BEYOND THE NOISE: MAKING LIVE MUSIC WORK FOR NEURODIVERGENCE

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BEYOND THE NOISE: MAKING LIVE MUSIC WORK FOR NEURODIVERGENCE

SIMPLE CHANGES

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Neurodivergence accessibility is not abstract—it is practical, specific, and achievable. Small changes in information, signage, sensory design and staff behaviour can profoundly improve the experience of live music and performance events.

While this report cannot encompass every dimension of neurodivergent experience, it seeks to support a more reflective, evidence-informed approach to how event organisers consider neurodivergent audiences within the planning, design, and delivery of cultural experiences.

THE REPORT

Ben Street, Festival Director for Wild Paths, demonstrated sector-leading commitment by subjecting his festival to a rigorous neurodivergent accessibility review. Previous Wild Paths audience research had shown us that on average more than 20% of live music audiences identify as living neurodivergence in some form; this work is not peripheral—it is central to the future of inclusive audience engagement.

Wild Paths' willingness to examine its practices reflects a profound recognition that meaningful cultural participation depends on environments designed for the full diversity of the people who attend.

While every venue differed in layout, atmosphere, and audience behaviour, the themes that emerged were remarkably consistent—and highly relevant to any live performance organisation seeking to improve accessibility.

The insights in this report highlight practical improvements that can make a profound difference to neurodivergent audiences. These are not costly redesigns, but predictability, clarity, and intentional sensory support.

Note:
Wild Paths Festival provided Sophie an access all gigs wristband. ACS Custom provided Sophie with custom high fidelity attenuated ear plugs.

SUMMARY

Across all venues, staff were positive and welcoming, and several spaces offered naturally calm viewing points or quieter corners. However, the overall experience placed a high cognitive and sensory load on a neurodivergent visitor due to:

- Insufficient pre-arrival information
- Lack of or inconsistent signage
- Hidden or poorly marked toilets
- Unclear routes in unfamiliar venues
- Sensory overload in bar-led or busy environments
- No designated low-stimulation spaces
- Wristbands that were physically uncomfortable

A consistent pattern emerged:
Once inside and oriented, the experience could be enjoyable and manageable. The most significant barriers occurred in the transition into and through the venue.

This means accessibility improvements must focus heavily on:

- Entry and threshold design
- Pre-visit preparation
- Wayfinding
- Sensory navigation support

PRE-VISIT ACCESSIBILITY

Across all venues with the exception of Norwich Arts Centre, the online information provided was insufficient for neurodivergent audiences, focusing almost exclusively on mobility access while omitting the elements that most directly support sensory needs and cognitive predictability.

There were no venue diagrams, floorplans, walkthroughs, or visual cues that would help visitors understand entrances, wristband checkpoints, or the internal layout of each space, and links to venue websites were inconsistent and often unhelpful.

As Sophie highlights, the Wild Paths website "only [had] accessibility information [that] relates to mobility issues," and she emphasised repeatedly that for neurodivergent festivalgoers, predictability is accessibility.

The absence of photos, videos or descriptions created significant anxiety: "Personally I need more information before I go to a place... It's not knowing what it looks like, where I need to go, and what I'm expected to do and when which is difficult." She explains that pre-visit visual guidance would have transformed her experience: "To make it more accessible for me, it basically comes down to explaining what it looks like... before-hand with photos, videos and things like that on websites."

A simple venue walkthrough could have resolved most early stressors; for example, Sophie noted that "the amount of signage to get to the Minstrel Room... would have probably been adequate if I had seen a video showing the route."

WEBSITE & ONLINE INFORMATION

Across venues, online information was:

- Focused mostly on mobility access
- Missing sensory information
- Missing venue diagrams, floorplans, or simple "what it looks like inside" cues
- Lacking venue-by-venue walkthroughs
- Inconsistent in linking to venue websites
- Absent of visual explanations (videos/photos) of entrances, wristband checks, stairs, queues, etc.

KEY PRINCIPLE:
For neurodivergent audiences, predictability is accessibility.

Without understanding what a venue looks like and what will happen on arrival, anxiety increases dramatically.

