

Creating Welcoming, Inclusive, and Accessible Events: A Guide for Stewards

by Gwen verch David

Introduction

The SCA community prides itself on its hospitality: making *everyone* feel welcome. But sometimes it can be difficult to work out how to do so, especially when you're running an event for a large group of very different people with different needs. So to help work out what stewards can do and who it is likely to help, I went out and asked people: what makes *you* feel comfortable?

This article summarises the answers I received, along with providing some background on the research process and the kinds of people who responded. Their experiences included the good and the bad, ranging from minor inconveniences to social isolation and physical injury, from friendly support to the best our community can be. Our whole community plays a role in welcoming and supporting our members; event teams can't do it all. But they *can* help. Here, I have aimed to provide practical, easy-to-use advice on what stewards can do, and who it will help most.

No event will ever be perfectly accessible to everybody – resources are limited, and sometimes people's needs conflict. (For instance, it's difficult to help a person who has migraines triggered by bright light, *and* someone who has difficulty seeing in low light.) I don't expect stewards to implement every recommendation in this article at any one event, and I don't really advise them to try. Instead, I hope stewards will be able to make informed decisions about which things will provide the greatest benefits for *their* community.

(Please note: This research was conducted shortly before COVID-19 began to affect SCA activities in most of the Known World. As such, solutions that became more common during the pandemic, such as virtual activities, weren't on the radar for our participants.)

What Makes Events Welcoming?

Community Culture

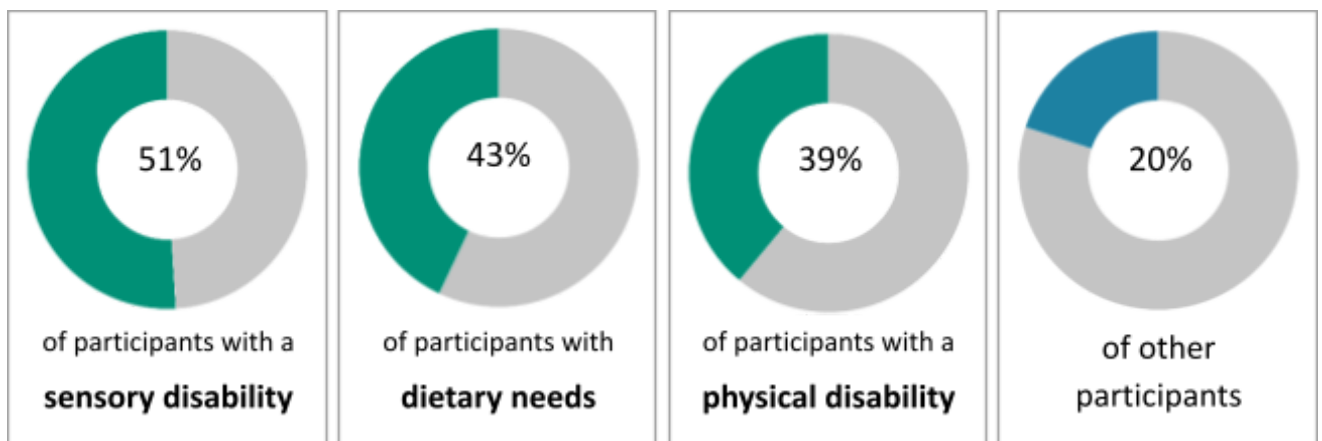
Almost 90% of participants talked about their social environment when we asked what affected their comfort at events. This included the people and attitudes around them; whether they knew anyone; whether they were included in conversations; whether they experienced rudeness, prejudice, or more serious forms of bad behaviour; and whether they felt accepted or judged. The lesson here is for all of us: community culture matters most.

The attitudes, behaviour, and culture of our communities goes far beyond the control of our stewards. But there are some things stewards can do to support positive social experiences at their event. They can create 'hospitality' spaces where people can gather if they don't have someone to sit with; include a contact address for the local newcomer's officer in event information; and make sure planned activities aren't reflecting social biases (e.g. patronage of activities by Crown or Coronets distributed along gender lines) or potentially distressing topics (e.g. a 'crusade' themed event with strong negative language about Muslim people).

