experiences of disabled fans of all sports, at various levels, this survey was limited to supporters of football clubs who have participated in European club competitions within the last 5 years. The survey was carried out using SurveyMonkey and was sent out across Level Playing Field's network of disabled fans, club staff, disabled supporters' associations and other relevant stakeholders. The survey was live for one month, running from Thursday 18 April through to Sunday 19 May 2024. Responses were anonymous unless the respondent chose to give their name.

This summary report outlines the results of the survey and includes some quotes and specific feedback from disabled fans. Within the report, some comparisons will be made with our most recent Annual Fan Survey (2023) results data, which provides baseline data for the experiences of over 1600 disabled fans across all sports.



Key findings

Poor Accessibility

The average rating for the level of accessibility and inclusion at clubs/stadiums in European club competitions was 'poor'.

Only 20% of respondents gave a rating above 'adequate', whilst 53% selected options below 'adequate'.

This is significantly worse than the average rating of 'adequate' from the equivalent question in our most recent Annual Fan Survey (2023), relating to stadiums in England and Wales. By contrast, only 21% of those respondents gave a rating below 'adequate'.



Separated fans

Of the wheelchair users who told us that they had attended a European away match, 79% said that they had been required to sit with the home fans, as a visiting supporter.



UEFA shortcomings

When asked about UEFA's communication with disabled fans, 29% of respondents rated it as 'non-existent'.

Additionally, UEFA's commitment to providing an accessible and inclusive matchday experience for disabled fans was rated between 'poor' and 'very poor'.



About the respondents

Disabilities represented

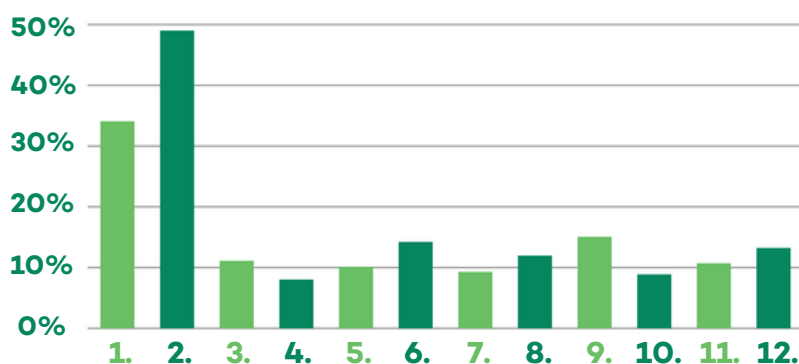


The survey was answered by 232 disabled football fans, who between them support a selection of teams that have competed in UEFA club competitions over the last five years - since the start of 2019.

232 survey responses

We asked supporters 'What do you consider your disability to be?' and provided them with several disability categories to select from. Respondents were asked to select all categories that applied. This question was optional, but was answered by the large majority. The results are shown below, and comparisons are made with the Annual Fan Survey 2023 (AFS).

Figure 1: Disabilities represented



- 1. Wheelchair users - 34%**
- 2. Ambulant disability - 49%**
- 3. Hearing disability - 11%**
- 4. Sight disability - 8%**
- 5. Learning disability - 10%**
- 6. Neurodivergent - 14%**
- 7. Neurological condition - 9%**
- 8. Mental health condition - 12%**
- 9. Pain or nerve related - 15%**
- 10. Motor skills/speech related - 9%**
- 11. Fatigue/low immunity - 11%**
- 12. Other unseen disability - 13%**

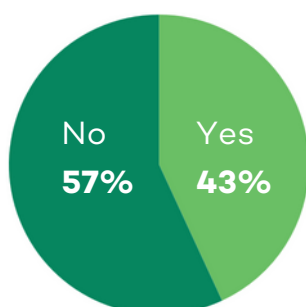
Overall, there are a wide range of disabilities represented by the survey. The disabled supporters most represented in the survey were those who selected 'Ambulant disability' at 49%, which was also the highest in the AFS, with a similar percentage. There was a higher percentage of wheelchair users who participated in this European away football fan survey - 34% compared to 27% in the AFS - but fewer people with mental health conditions - 12% compared to 18% in the AFS. The rest of the figures were very similar to the Annual Fan Survey results.