EVENT DATES & TICKETING CLARITY

Sophie experienced frequent uncertainty about event dates, running times, and what the ticket actually entitled her to, largely because the festival's published information lacked clear, consistent guidance. She noted confusion over whether Wild Paths ran "*the 14th to 18th or just the 16th to the 18th*" and whether events were "*all day on those days or... just in the evening.*" The absence of approximate set times, re-entry information, or simple scheduling cues increased anxiety and made planning difficult. For neurodivergent audiences, clear, consistent information reduces cognitive load, and ambiguity around timing can become a barrier to attendance. As Sophie explained, some basic temporal context–"*Some rough estimations of time would be helpful*"–would have significantly improved her ability to prepare and feel confident about attending.

Confusion often arose around:

- What dates events ran
- Whether events were all day or evening
- Approximate set times
- Whether re-entry was allowed

KEY PRINCIPLE:
Clear, consistent information significantly lowers cognitive load.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Sophie found Wild Paths' and venue social media posts "*relatively clear and straight to the point*," but noted they rarely included the information neurodivergent audiences rely on most—such as sensory warnings, crowding expectations, venue layout previews, or practical details like where toilets or bars are located.

While the content was understandable, it lacked the contextual cues that reduce anxiety and support planning. As Sophie commented, "*I need more information before I go to a place… what it looks like, where I need to go, and what I'm expected to do and when*," and social media is one of the simplest channels for providing those cues.

Small additions—photos of interiors, short arrival videos, or 'what to expect' posts—can dramatically improve accessibility without changing the venue or Festival's overall communications style.

Social media content was generally easy to understand, but it rarely included:

- Sensory warnings
- Crowding expectations
- Venue layout previews
- Information about toilets or bars

KEY PRINCIPLE:
Simple additions can dramatically improve accessibility.

ON-SITE EXPERIENCE ACROSS VENUES

Although venues ranged from purpose designed to churches to pubs to hotel function rooms, Sophie encountered a consistent pattern of navigational and wayfinding challenges that increased anxiety and slowed her ability to settle into each space. Signage was frequently absent, too small, or positioned where it was easy to miss, leading to uncertainty at key moments.

At The Maids Head, for example, she described "*a fairly long way from the entrance… and because it was a hotel there were people there for completely unrelated reasons which just introduces more space for doubt*," with some points along the route lacking confirmation signs. Toilet signage was a recurring problem—at St Laurence, she notes that the sign "*wasn't particularly noticeable… there was lots of other things to think about*," making it difficult to locate facilities in a crowded, dimly lit entrance area.

Wristband check locations were also inconsistent, with some looking "*more like two people sat at a table in a busy pub chatting*," leaving her unsure whom to approach. These issues collectively created repeated moments of hesitation and cognitive overload; as she explains, "*the first time I do anything is often hard*," and unclear wayfinding amplified that difficulty across multiple venues.

Consistent, visible, confirmatory signage and identifiable staff would significantly reduce these stress points.

NAVIGATION & WAYFINDING

Common issues:

- Signage either absent, too small, or placed where it was easy to miss
- Long or unclear routes to performance areas
- Multiple decision points without confirmatory signs ("Yes, keep going")
- Toilet signage inconsistent or invisible
- Wristband check areas not visually obvious

KEY PRINCIPLE:
These issues consistently increased anxiety and slowed orientation.

SENSORY ENVIRONMENT

The sensory environment varied significantly between venues, ranging from calm and manageable to highly overwhelming, with several recurring triggers for neurodivergent visitors.

Sophie frequently struggled with overlapping conversations, strong food smells, bright or white lighting, dense crowds, and vibrating bass levels—factors that compound quickly in unfamiliar or visually chaotic venues.

At St Andrews Brewhouse, she described the downstairs area as "*a lot sensory wise... very busy... a completely new place to me*," which made it difficult to process what staff were saying because she was "*spending so much energy dealing with the sensory input.*"

Similarly, upstairs at Voodoo Daddy's was "*not great sensory wise... especially when busy, because there isn't loads of space and you have lots of overlapping conversations, and the smell of pizza.*" In contrast, darker or more controlled environments were far easier to tolerate; she noted that Voodoo Daddy's downstairs was "*great sensory-wise... dark with colourful lights*," and that the Octagon Chapel felt "*fairly chill*," offering spaces where she could take a break.