However, stewards and their teams can do far more to affect other aspects of an event. As such, the rest of this article will focus on eleven key non-social issues, relating to event management and to the venue.

Non-Social Issues

1) Access to event information was mentioned by:



Participants were looking for information well in advance of the event to help them decide whether to attend and what to bring, as well as information at the event itself.

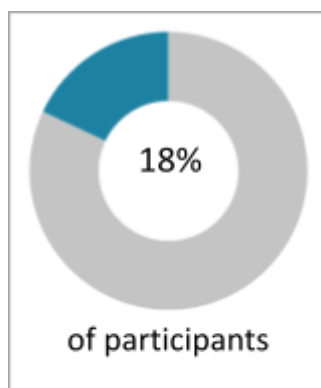
When this isn't available, it can mean people are disappointed or frustrated when they arrive, that they find out they can't actually participate after they get there, or that they skip events altogether because they don't know what issues they'll face.

Stewards can help by:

- Publishing event information in advance, including:
 - Draft schedules
 - Draft menus with ingredients
 - Transport information (parking, availability of public transport, etc)
 - Information about site accessibility (see 'Physical access' below)
- Providing information at the event, including:
 - Copies of the map and schedule
 - Clear signage to help people find activities and amenities
 - Ingredient labels on food and/or menus with ingredient lists on the table

Without changing anything else, you can make your event substantially more accessible by giving attendees information in advance – because attendees can use that information to make the event more accessible for *themselves*. Most people have a lot of experience compensating for things that affect them; they just need to know that they'll have to.

2) Planned social activities were mentioned by:



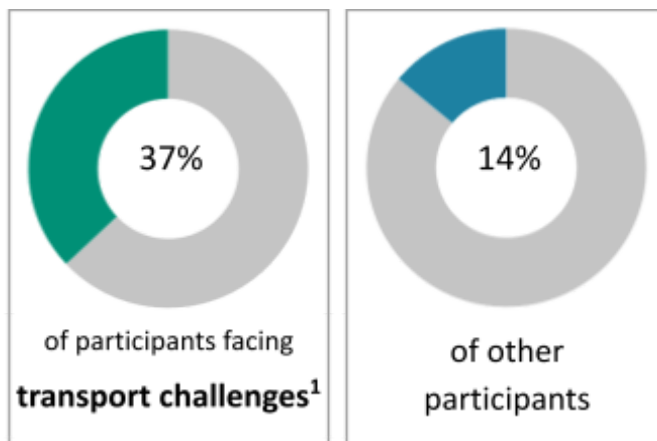
A wide range of participants were concerned with the activities available. They were looking for a variety of activities at an event (in particular, alternatives to combat), and for planned activities as 'something to do besides eat and talk'.

When these aren't available, it can leave people feeling awkward or bored, and for those who don't have friends at the event, can make them feel very isolated.

Stewards can help by:

- Seeking organisers for classes, dance, bardic circles, or other structured social activities suitable for a range of skill levels
- Planning for a mix of structured activities and relaxed social time
- Providing a clear, detailed schedule

3) Ease of travel was mentioned by:



Participants had a range of concerns, including the availability of enough parking close to site, access to public transport, and the distance they had to travel.

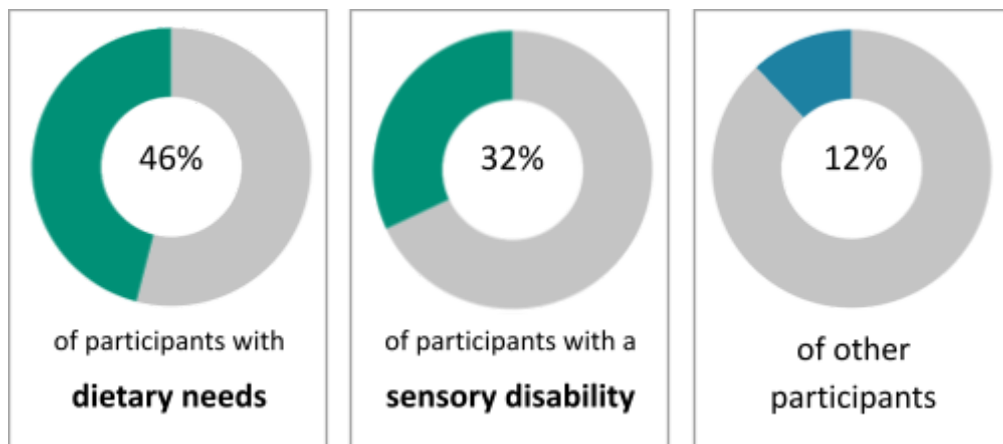
When transport alternatives aren't available, it can make an event impossible to attend for those who don't drive. Issues with parking availability can be frustrating for people who aren't expecting it, and for those with mobility issues, lack of close parking can leave them struggling or in pain as they unload.