About the respondents

Attendance & competitions



We asked respondents 'Have you attended a European club competition match outside the UK since the start of 2019?' The results are shown below:



Just under half - 43% - of respondents said that they had attended a European club competition match in the last 5 years. Those who selected 'no' were then asked for the reason/s why they had not done so. The top five reasons are listed below.

- 1 Cost of attending - 29%
- 2 Anxiety of lack of confidence - 28%
- 3 Lack of accessible tickets - 27%
- 4 Lack of information - 23%
- 5 Inaccessible transport - 23%

Whilst 'cost of attending'; 'anxiety or lack of confidence' and 'lack of information' are not exclusively disability-related issues, they are factors that are more likely to affect disabled people than non-disabled people.

The limited provision of accessible seating at many stadiums across Europe is a key factor in the lack of accessible tickets available. Disabled fans should be provided the same opportunities to attend.

The following survey results (up to the end of page 12), are from only the respondents who selected that they had attended a European club competition match in the last 5 years. The table below shows which competition/s their team was competing in.

Figure 2: European club competitions represented

- ▶ UEFA Champions League - 62%
- ▶ UEFA Europa League - 51%
- ▶ UEFA Europa Conference League - 18%
- ▶ UEFA Super Cup - 7%

Barriers when attending

Top 10 barriers



We asked respondents to identify which of the following, if any, were disability-related barriers for them attending European club competition matches. Below are the ten most selected barriers:

- 1 Physical access at away stadiums – **44%**
- 2 Attitudes of others – **26%**
- 3 Cost of attending – **26%**
- 4 Inaccessible public transport in country/city – **25%**
- 5 "I don't think stadiums are inclusive for disabled people" – **25%**
- 6 Lack of information – **23%**
- 7 No access to a companion/PA ticket – **20%**
- 8 Lack of support from club staff – **16%**
- 9 Disability abuse – **9%**
- 10 Lack of match points to attend – **9%**

'Physical access is a significant barrier'

Whilst 'physical access' was the main barrier identified in both this survey and the Annual Fan Survey, the response rate of 44% of supporters is significantly higher than the 30% who selected the same barrier in the annual fan survey.

The second-most selected barrier in both this survey and the Annual Fan Survey was 'attitudes of others', with a very similar response rate for each. This includes others fans standing and blocking the view of disabled supporters.

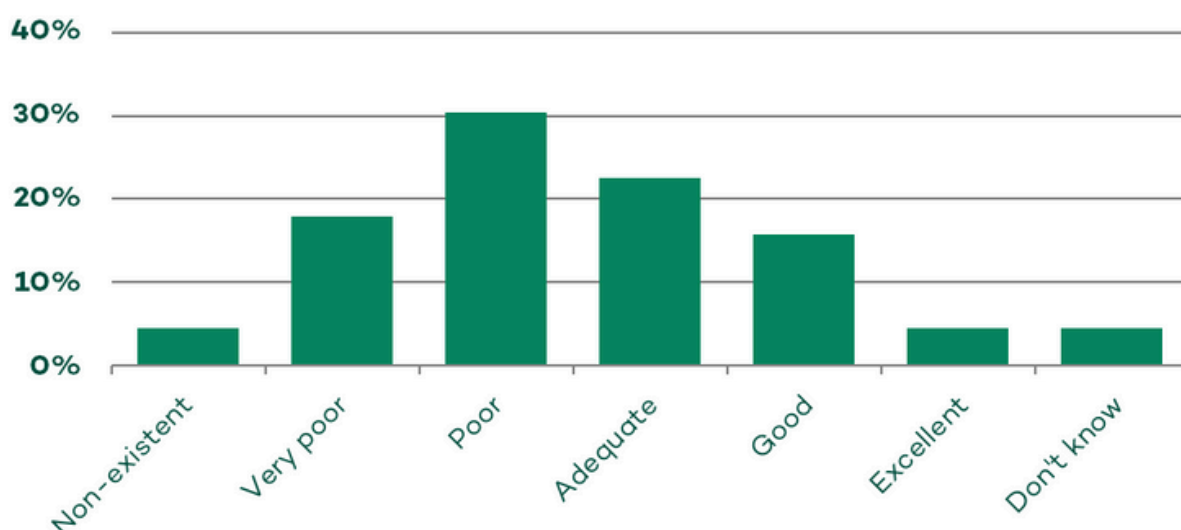
Overall, the results shown above are higher percentages than for the annual fan survey in almost every category, indicating that the barriers for disabled people to attend away matches in European club competitions are more significant than the barriers to attend matches in England and Wales. This is despite the fact that this particular survey pertains to clubs playing at a more 'elite' level of the sport. Notably, there were 23% of respondents who identified a 'lack of information' as a barrier, compared to just 15.5% in the annual fan survey.

