Regional Report

Region Name: **Riga Planning Region – PP8**

Date of Report: **28ᵗʰ of February, 2025**

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Introduction

The regional report focused on the accessibility of cultural and natural resources for people with disabilities and varied needs in the Riga Planning Region. The purpose of the document is to assess the current state of accessibility. The report investigates existing policies, legislative frameworks, and the actual accessibility of cultural and natural resources in the Riga Planning Region. This includes identifying barriers and challenges. The report also gathers and analyses data.

The report uses desk research, regional surveys, and focus group discussions to collect data on accessibility needs, attitudes, and perspectives from various stakeholders, including policymakers, organizations, and people with disabilities. Based on the collected data, the report aims to pinpoint specific gaps in accessibility and areas where improvements are needed. The report offers strategies, initiatives, and policy recommendations for overcoming identified barriers and enhancing accessibility in the region.

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1. Results from Desk research

Investigate the existing policies and legislative frameworks (regional and/or national) on the accessibility of cultural and natural resources for people with disabilities and varied needs. The focus should be on the objectives and strategies of these policies.

According to the VDEAK1[1] (State Medical Commission for Assessment of Health Condition and Working Ability) data, as of September 2023, there were a total of 202,800 people with disabilities in Latvia. Among them, 26.4 thousand have mental and behavioural disorders, 39.9 thousand have mobility impairments, 9.9 thousand have visual impairments, 2.2 thousand have hearing impairments, and a total of 126.6 thousand have other types of impairments. In the Riga region, the number of people with disabilities in 2023 was 75,553, which is approximately 9% of the population.

Adult persons from the age of 18 are defined as disabled in the following degrees of severity[2]: disability group I – very severe disability; group II – severe disability; group III – moderate disability. Out of the 202.8 thousand people with disabilities, 86.4 thousand have been assigned the 3rd disability group, 91.3 thousand the 2nd disability group, and 28.3 thousand the 1st disability group.

A different situation is observed across various target groups when categorized by age. In the group of people with mental and behavioural disorders, 36% are under the age of 44, while in other target groups, individuals aged 45 and older are significantly more represented. In the group of people with mobility impairments, 40% are over the age of 65, and an additional 35% are between the ages of 55 and 64.

Up to 40% of Latvia's population feels the need for accessible environments, including people with disabilities, the older individuals, and families with children, pregnant women, and those with temporary mobility impairments.

Here is a concise summary of research on accessibility and inclusivity in the cultural sector in Latvia from 2020 to 2023. Following studies collectively provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges and progress in making cultural activities more accessible in Latvia.

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[1] Latvian open data source: https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/group/6c65a496-cf64-4af1-8259-fcb73cc180fb?organization=veselibas-undarbspeju-ekspertizes-arstu-valsts-komisija

[2] The procedure for determining disability is regulated by the Disability Law and the Cabinet of Ministers Regulation of December 23, 2014 No. 805 "Provisions for determining foreseeable disability, disability and loss of working capacity and issuing a document certifying disability".

1. **Cultural Consumption and Participation Impact Study (2020)**

   - *Focus:* Accessibility of cultural services for individuals with functional limitations.
   - *Conclusions:* The study analyzed key accessibility issues from the perspective of people with special needs, highlighting the need to improve infrastructure and accessibility solutions.

2. **Cultural Accessibility in Latvia: Factors and Possible Solutions (2020)**

   - *Focus:* Barriers to cultural accessibility and the most effective solutions.
   - *Conclusions:* This study provided in-depth information on the barriers to cultural accessibility and identified best practice examples.

3. **Mapping of the Current Situation of Social Inclusion for Youth with Limited Opportunities (2022)**

   - *Focus:* Barriers to social inclusion for youth with limited opportunities.
   - *Conclusions:* The mapping offered an overview of statistical indicators for the target group and analyzed barriers to social inclusion.

4. **Cultural Activities Barometer (2022)**

   - *Focus:* Regional and social accessibility of cultural services.
   - *Conclusions:* The study provided a detailed description of the barriers to cultural accessibility and inclusivity and proposed potential solutions.