Stewards can help by:

- Taking the availability of public transport and parking into account when choosing a site
- Reserving parking spaces close to the main area for people with disabilities
- Setting up an unloading zone when parking isn't close to site
- Encouraging or organising ride sharing.

¹Note: Our survey used very open questions, and didn't prompt people to select topics from a list. That means that the number of people who mentioned an issue is almost certainly smaller than the number of people affected by an issue. The question we used to determine our demographic categories was in a different section of the survey to our questions about comfort at events, and used different wording. It is not surprising that some participants mentioned transport in the demographic section and not in the event comfort section, and vice versa.

4) Allergy-safe food was mentioned by:



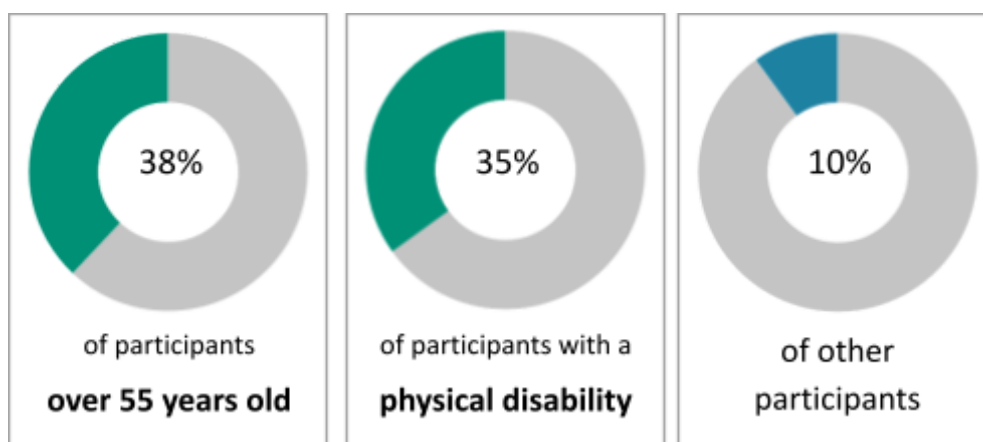
Participants wanted to know the menu in advance so they could plan around it, have a reasonable amount of food suitable to them, and have clear information about ingredients and potential contamination of the food available when choosing what to eat.

When this isn't available, people may end up unable to eat much of what is provided, going hungry because of the risk of an allergic reaction, or experiencing serious health consequences from eating something they didn't know was unsafe for them.

Stewards can help by:

- Providing draft menus with complete ingredient lists in advance of the event
- Planning to accommodate the most common dietary needs (e.g. vegetarian, dairy free)
- Making menus with full ingredient lists available on feast tables
- Communicating clearly about which foods might be contaminated by allergens
- Providing an off-board (self-catered) option that does not require attendees to sit separately from their social group

5) Physical access was mentioned by:



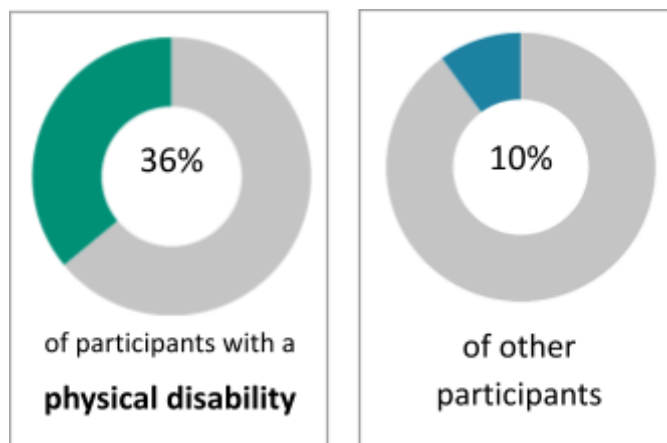
Participants were concerned about their ability to get around sites and access critical amenities (toilets, parking, etc) when using mobility aids like canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. The two biggest problems they faced were stairs and rough, uneven ground.

When this is an issue, people can find participating in core parts of the event to be tiring, painful, or even impossible. People in wheelchairs can find themselves stranded and unable to go anywhere.

Stewards can help by:

- Looking for sites which have alternatives to any stairs
- Laying out their event to take advantage of existing paths or level ground
- Making sure there is enough room between things (e.g. feast tables) for a wheelchair or walker to move
- Communicating clearly about any access limitations as part of their event information

6) Time on their feet was mentioned by:



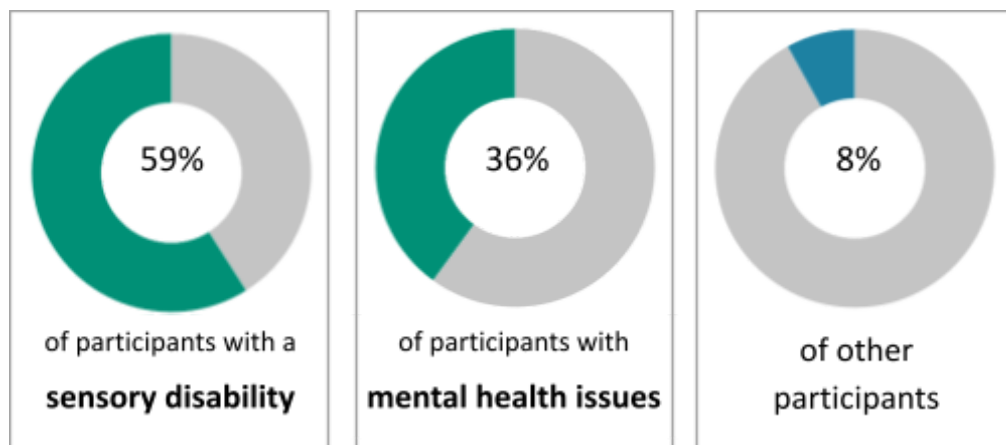
Participants were concerned about the availability of seating, whether they would be required to stand for a long time, and how far they would have to walk between important locations.

When this is an issue, people may find themselves having to choose between accessing activities/amenities and being tired, uncomfortable, or even in lasting pain. Long distances to walk can also 'cost' a lot of time, meaning people don't get as much time to enjoy the activities.

Stewards can help by:

- Providing sturdy, shaded public seating in the main activity areas (e.g. near the tourney field, at court)
- Setting up the main activity areas close to each other and to key amenities (water, toilets, parking)
- Thinking about ways to reduce the time people spend queuing at the gate or to get food
- Setting up an 'unloading zone' if the parking is far away from the main areas
- Putting shaded respite seating on the routes between locations at very large events

7) Quiet spaces were mentioned by:



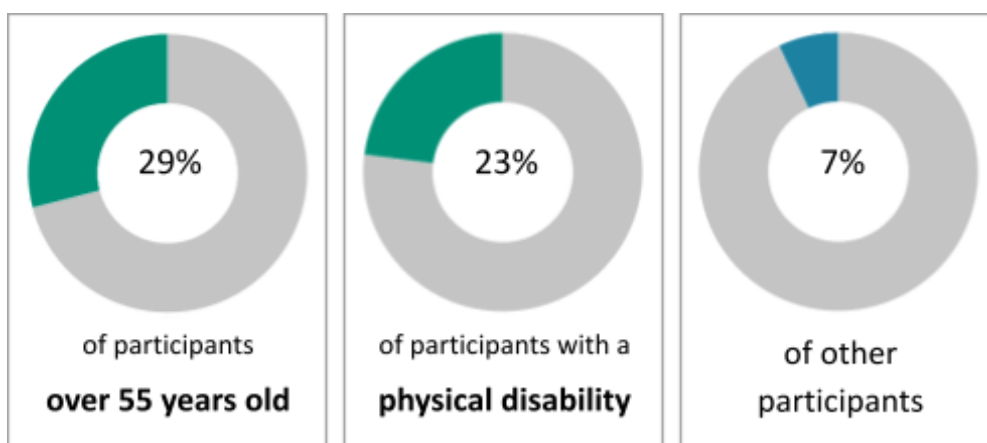
Participants wanted the ability to get away from crowds and noise so that they could rest and recharge during the event. A small number wanted a quiet place to talk, but most were looking for somewhere 'like a quiet carriage on a train'.

When this is not available, people can become overwhelmed by the social or sensory environment of the event. They may find they need to go to their cars, or leave altogether, to get away when things are too much.

Stewards can help by:

- Setting aside a shaded area with some seating and (if outdoors) a floor cover, and explicitly inviting attendees to use the space if they want some quiet.
- Posting a sign with the rules for the space
- Mentioning the existence and purpose of the space on the schedule or map.

8) Climate was mentioned by:



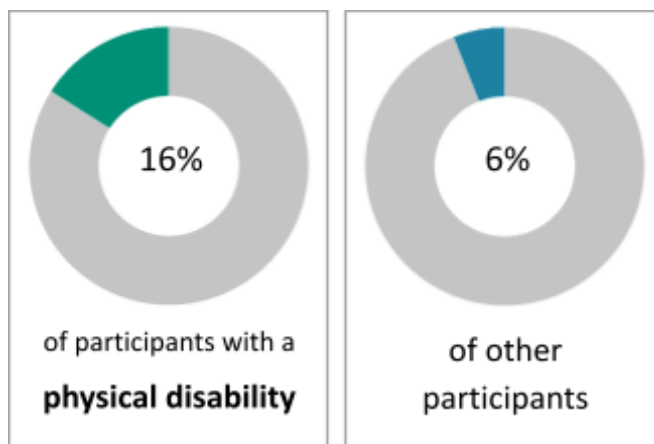
Participants were primarily concerned about heat and the availability of shade or air conditioning. Other forms of bad weather were also mentioned, and lack of heating at very cold events.

When shelter from the heat is unavailable, it can not only cause discomfort, but serious health consequences to those who are heat or sun sensitive. Several people mentioned 'weather', 'climate', or 'heat' as a reason they would choose to skip an event.

Stewards can help by:

- Providing shade in key activity areas (e.g. near the list field)
- Looking for sites that have some degree of weather protection (especially at times of year with frequent extreme weather)
- Preparing bad weather contingency plans for the possibility of unexpected rain or extreme temperatures.

9) Help was mentioned by:



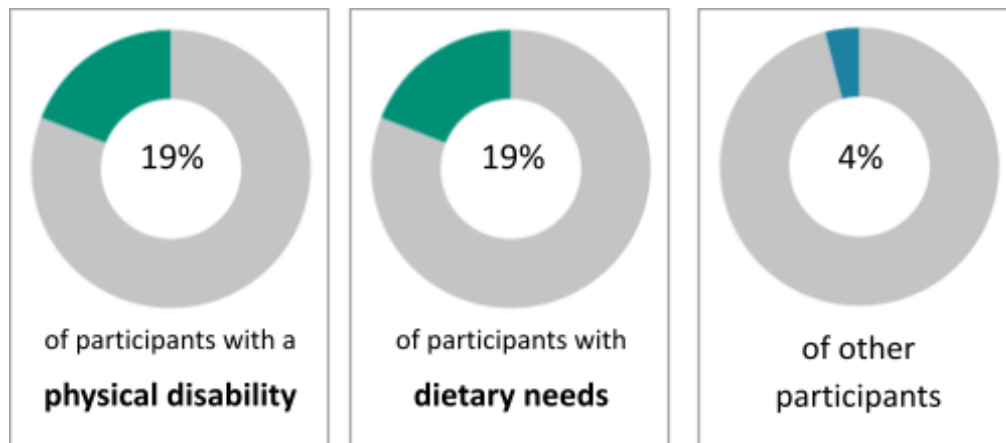
Participants appreciated a general culture of helpfulness, but also valued the security of arranging things in advance with a help or disability coordinator. In most cases, they were seeking help with carrying things, unloading, and setting up.