Accessibility ratings



We asked respondents "How would you rate the level of accessibility and inclusion at clubs/stadiums in European club competitions, on average?"
The results are below.

Figure 3: Accessibility ratings for stadiums in European club competitions



- ▶ Non-existent - **4.5%**
- ▶ Very poor - **18%**
- ▶ Poor - **30%**
- ▶ Adequate - **22%**
- ▶ Good - **16%**
- ▶ Excellent - **4.5%**
- ▶ Don't know - **4.5%**

Overall, fans gave an average accessibility rating of 'poor' for the stadiums used in European club competitions, with over half (53%) of respondents giving a rating of 'poor', 'very poor', or 'non-existent'. This is notably worse than in the Annual Fan Survey, which had an average rating of 'adequate', and just 21% of respondents giving a rating of 'poor', 'very poor', or 'non-existent'.

Suggested improvements

Fan comments



During the survey, fans had opportunities to write comments on their experiences of attending away European matches. Below are some responses to the question: “If you could suggest one improvement to make away matchdays more accessible and inclusive for disabled fans in European club competitions, what would it be?”

“

Clarity about seating in the stadium and information about transportation to/from the game. - Anonymous

”

“

More staff that deal with accessibility issues and safeguarding. Better facilities for away fans that are ambulant disabled with hidden disabilities to be able to access the stadium without the crowd that tends to overcrowd the entrances. - Fran S

”

“

A dedicated Disability Liaison Officer in attendance. - William R

”

“

We had to queue for the bus to get to the stadium, disabled supporters should have had a separate line to reduce queuing and enable first on the bus situation. - Anonymous

”

“

Provide information about the stadium that lets me know if I can get to it, no 4 mile walks from a station surrounded by riot police, and what seats I can get to without falling over. - Robert J

”

“

Having an away disabled section in the away end. - Anonymous

”