5. **Study on the Accessibility of Cultural Infrastructure and Services in Latvia (2024)**

   - *Note:* This study has been used in preparing this desk research.

1.1 Normative Framework

Riga City:
- *Current Status:* Riga has not yet developed an accessibility strategy, and the current city development strategy does not address accessibility issues.
- *Regional Planning:* The Riga Planning Region Development Program 2022-2027 includes an action plan where priorities R 1.1.5 and R 1.4.4 emphasize the creation and improvement of accessible environments and services.

National Level in Latvia:
- *Disability Law:* The purpose of this law is to prevent or reduce the risk of disability for persons with a foreseeable disability and to mitigate the consequences of disability for persons with disabilities.
- *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:* Latvia has ratified this convention, committing to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities.

● *Construction Law:* This law mandates the necessity of an accessible environment in new constructions. However, the reconstruction and maintenance of cultural monuments are governed by the "Law on the Protection of Cultural Monuments."

Name	Short summary	Commisioned by	Developed by
Plan for Promoting Equal Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities 2024–2027	This plan outlines strategies to enhance equal opportunities for persons with disabilities over the next four years.	Ministry of Welfare	
Accessibility Guidelines for Cultural Organizations and Event Organizers (2024)	These guidelines provide specific advice for museums, theaters, cinemas, concert organizations, festivals, cultural tourism entities, and other cultural organizations on becoming more accessible to various visitor groups with functional impairments. The guidelines adhere to the Welfare Ministry's classification, which includes individuals with visual, hearing, mobility, and mental disabilities.	Ministry of Culture	Latvian Academy of Culture
Guidelines for Creating Accessible Audio Descriptions and Subtitles (2023)	These guidelines, titled "Audio Recording Against Exclusion," offer instructions for creating audio descriptions for people with visual impairments and descriptive subtitles for those with hearing impairments.	ERASMUS+	Latvian Academy of Culture
Guidelines for Enhancing Accessibility in Performing Arts and Culture (2021)	These guidelines are intended for cultural organizations and include solutions for physical, informational, social, and economic accessibility. They cover the needs of people with mobility, visual, hearing, and mental impairments and provide useful additional information sources.		Latvian New Theatre Institute

Handbook on Making Tourism Services More Accessible for People with Mental Disabilities (2022)	This handbook is designed for tourism service providers and includes information on physical, social, informational, and economic accessibility solutions for individuals with mental disabilities. It also offers a self-assessment tool for accessibility, examples of best practices, and useful additional information sources.		A collective of experts.

Guidelines and Regulatory Documents:
- ***Environmental Accessibility Guidelines:*** These guidelines are intended for architects, engineers, builders, construction managers, building owners, policymakers, and anyone interested in creating an accessible environment. They cover public buildings, spaces, and outdoor areas.

- **Key Regulatory Acts:**
  - **Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 143 (March 1, 2022):** "Cultural Policy Guidelines 2021-2027: 'Kultūrvalsts'".
  - **Cabinet of Ministers Order No. 616 (September 1, 2021):** "On Social Protection and Labor Market Policy Guidelines 2021–2027". Published in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* (No. 171, September 6, 2021).
  - **Disability Determination Law:** This law, along with Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 805 (December 23, 2014), governs the procedures for determining disability, including the issuance of documents certifying disability.
  - **Goods and Services Accessibility Law:** Published in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* (No. 62, March 28, 2023). This law will come into force on June 28, 2025.

1.2 Plans and Guidelines:
2. Regional-specific needs

In Latvia, people with disabilities represent one of the highest-risk groups facing insufficient social protection. In 2020, the proportion of people with disabilities at risk of poverty or social exclusion was 39.3%, one of the highest rates in the EU.

Public Support and Organizational Preparedness

- **Public Support for Inclusion:** According to a 2022 survey, only 38%[3] Latvians fully support the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in society, including

[3] Latvijas Fakti, 2022. Inhabitants' awareness and understanding of the deinstitutionalization process. Available: https://www.lm.gov.lv/lv/deinstitucionalizacija

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living outside of care institutions. An additional 32% somewhat support this, while 20% do not support it.