When this is not available, it can leave some participants tired out or even in pain after unloading and setting up, and the recovery time they need can prevent them enjoying other parts of the event. If people need help and it isn't offered by the people around them, it can also be very isolating and demoralizing.

Stewards can help by:

- Providing an opportunity (e.g. during the booking process) for participants to ask if the event team can provide help they will need
- Calling for volunteers at the beginning and end of an event to help other people with carrying, setting up, and packing down their gear.

10) Bathrooms were mentioned by:



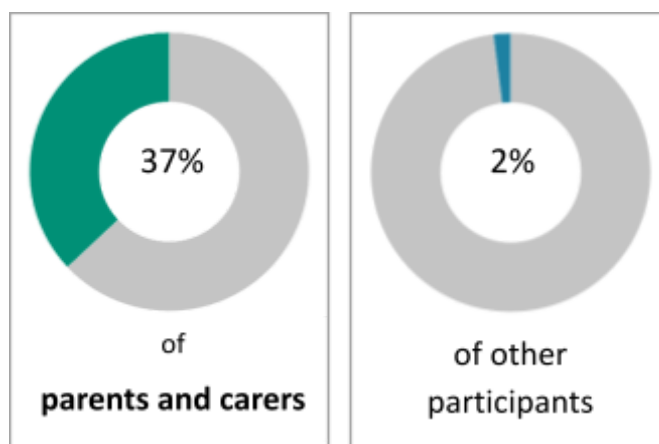
People talked about having enough bathrooms available, and having bathrooms that were close by, clean, well lit, handicap-accessible, and with large enough cubicles. A smaller group asked for gender-neutral or unisex options to be available; however, this is a complex issue where the needs of different groups can conflict.

When this is an issue, it can cause a lot of discomfort. Bathrooms that are too far away or not wheelchair accessible may be completely unusable for some people, which can prevent them attending.

Stewards can help by:

- Choosing sites with bathrooms that are easy to get to
- Setting up the main activity areas near the bathrooms
- Providing bathroom lighting at camping events
- Making sure there are handicap-accessible bathrooms on site where possible. You may need to check with a wheelchair user to find out if a bathroom is *actually* accessible for them.

11) Activities and spaces for children were mentioned by:



Participants talked about having spaces that were safe for children to play, having activities children could enjoy on the schedule, and general acceptance of children at the event. The ability to leave a child under someone else's supervision for a period was highly valued, but parents understood that it can be difficult to achieve.

When these aren't available, parents can feel isolated or like their family's presence is unwelcome. They may be partially or wholly unable to participate in activities at the event because they need to keep their focus on making sure their children are safe and entertained.

Stewards can help by:

- Noting on the schedule which activities children and teens can or can't participate in
- Setting aside a children's play area with some separation from hazards (e.g. list field, cars)
- Seeking organisers for activities specifically for children

What do our demographic categories mean?

We gave our participants the opportunity to tell us in their own words what factors affected their experience that might not affect other members of their community, and then compared their answers to develop nine categories, in three groups.

Health factors

- 'Physical disability', including both disabilities and chronic illness.
- 'Sensory disability', including vision or hearing impairments, sensory sensitivities (e.g. to bright lights), and sensory processing issues.
- 'Dietary needs', including allergies, intolerances, or philosophical or religious dietary restrictions. We also included people with environmental sensitivities and allergies (e.g. hayfever, perfume allergy) in this category.
- 'Mental health issues', including everything from 'Severe introversion' to 'Anxiety, OCD, PTSD'.