These patterns show that lighting, sound, crowd density, and smell dramatically shape accessibility, and more predictable, lower-stimulation environments consistently supported Sophie's comfort and enjoyment.

Venues ranged from calm to overwhelming. Neurodivergent visitors may struggle with:

- Overlapping conversations
- Strong smells (food, alcohol)
- Bright or white lighting
- Vibrations or bass amplification
- Dense crowds
- Narrow, busy stairs
- Downstairs spaces with controlled lighting were often preferred to bright or visually chaotic bars.

QUIET SPACES

Across all venues, there were no designated quiet spaces where neurodivergent visitors could reliably regulate sensory input or decompress during moments of overwhelm. As a result, Sophie's ability to take breaks depended entirely on luck—empty corners between acts, outdoor benches, or the occasional quieter upstairs gallery.

She explains that "*I didn't see any purpose-made time out spaces,*" and although she sometimes found relief outside or in less crowded areas, these options were inconsistent and often unavailable during busy periods. For example, she noted that sitting on the bench outside Voodoo Daddy's "*was okay... a nice middle ground,*" but also acknowledged that "*if I was really overwhelmed it probably would have been too much,*" demonstrating that chance-based solutions do not provide adequate sensory safety.

The lack of intentional quiet areas meant a full retreat was never guaranteed, particularly during Saturday peak times. A single, clearly marked low-stimulation area per venue or venue cluster would, in Sophie's words, have "*made it easier*" and would meaningfully improve neurodivergent accessibility across the entire festival.

Across venues:

- No designated quiet spaces existed
- Breaks relied on luck—empty corners, outdoor benches, or upstairs galleries
- Full sensory retreat was not possible during busy periods
- A single quiet corner per venue cluster would transform accessibility.

STAFF INTERACTION

Venue staff were frequently praised for their friendliness and willingness to help, and Sophie's experience shows that proactive guidance was one of the most effective forms of accessibility support across the festival.

Clear, welcoming direction—such as being told immediately where to go or what to expect—greatly reduced anxiety. At St Andrews Brewhouse, for example, the door SIA staff member "*was nice and helpful... he asked us if we were there for Wild Paths, then told us we needed to go upstairs and there was a bar there,*" which she described as particularly valuable because "*initiating conversations is often difficult and stressful.*"

Similarly, at the Octagon Chapel, staff "*asked if we had been there before then explained there was an upstairs and downstairs and where we needed to go,*" a small action that made the venue feel instantly navigable.

The most effective behaviours were therefore proactive guidance, visible staff at entrances, a clear and friendly tone, and confidence in explaining where things were located. By contrast, the least effective behaviours involved staff who appeared indistinguishable from regular patrons or who waited for visitors to ask for help. Wristband checkers who looked like "*two people sat at a table in a busy pub chatting*" created uncertainty and hesitation, particularly when combined with high sensory load.

Sophie's experience demonstrates that proactivity, visibility, and clarity from staff are among the strongest enablers of neurodivergent accessibility at live events. Staff were frequently praised.

Most effective behaviours:

- Proactive guidance ("*Are you here for the show? Head upstairs and the bar is on your left*")
- Clear, friendly tone
- Staff positioned visibly at entrances
- Knowing where everything is and how to get there

Least effective behaviours:

- Wristband checkers who looked like regular patrons
- Staff waiting to be asked for help rather than offering it

PHYSICAL MATERIALS – WRISTBANDS

For neurodivergent visitors with sensory sensitivities, the physical design of wristbands had a significant impact on comfort and overall accessibility. Sophie reported that the hard plastic QR square on her wristband was particularly difficult to tolerate, noting that "*the plastic QR code on it was not good,*" and that the band became uncomfortable when clothing layers changed and it rested directly against her skin. She explained that she initially avoided the issue by wearing the wristband over her hoodie sleeve, but once she became warm and had to remove the layer, the texture became irritating. These experiences highlight the need for fabric-only wristbands without rigid components, which are less likely to cause sensory distress and are strongly preferred by neurodivergent festivalgoers.