- **Organizational Readiness:** Although 85% of organizations offer personal assistance, only 20% have staff trained to work with people with various types of disabilities. Which indicates the need to convince organizations of the relevance of the necessary training, as well as to find solutions for providing training and exercises.

Accessibility Challenges

- **Physical Accessibility:** Solutions for people with visual and hearing impairments are the least implemented. Approximately 10% of organizations have introduced accessibility solutions, such as color-contrasting markings (11%), appropriate signage for people with intellectual disabilities (10%), tactile paving systems leading to entrances (9%), and informational pictograms (9%).

- **Event and Service Accessibility:** Even in organizations where the physical accessibility of spaces is rated positively, the accessibility of events and services is often rated poorly. For example, only 39% of organizations that rated their spaces as accessible for people with hearing impairments also rated their events as accessible. The figures are slightly better for those with visual impairments (50%) and intellectual disabilities (60%), while organizations catering to those with mobility impairments had a higher positive assessment at 82%[4].

Barriers to Cultural Participation

- **Physical Accessibility:** This includes accessibility of geographical locations, transportation, buildings, and rooms.

- **Financial Accessibility:** Refers to the ability to afford tickets or services, as well as covering other costs associated with cultural participation.

- **Social Accessibility:** Involves overcoming social barriers such as societal intolerance or misunderstanding, low self-esteem, and fear of integration.

- **Information Accessibility:** Involves providing accessible information for specific target groups and details about accessibility.

Organizational Self-Assessment

- **Cultural Infrastructure Accessibility:** Nearly two-thirds of cultural and creative sector representatives believe their buildings and spaces are accessible to people with intellectual, hearing, and mobility impairments. However, only 45% think their spaces

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[4] Study on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and services. Latvian Academy of culture. 2024.

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are accessible to people with visual impairments.

- **Implementation of Accessibility Solutions:** On average, cultural organizations have implemented only 3.5 out of 15 possible accessibility solutions.

Information Provision Gaps

- **Online Information:** Research[5] indicates that cultural organizations often fail to provide comprehensive information about the accessibility of their spaces and events, even when these are accessible to specific groups. Only 18% of respondents reported having easily understandable accessibility information on their websites, and just 10% provide event-specific accessibility details. Furthermore, only 14% of websites are designed to be suitable for people with intellectual disabilities by following easy-to-read language principles.

3. Implementation methods and funding mechanisms: Discuss the methods used for implementing accessibility policies and the associated funding mechanisms that support these efforts.

In a survey of cultural organization representatives, 66% highlighted a lack of funding for infrastructure adaptations, while 53% noted insufficient funds for adapting events. The most significant investments are required for building and space accessibility solutions, surrounding areas, and creating accessible websites [6].

Key Findings and Strategic Insights:

- **Funding Challenges:** A significant portion of cultural organizations struggle with funding issues, particularly regarding event adaptations (53%) and infrastructure modifications (6%). Major investments are necessary to improve the accessibility of buildings, facilities, and websites.

- **Importance of Education and Expert Involvement:** Analysis of projects supported by the VKKF's "KultūrELPA" program suggests the importance of educating project implementers before providing funding and involving representatives of target groups as experts and consultants. This indicates that developing knowledge and understanding should precede financial support.

- **Impact of Interreg-Funded Projects:** Projects financed by Interreg at various levels have notably improved the accessibility of natural and cultural sites by enhancing buildings, infrastructure, and services. A prominent example is **Mapeirons.eu**, a

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[5] Study on accessibility of cultural infrastructure and services. Latvian Academy of culture. 2024.

[6] Study on the Accessibility of Cultural Infrastructure and Services in Latvia (2024)

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website [7] that provides accurate and verified information about accessible locations for people with disabilities, seniors, and parents with young children. This initiative represents the first large-scale database of accessible sites in Latvia, as well as in the Baltic and European regions.