Three-quarters of our participants mentioned experiencing at least one health factor. Many experienced more than one.

Lifestyle factors

- 'Financial situation', including income and work commitments.
- 'Travel challenges', including ability to drive, distance to travel, and some who simply said 'travel difficulties'.
- 'Parent or carer'.

Almost half of our participants mentioned experiencing at least one lifestyle factor, and there was a lot of overlap between categories. At least half of the people who mentioned one lifestyle factor mentioned *more* than one lifestyle factor.

Identity factors

- 'LGBTQIA+'.
- 'Ethnicity & Religion', including ethnicity, religion, cultural background, and status as a person of colour.

We had a comparatively small number of participants who mentioned identity factors. That doesn't mean there are a small number in the SCA; it simply means that either people in these groups didn't fill out the survey, or that when they did fill out the survey, they didn't decide to mention it.

How do we know?

The information in this article comes from an online survey run in December 2019 – January 2020, with 264 participants. (For a survey like this, that's a pretty big number – equivalent to approximately 1 person for every 200 SCA participants across the Known World.) The people who answered the survey were distributed in age, time in the SCA, and location, with 15 kingdoms represented.

We wanted to understand how to make activities more accessible and inclusive, but we also wanted to hear from people who might not think the word 'accessibility' applied to them. So, throughout the survey we used the words 'welcoming' or 'comfortable', and when asking people to tell us about themselves, we simply asked: 'What factors affect your SCA experience that may not affect other members of your community?'

What questions did we ask?

This article is based on responses to four of the questions we asked:

- At SCA activities you've attended, what has made you feel more comfortable?
- At SCA activities you've attended, what has made you feel UNcomfortable?
- What makes an activity so uncomfortable that you would avoid attending/participating?
- What could organisers do to make attending/participating in activities more comfortable for you and people with similar needs?

These questions were designed to help us understand what a welcoming event looks like to different people (no event can be welcoming to everyone), what problems people face, and what actions stewards could take to address that. A different part of the survey asked about SCA participation overall.

What are the limitations of our results?

We asked people to tell us what they thought in their own words. That means that we can look for trends in what they said, but we can't assume anything from what they *didn't* say. A person who would have picked the option 'more places to sit down' out of a multiple-choice list may not have mentioned it to us because they simply didn't think of it at the time.

We had a large number of participants, but they weren't selected in a systematic, randomised way, so we can't assume that the statistics in this group carry over to the SCA population as a whole. However, their experiences *are* definitely present in our community, and if a lot of people are saying the same thing, that tells us something.

Final thoughts

This article is the result of a substantial research project, which gave over 250 SCAdians the opportunity to make their voices heard. They told us about what helps them and what gets in their way, what makes them comfortable, and what makes attending unsafe or impossible. We learned that there are many things event stewards can do to support members of our community - the most powerful of which is simply providing event information in advance. Stewards and their teams already work hard to create enjoyable events for all, and our participants acknowledged the value of that work - none of the ideas in this article are new. We don't want to place more demands on stewards, and this article is not a checklist of ideas that should *all* be implemented at once. Instead, we hope that stewards can use this information to decide what to add next, when they're trying to make their event more accessible.

What makes SCA spaces welcoming goes beyond stewards; we all have a part to play. In our research, we learned that beyond the physical and organisational characteristics of an event, what matters most is our community culture. Our attitudes and behaviour are what make people feel comfortable and welcome. The attitudes and behaviour of people in our community can also have a strong *negative* impact. When we think about accessibility and inclusion, we can't talk only about events, or only about stewards. We need to discuss how we, as a community, will keep putting our principles of courtesy and hospitality into practice.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Dr Louise Stone (non-SCA) for advice on survey design and research ethics, Lady Skjaldadis Bragadóttir for support in distributing and communicating about the survey, and Mistress Eleanor Catlyng for assistance with data analysis.

Author Bio

This research project was run by Lady Gwen verch David, of the Barony of Politarchopolis in the Kingdom of Lochac. She is the protégé of Boyarinya Tatianitska Ivanova Iaroslavna, and is a member of the LGBT+ community with personal experience of mental illness and chronic physical illness.