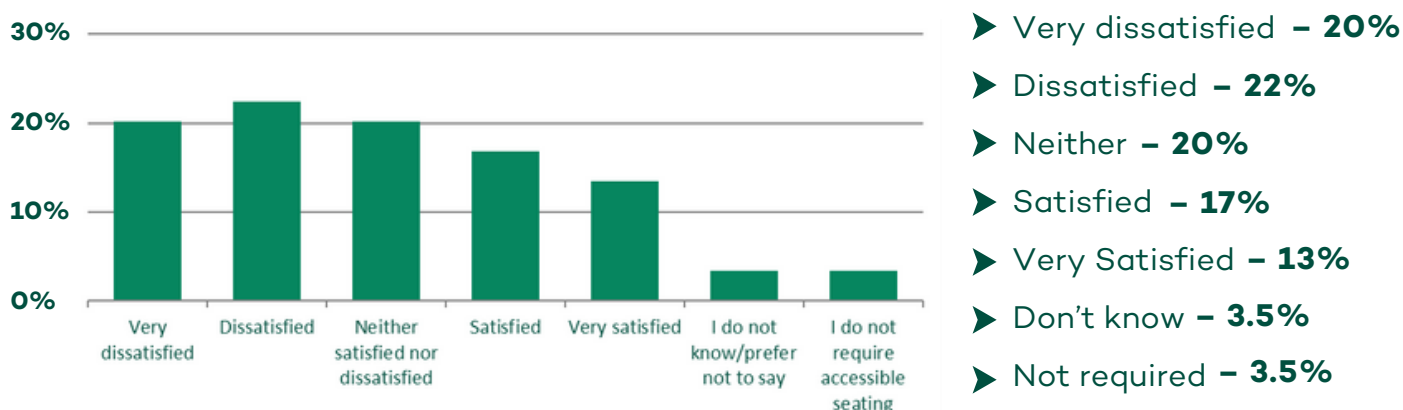
Accessible seating

Ratings



We asked respondents "On average, how satisfied have you been with the assigned accessible seating when attending European club competition matches?" The results are shown below.

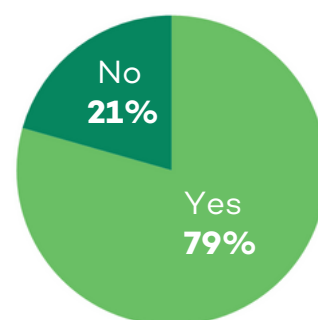
Figure 4: Accessible seating ratings for stadiums in European club competitions



Whilst the ratings for the accessible seating are slightly better than the overall accessibility ratings shown on page 8, there are still far more supporters who are dissatisfied with the provision (42%) than those who are satisfied (30%).

We also asked respondents "Have you ever had to sit with home fans as an away supporter at a European club competition on a match day?"

The large majority - 79% - of supporters responded 'yes' they had been required to sit with home fans as an away supporter.



This is a worrying statistic, as it represents a significant safety concern. In most cases, clubs would not be permitted to allow home fans and away fans to be seated together, as it would be considered too high risk to do so. This risk should not be ignored when it comes to positioning disabled supporters, particularly since over a quarter of disabled fans have identified 'the attitudes of others' as a barrier to attending.

Accessible seating

Fan comments



The following comments, from disabled fans, are in relation to the accessible seating provision discussed on the previous page.

“

Every European away match that I have been to I am always seated amongst the home team's supporters which makes me feel very uncomfortable and an afterthought. - Dagan R

”

“

Assigned accessible seating is very limited and extremely difficult to access - you cannot access a ticket without travel plans and I personally wouldn't make travel plans without a ticket. - Anonymous

”

“

For three of our four European away matches, we sat with the home supporters. At the best of times this means there a certain vulnerability, but factor in the language barriers and different attitudes and behaviours of some European supporters then this vulnerability is magnified. Clubs seem very unconcerned about this point on the continent which will make progress difficult. - Sean C

”

“

I was lucky to get a last minute ticket. But really sad to see all the wheelchair space to be empty when I had to fight to get one. - Anonymous

”

“

The only assigned disabled seating is for wheelchair users and carers. The away games in Europe are a sit-where-you-like policy. To get a seat at the front, you have to get to and inside the ground hours before kick off. Otherwise, you have fans in front of you standing that refuse to sit down. This also means you get hostility for the rest of the match. - Rebecca C

”