- National-Level Projects (2022-2026): A significant national project is underway, titled "Public Service and Employment Accessibility Promotion Measures for People with Functional Impairments". The first phase, "Ensuring the Accessibility of State and Municipal Buildings," has a substantial budget of EUR 10,181,051, reflecting the scale and importance of this initiative within Latvia.

- Currently, there is a draft of Cabinet of Ministers regulations under review, focused on adapting the design of cultural services to meet the needs of people with various needs. The planned support budget for this initiative is approximately EUR 10 million.

4. Gaps and areas for improvement

Identify and discuss gaps and areas needing improvement. Use relevant literature, existing assessments, and/or monitoring mechanisms as references.

In discussing the implementation of national cultural policy to improve accessibility in culture, the most successful example is indicated the 2021 State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF) "KultūrELPA" program, one of whose focus areas was the promotion of cultural accessibility. Experts emphasize the necessity of embedding accessibility criteria in every project competition guideline, both within VKKF and local municipalities, drawing parallels to the principles embedded in European Union program competitions, where it is prohibited to create new barriers with EU funds.

Regarding physical accessibility, a key issue for all groups is ensuring that accessibility experts are involved during the design and planning stages of newly constructed or renovated buildings and public spaces. Research participants note that there is a desire for more proactive initiatives within the cultural sector, especially in cultural buildings currently undergoing renovation. For example, of the three theaters recently reconstructed (Latvian Puppet Theatre, New Riga Theatre, Valmiera Drama Theatre), consultations with accessibility experts occurred in only one case, and even then, not systematically.

Respondents emphasize that while there has been progress in understanding and implementing physical accessibility solutions, the most challenging aspect is changing societal attitudes. Experiences shared by participants indicate that children tend to have fewer prejudices than adults, but overall, changing societal attitudes is the slowest process in

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[7] https://mapeirons.eu/?pn=1

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improving accessibility.

The collected recommendations for the Ministry of Culture (KM), largely responsible for the accessibility of cultural objects and services, are as follows:

1. **Lead by Example**: KM should set an example in implementing accessibility solutions. Representatives of NGOs highlight that the KM building itself is currently inaccessible for wheelchair users, making it difficult to discuss the representation of the target group's interests in KM working groups if their representatives cannot join these groups in person.

2. **Proactive Policy Development**: KM should actively develop sectoral policies and implement uniform solutions that all subordinate institutions must follow (e.g., overseeing unified discount policies for people with functional impairments and their assistants).

3. **Delegate Functions to NGOs**: KM should consider delegating functions to the NGO sector, particularly those related to organizing training or raising awareness about accessibility issues, with appropriate state funding allocated for these activities.

4. **State-Level Recognition**: KM is advised to establish a national award for cultural organizations that have successfully implemented accessibility solutions, thereby emphasizing the importance of positive motivation.

Furthermore, the responsibility of the Riga City Council in improving accessibility is also highlighted. The council and its various departments are currently cited as among the least responsive institutions, often hindering the implementation of practical accessibility solutions. Issues are frequently passed between departments without reaching a timely resolution.

For the State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF), which is the largest financier of cultural projects in the non-governmental sector, it is suggested that key cultural accessibility criteria be incorporated into project competition guidelines. Additionally, there is a recommendation to consider reactivating the "KultūrELPA" program as a specific support program for implementing accessibility solutions in cultural organizations.

Research respondents express hope that, over time, cultural accessibility and understanding will improve, leading to all public events and buildings being accessible and inclusive by default.

2. Regional Survey Results

The Riga Planning Region conducted field research through the use of surveys, in September and October 2024, to identify and assess regional needs, attitudes and perspectives regarding the accessibility of cultural and natural resources for people with disabilities and varied needs in Riga and surrounding municipalities. Three online survey questionnaires were used for data collection, each targeting distinct groups: policymakers and public authorities, organizations and stakeholders, and people with disabilities and varied needs. The total number of respondents were 60 persons.