For neurodivergent visitors with sensory sensitivities:

- Hard plastic QR squares were irritating
- Wristbands worn against skin became uncomfortable when layers changed
- Fabric-only bands were strongly preferred

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

Across all venues and touchpoints, several universal accessibility principles emerged. First, getting in is the hardest part: entrances, stairways, wristband checks, and unfamiliar thresholds consistently produced the highest anxiety.

Sophie emphasised in her assessments that "*the first time I do anything is often hard,*" especially when expectations are unclear. Second, predictability reduces anxiety, and the absence of photos, videos, maps, or simple walkthroughs significantly increased cognitive load; she repeatedly explained that "*I need more information before I go to a place… what it looks like, where I need to go, and what I'm expected to do and when*." Third, signage is the single biggest barrier, with poor or inconsistent signs causing avoidable confusion at toilets, stairs, corridors, and performance areas. Fourth, staff friendliness is a major asset, with small proactive actions—such as a greeting or directional cue—proving "*really helpful*" and often transformative in easing uncertainty. Fifth, quiet spaces should really be intentional, not incidental; Sophie noted that she "*didn't see any purpose-made time out spaces,*" meaning breaks were dependent on luck rather than design.

Finally, the sensory environment profoundly shapes participation, with bright lights, strong smells, crowd density, overlapping conversations, and bass vibrations influencing whether a venue felt manageable or overwhelming. Together, these themes show that relatively small, low-cost adjustments can dramatically improve accessibility for neurodivergent audiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIVE MUSIC & CULTURAL VENUES

Sophie's experience across the Wild Paths Festival demonstrates that neurodivergent accessibility is shaped far more by the design of the visitor journey than by the performance itself. The moments of greatest difficulty were almost always connected to uncertainty—unfamiliar entrances, unclear routes, unexpected sensory triggers, and a lack of reliable retreat spaces.

Conversely, the strongest positive moments came from small, intentional acts of clarity: proactive staff greetings, visible signage, predictable pathways, and calm sensory environments. These findings show that meaningful neuro-inclusion is not dependent on expensive infrastructure but on consistent, low-cost design decisions applied festival-wide and venue-wide. When venues communicate clearly, signpost effectively, and structure their spaces with sensory needs in mind, neurodivergent visitors are not only able to attend—they are able to stay longer, enjoy more, and return with confidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LIVE MUSIC & CULTURAL VENUES

Here we present a consolidated improvement framework suitable for any live performance organisation.

A. PRE-VISIT ACCESSIBILITY

Publish venue / festival access guides

Include clear, simple explanations of:

- Entrances
- Queues
- Wristband / check-in points
- Toilets
- Bars
- Stairs
- Quiet zones

Add visual & sensory previews

- Short walkthrough videos
- Photos of empty rooms and rooms during busy periods
- Highlight expected noise, lighting, crowd density, and sensory triggers

Provide clear, consistent event information

- Date ranges presented in one format
- Approximate running times (e.g., "doors at 7pm, first act at ~7:30pm")
- Re-entry rules
- Accessible entrance details
- Sensory advisory notes where appropriate

B. WAYFINDING & SIGNAGE

Clear, branded directional signage

At minimum, signpost:

- Entrance
- Route to stage
- Toilets
- Bar
- Quiet space
- Confirmation signs
- "You're on the right path (arrow)"
- "Toilets (arrow) keep going"

Repeat toilet signs

At entrance, mid-venue, and near the facilities.

STAFF TRAINING & PRACTICE

Proactive welcome scripts

Examples:

- "Hi there, are you here for the show?"
- "Stairs are to the left; bar is upstairs."
- "Toilets are just behind that wall—look for the arrow."
- It is not enough just to say hello.

Staff visibility

- Branded lanyards
- Venue / Festival T-shirts
- Clearly marked wristband/ticket check stations

Sensory awareness training

Staff should understand that:

- Some visitors may be overwhelmed by crowds or noise
- Instructions may need to be repeated calmly
- A friendly, steady tone reduces panic

SENSORY SUPPORT

Establish low-stimulation spaces

- Dim, warm lighting
- Seating
- No direct sound bleed
- Clear signage indicating location

Provide free earplugs

A simple, high-impact intervention for sensory and hearing support.