Stewarding interactions

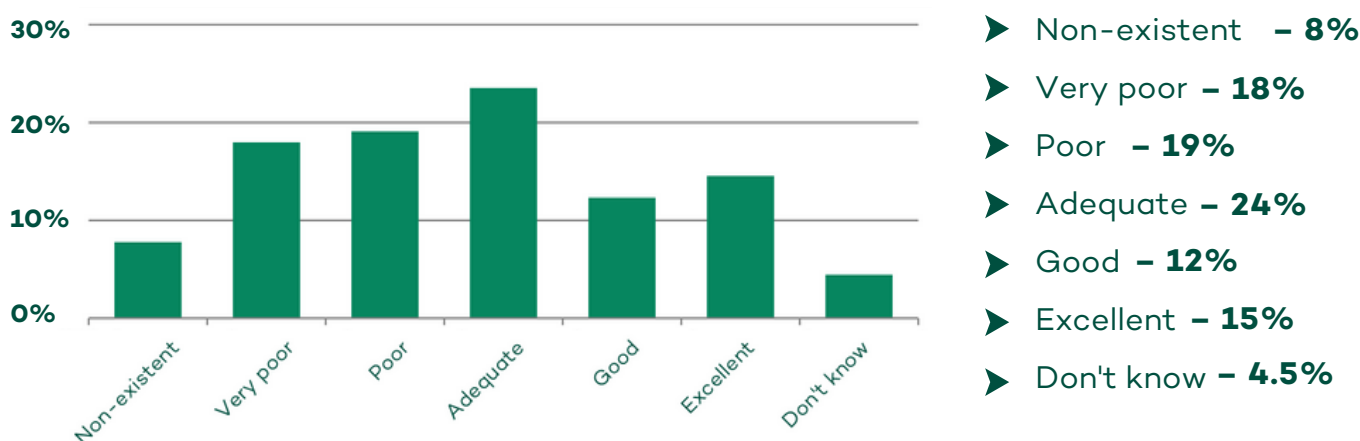
Ratings & Fan comments



We asked respondents "Overall, how would you rate your interactions with stewards/staff when attending an away European club match?"

The results are shown below.

Figure 5: Stewarding ratings for away European club matches



The ratings given for stewarding are notably better than the rating for overall accessibility on page 8, but still significantly worse than in the Annual Fan Survey, where fans rated their interactions with stewards as 'good', on average.

Below are some of the fan comments regarding stewarding, from this survey:

“

The Disability Liaison Officer being in attendance makes a massive difference to how accessible seating and wheelchair fans are treated compared to previous seasons. - William R

”

“

They do not recognise or understand hidden disabilities. - Anonymous

”

“

Having our own staff/stewards has been the only interaction worth noting. Very poor knowledge and very little help from [other] staff/stewards from any European away game I have attended. - Anonymous

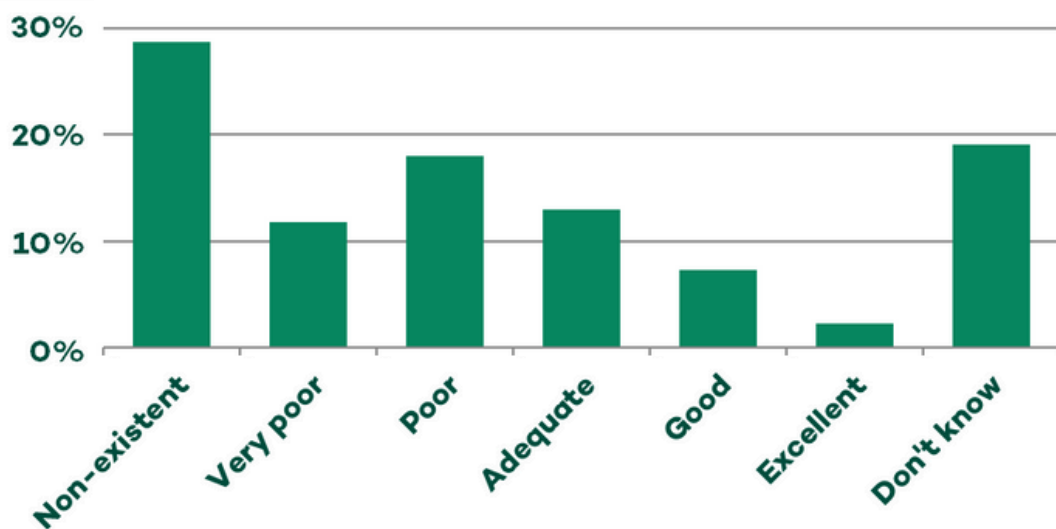
”

UEFA

Communication ratings

We asked respondents "Overall, how would you rate UEFA on its communication with disabled fans?" The chart below shows the results.