1st Survey: Policymakers and public authorities, focusing on the current state of the policy-making process and frameworks
Taking into account the small scale of Latvia, in the first survey, we addressed not only the local government employees and policy makers of the region, but also the three ministries responsible for creating accessibility policy: the Ministry of Welfare, the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Smart Administration and Regional Development. We also addressed the heads of the committees of the Saeima (Latvian Parliament) under whose direct authority are issues of accessibility. Among the survey participants 40% were from Riga, 60% from the municipalities surrounding Riga, which can be considered a good distribution. We received answers from 20 respondents in the 1st survey.
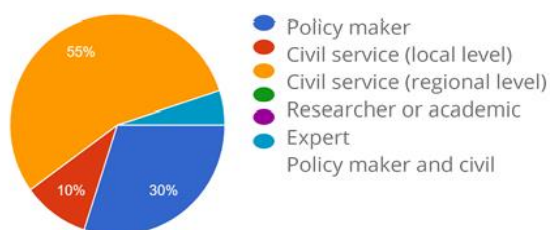

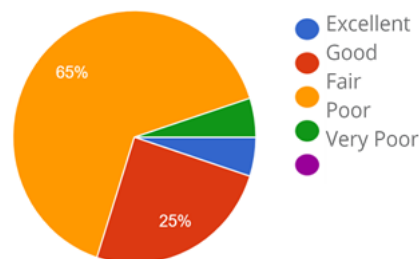Figure 1 primary role of respondent

Figure 2 rate the overall accessibility of cultural and natural resources

As seen in Figure 2 the majority of respondents rate accessibility of cultural resources for individuals with disabilities and varied needs as fair (65%), only 25% as good, 5% as excellent (1 answer) and 5% as weak. When asked which cultural or natural resources are most accessible to people with disabilities and varied needs, the respondents indicated that libraries (65% of respondents), national parks (60%), followed by museums/galleries (40%), concert halls (25%) , theaters (20%). In the option "Other" respondents had also typed social centers, cultural centers and one specific cultural center in the Riga region (all 5%) as most accessible in the region.
Indicating the main barriers to accessibility of the region, the physical barriers (e.g., stairs, narrow doorways, no elevator) were mentioned in 79% of cases, followed by no translations into sign language in 58% of responses, lack of sensory accommodations (e.g., audio guides, tactile exhibits) in 53%, Unsuitable website/apps in 47%, economic barriers (e.g ticket or travel costs) seemed important to 31% of respondents. In the option "Other" 5% mentioned other premises in the above-mentioned objects, that are used for secondary services as catering, wardrobes, etc.

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The strengths and weaknesses of existing policies supporting accessibility for people with disabilities and varied needs in the region.
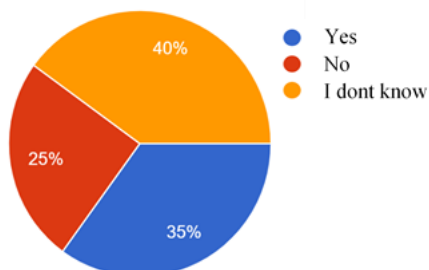

Figure 3 Is policy formulated for the region?

Concerning the question whether a policy has been developed in the region that supports the accessibility of cultural and natural resources for persons with disabilities and different needs, the surspiring fact was that 40% of respondents did not know if such a policy existed (Figure 3). 35% answered that such a policy exists, while 25% were convinced that it does not exist. Despite the fact that 65% responded that such a policy did not exist or that they were not aware of its existence, representatives of state and local governments gave their opinion on the timing of the development of such a policy (Figure 4). I assume that a large proportion of answers (50%) about the fact that the policy is at least 4 years old is related to this ignorance about the existence of the policy.
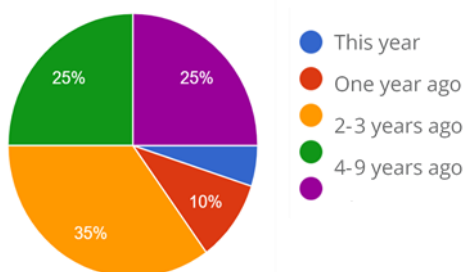

Figure 4 When policy for the region is formulated.