Improve lighting in transitional areas

- Avoid bright white LEDs
- Use warmer or coloured lighting where possible

PHYSICAL MATERIALS

Switch to soft, fabric wristbands

- Avoid rigid plastic QR patches
- Offer alternatives for people unable to tolerate wrist-worn materials

HEARING PROTECTION FOR NEURODIVERGENCE

Here we summarise the experience of neurodivergent researcher Sophie when using ACS Custom made ear protectors.

The report evaluates:

- The impact of ear protection on sensory regulation, communication, and post-event recovery.
- Environmental and procedural factors in venues that either increased sensory load or supported neurodivergent access.
- Opportunities for festivals and venues to create more inclusive experiences for neurodivergent audiences.

BENEFITS OF ACS EAR PROTECTORS FOR NEURODIVERGENCE

Feedback from Sophie provides clear evidence that ACS Custom ear protectors offer substantial benefits across several domains important for neurodivergence accessibility.

REDUCTION OF SENSORY OVERLOAD

Sophie reported that ACS ear protectors:

- Reduce sensory overwhelm while maintaining clear audio quality.
- Help manage crowded and noisy areas such as bars or busy foyers.
- Lower the likelihood of emotional or sensory overload, even when the environment is unpredictable.

"*the ACS ear protectors reduced sensory overload and kept the music clear. They also helped in crowded areas while still being able to understand the person I'm talking to.*"

PRESERVATION OF AUDIO QUALITY

Sophie emphasised that ACS ear protectors outperformed previous earplugs she had experienced, retaining music quality without distortion.

Audio remained intelligible, allowing enjoyment of the performance without the discomfort of high-volume sound.

"*they preserve the audio quality—they do a better job at it than my previous ones*."

SUPPORT IN MANAGING SENSORY FATIGUE

Sophie said that the ACS Custom Ear protectors helped reduce sensory fatigue after the event, including eliminating ear-ringing.

This allowed her to leave a venue without experiencing residual sensory distress.

"*I didn't get any ringing afterwards, which is helpful because I don't have to deal with that sensory input when I leave.*"

INCREASED ABILITY TO ACCESS LIVE MUSIC

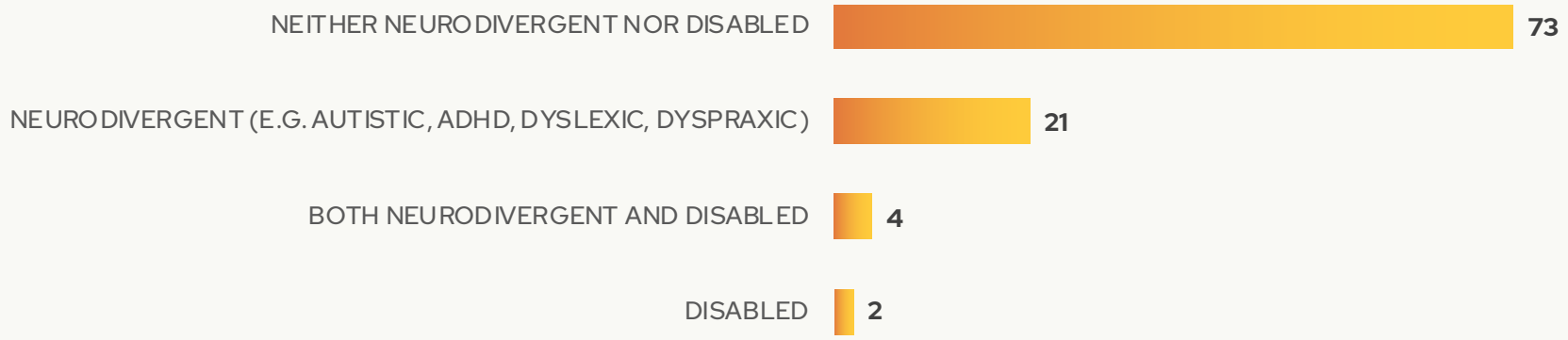
ACS Custom ear protectors materially improved Sophie's ability to attend and enjoy gigs. They lowered sensory risk enough to make attendance feasible.