Figure 6: Ratings for UEFA's communication with disabled fans



- ▶ Non-existent – **29%**
- ▶ Very poor – **12%**
- ▶ Poor – **18%**
- ▶ Adequate – **13%**
- ▶ Good – **7%**
- ▶ Excellent – **2%**
- ▶ Don't know – **19%**

With 'non-existent' being by far the most selected response, and fewer than 10% of respondents giving a rating better than 'adequate', these results are damning. UEFA should ensure that disabled fans are considered and communicated with for European club competition matches, and that communications are clear and helpful.

One supporter commented:



Disabled fans are always last to find out the allocation in an away Stadium. You then have to book flights (for two, as you may need a companion) and find accommodation (which can be difficult if you need an accessible room and bathroom) after all the able-bodied supporters, have booked flights and hotels. - Mick

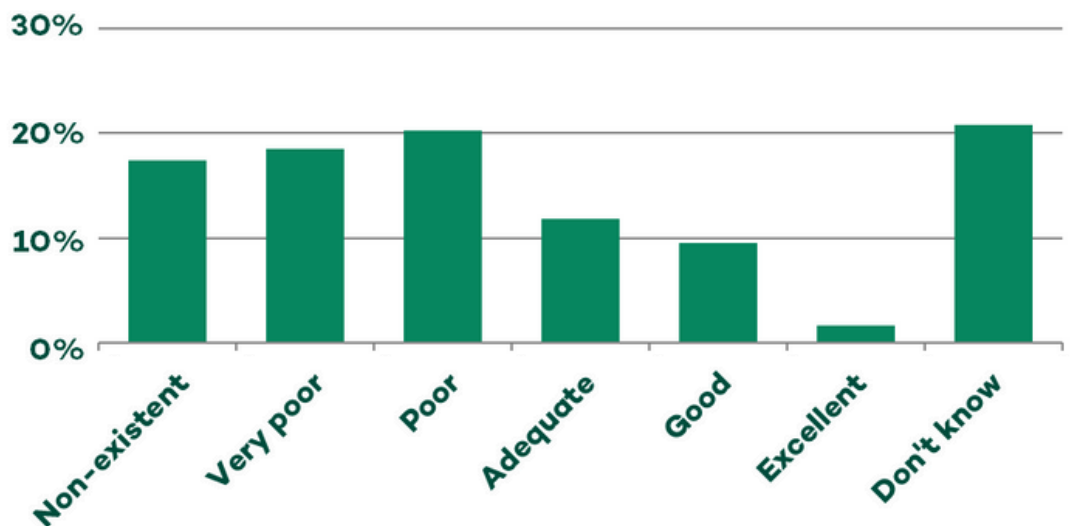


UEFA

Commitment to accessibility

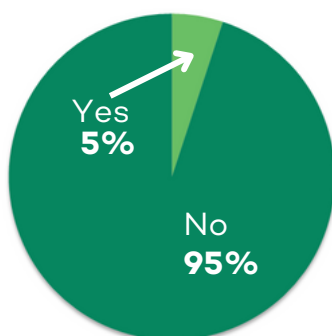
We asked respondents "Overall, how would you rate UEFA's commitment to providing an accessible and inclusive matchday experience for disabled fans?"