"*Yes, they make it easier for me to go to gigs.*"

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

The Norwich Live Music Survey was a quantitative survey with interviews from 480 live music attenders of which 25% of respondents were with respondents who identify as neurodivergent.

Do you consider yourself to be any of the following? %



The survey asked the 27% of respondents who had identified as neurodivergent or disabled to rate elements of thinking about and planning attendance at a gig.

How important are the following when deciding to go to a gig?
Rate out of 5, with 5 being highly important.

	AVERAGE
EASY-TO-USE TICKET WEBSITE OR PHONE BOOKING	4.32
CLEAR AND SIMPLE INFORMATION ABOUT THE VENUE	4.05
KNOWING I CAN LEAVE AND COME BACK IF I NEED A BREAK	3.64
EASY PARKING, TRANSPORT, AND CLEAR DIRECTIONS	3.50
KNOWING THE VENUE OFFERS HEARING PROTECTION AND SAFE SOUND LEVELS	3.32
BEING ABLE TO CHOOSE A SEAT OR STANDING AREA	3.19
INFORMATION ABOUT NOISE, LIGHTING, AND CROWD SIZE	2.77

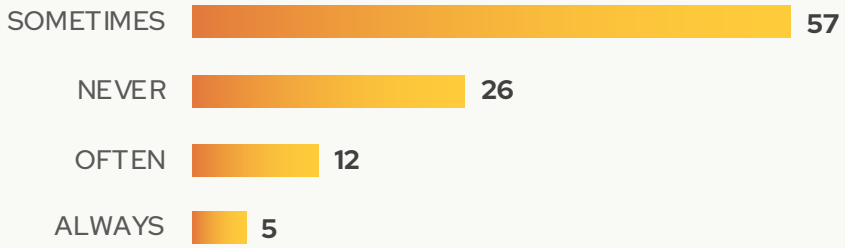
Those respondents who identify as both neurodivergent and disabled were more likely to say that each of the following were significantly more important to them:

Knowing the venue offers hearing protection and safe sound levels
Being able to choose a seat or standing area
Information about noise, lighting, and crowd size

ANXIETY

74% of identifying respondents said they feel anxiety at least sometimes when they are planning attendance at a gig.

Do you feel stressed or anxious when planning a gig? %



TOP 10 ACCESSIBILITY FEATURES

Which of these accessibility features are important to you?

ABILITY TO LEAVE AND RE-ENTER THE VENUE IF NEEDED	77%
SIMPLE AND ACCESSIBLE TICKET BOOKING PROCESS	74%
GOOD VISIBILITY OF PERFORMERS (E.G. SIGHTLINES, SEATING OPTIONS)	68%
CLEAR SIGNAGE AND DIRECTIONS	61%
CLEAR INFORMATION PROVIDED IN ADVANCE (ACCESS GUIDES, EVENT DETAILS)	57 %
FREE OR LOW-COST EARPLUGS	52%
QUIET OR LOW-STIMULUS AREAS TO REST	41%
ACCESSIBLE TOILETS	32%
ACCESS TO EAR PLUGS WITH ATTENUATION FILTERS TO REDUCE VOLUME EVENLY ACROSS FREQUENCIES	32%
TRAINED STAFF OR CLEAR “HELP POINTS”	31%

WILD PATHS

acs
SERIOUS ABOUT SOUND

NORFOLK N&N NORWICH
FESTIVAL

vivid interface

FUTURE PLANNING, STRATEGY AND RESEARCH

WE SEARCH OUT ORGANISATIONS WHO ENRICH ALL OF OUR LIVES, AND PARTNER WITH THEM TO RE-IMAGINE, TO DESIGN NEW EXPERIENCES, AND TO FIND NEW FUTURES.

WE ARE STRATEGISTS, PLANNERS AND RESEARCHERS WHO LEVERAGE CURIOSITY, EXPERIMENTATION AND INSIGHT TO HELP ORGANISATIONS THRIVE. WE BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO OLD CHALLENGES AND FOSTER INNOVATIVE THINKING TO ENABLE ORGANISATIONS TO EVOLVE AND GROW.

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