Figure 7: Ratings for UEFA's commitment to providing an accessible matchday



- ▶ Non-existent – **17%**
- ▶ Very poor – **19%**
- ▶ Poor – **20%**
- ▶ Adequate – **12%**
- ▶ Good – **10%**
- ▶ Excellent – **2%**
- ▶ Don't know – **21%**

Whilst these ratings are slightly better than the ones for UEFA's communication to disabled fans, on the previous page, the average is still poor-to-very poor. Just 12% of fans gave a rating above 'adequate'. This rating is consistent with the results in the rest of this survey, and provides a negative overall picture of disabled fans' experience.



We also asked respondents "Are you aware of any initiatives or policies by UEFA aimed at improving disability access?" Shockingly 95% said that they had not. This suggests a lack of effectiveness, or priority from UEFA, around these particular policies and initiatives.

UEFA

Fan comments (1)

The following fan comments are responses to the question “What do you feel UEFA does well for disabled supporters who attend European club competition matchdays?” It is worth noting that the answer “Nothing” was given by 24 separate respondents.

“

Provides a little info on the stadium and area. - Lisa S

”

“

I don't think I have ever seen anything by UEFA on this point. I was actually surprised by the question as it never occurred to me UEFA had any interest in this. - Robert J

”

“

They are trying to improve facilities all the time. - Paul W

”

“

I don't think UEFA do very much from my experience, having CAFE [AccessibAll] fight for disability rights within football has improved the situation slightly. All of this seems to be OK for home fans but away fans are not always receiving the same level of service. - Margaret S

”

“

I have no information to offer an opinion and I feel this demonstrates the lack of information and opportunities available. - Anonymous

”

UEFA

Fan comments (2)

The following fan comments are responses to the question “What do you think UEFA could do to improve access and inclusion for disabled supporters?”

“ Listen and act upon what disabled fans actually need not what they assume. - Johanne E ”

“ Send out information on accessible seating arrangements, when a match is planned, to members of the away team’s DSA. - Anon. ”

“ Show that they actually care about disabled supporters rather than creating their adverts about football being for everyone when it clearly isn’t in their eyes from previous experiences. Something as simple as communicating with disabled supporters travelling across Europe would be a good starting point. - Dagan R ”

“ Treating disabled supporters with dignity and respect and ensuring that the needs of disabled supporters are equally addressed when considering different venues. - Anonymous ”

“ Work closer with the home club Disability Access Officers. - Anon. ”

“ Come up with a minimum standard for treatment of disabled fans and ensure all clubs implement it. - Anonymous ”

“ Empower CAFE [AccessibAll] and set clear sanctions to European clubs to ensure access for visiting fans. - Anonymous ”

UEFA

Fan comments (3)

[continued]



Let away wheelchair supporters sit with their own fans. Also the Home club never provides a fair amount of the wheelchair tickets to the away team. When well supported clubs have plenty of wheelchairs supporters and the club only gets three or four wheelchair tickets is totally unacceptable. - Adam M



More information. Demand better viewing areas, make sure you're sat with your own fans. Not stick you behind TV cameras advertising hoardings et cetera. Stop clubs treating disabled away fans as an afterthought which is often what we are. - Ben P



Finally, we asked supporters if they had “Any other comments?” Here are a couple of the additional fan comments:



[One improvement to access and inclusion would be] Having audio descriptive commentary available for ALL fans not just home fans... [Also] Training all staff that work within stadiums to be aware that not all disabilities are visible. - Anonymous



While disability is recognised, it does not appear as a priority and generally is looked upon in regards to minimum legal requirements rather than an actual group of fans. I commend work that has started and is beginning to show results but I also feel there is a high scope for improvement before disabled football fans are treated in a level playing field as non disabled fans. - Anonymous



Conclusion



Following analysis of the survey results, reports have been sent to the relevant clubs across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, as well as other key stakeholders. This will help them identify areas in which they can help improve the accessibility of disabled fans' European away days, as well as see where they might already be making a difference.

Level Playing Field will continue to offer support to the relevant organisations, on addressing the key barriers highlighted in these results.

Important points, which require consideration and action include:

- ▶ The overall ratings across different areas in the survey indicate the poor standard of accessibility and complexity of the problem.
- ▶ Barriers to disabled fans attending are significantly more prevalent than for matchdays in England and Wales, when compared with the results from previous annual fan surveys.
- ▶ The issue of away wheelchair users being seated with home fans is a significant one. 79% of the wheelchair users who had attended European away matches identified this and the unacceptable nature of the situation was remarked on in numerous comments.
- ▶ UEFA's communication with disabled supporters and commitment to providing an accessible matchday were both viewed negatively by respondents.
- ▶ Staff from the visiting club being present, alongside disabled away fans, can clearly make a meaningful difference to the accessibility of some matchdays.
- ▶ The lack of information regarding accessible services and facilities at stadiums was repeatedly highlighted by respondents. For almost a quarter of fans (23%), this lack of information contributes to them being unable to attend away matchdays in Europe.



Chair's review

Tony Taylor

The results of this survey have provided us with valuable data, in an area which was previously lacking. This report has now been sent onto the relevant clubs and governing bodies, in order to raise the important points identified by respondents. It will also inform our work, as we push for more inclusive matchdays for disabled fans.

Overall ratings given by supporters throughout the survey display that the standard of accessibility at many stadiums across Europe is poor. The barriers to disabled fans attending are notably greater than for matchdays in England and Wales, when compared with the results from our previous three annual fan surveys. This is particularly disappointing, given that clubs and stadia featured in these particular survey results are those at the elite level of competition. We are very aware of the improvements which still need to be made on these shores and continue to campaign strongly for those, but this contrast makes the need for urgent action on the standards of access and inclusion for away fans in Europe even more apparent.

In multiple cases, individual staff from travelling clubs were praised by supporters for helping to facilitate a more accessible matchday. These staff should be hugely encouraged by the positive impact they have had, and this shows the benefit of having trained and dedicated personnel in access team roles, in attendance at away fixtures. There should not be an over reliance on those members of staff, however, and the need for their actions are intensified by the lack of a contactable disability liaison officer at host clubs and a lack of accessibility information available in advance of matchdays, as highlighted in the survey results.

A key issue that was repeatedly raised, was away wheelchair users being seated with home fans, with almost 80% of the wheelchair users who had attended European matches experiencing this. This was repeatedly cited in the written comments as having a detrimental impact on those supporters, and signifies a widespread and monumental failure of duty to those fans.

This comes as the EFL have introduced regulation that will require all clubs across the Sky Bet Championship, League One, and League Two to provide wheelchair user spaces in the away end. It was pleasing to see the importance of spaces for wheelchair users with their fellow away fans referenced in the recently published 'UEFA Accessibility Guidelines' document, from UEFA and AccessibALL. This must now be monitored and enforced, in order to bring about meaningful change.

We understand the complexities of creating universal guidance to be used across a large number of countries, but having shown an appetite to set standards, it is now crucial that UEFA work with clubs and venues to ensure they deliver for disabled supporters, allowing fans to travel with confidence.

It is clear that disabled fans currently lack confidence around European competitions. Fans who took part in the survey were damning in their criticism of the governing body and did not recognise UEFA as an organisation committed to improving the experiences of disabled supporters. Communication was a key area of underperformance and Level Playing Field is keen to present an opportunity for this to be put right. The charity has requested to set up a meeting where disabled fans can share their experiences directly with decision makers, to help set out solutions and create a more accessible future for those fans and other disabled supporters who currently feel unable to attend.

The results of this survey have proven the anecdotal reports of substandard access and inclusion on European away days, and it is clear that action must be taken. We will assist clubs to make use of this report, to help identify the ways in which they can provide relevant support to their disabled fans, but it is clear on a wider scale that UEFA must display leadership and a commitment to inclusion, in order to bring about meaningful change. We will continue to raise the need for this, and I would like to thank all of the supporters who took part in this survey, for providing us with the data to do so effectively.

Tony Taylor,
Level Playing Field Chair

Level Playing Field

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