More than half of the survey respondents did not know whether the existing policies reviewed and updated, 5% answered that it never happens, 25% think it happens every 2-3 years, 10% chose the answear every 4-5 years, but most respondents

(45%) could just guess that it happens rare. However, when asked about the possible research/evaluation of the effectiveness of current policies only 40% answered affirmatively, 10% think the exact opposite and 50% or half of people involved in the survey do not know. Of those who answered affirmatively, in Figure 5, it can be seen that 37.5% consider this policy ineffective, the same number consider it effective, while 20% admit that this policy is neutral
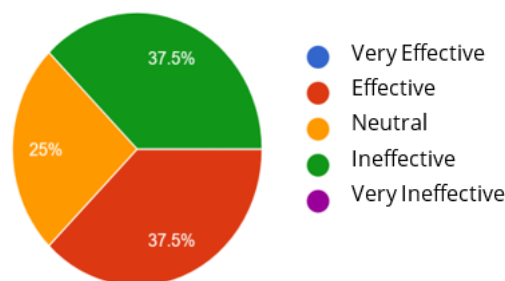

Figure 5 Effectiveness of current policies in supporting the accessibility

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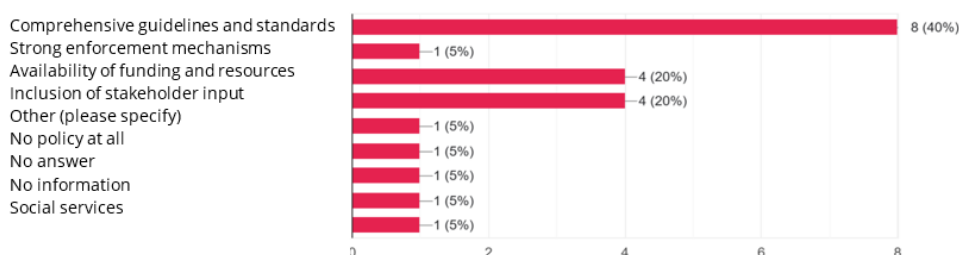
Figure 6 Strengths of current accessibility policies in your region

Regarding the strengths of current accessibility policies, which can be seen in Figure 6, 40% indicate comprehensive guidelines and standards, 20% indicate both the Availability of funding and resources and the inclusion of stakeholder input, 5% indicate strong enforcement mechanisms, while 20% indicate that such a policy has not been developed, they have no information or it is difficult to answer this question.
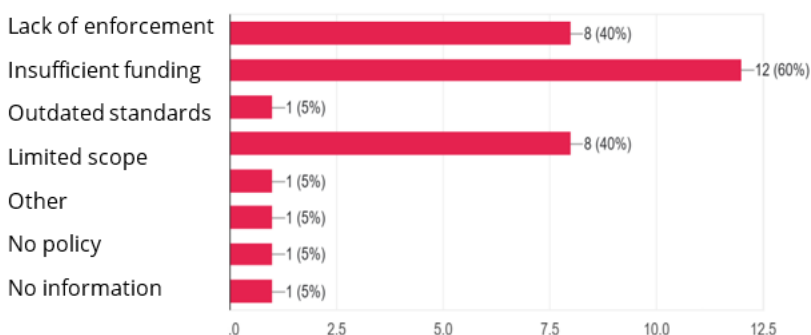

Figure 7 Weaknesses of current accessibility policies in your region

Looking at the opinion of the respondents about the weak sides of the policy, the Insufficient funding (60%) and lack of enforcement and limited scope (both 40%) should be highlighted, 20% of the respondents found it difficult to answer about the existing political framework.

When asked to what extent do existing policies address the needs of individuals with different types of disabilities, most people give an aswear "Neutral" to all types of disabilities. The second most popular answer is "Poorly", except in cases of mobility and visual disabilities, the more popular or equal answear is "Well". Some respondents have also marked "Very weak" next to sensory, hearing and hearing disabilities. No one chose "Very well".

Concerning the support from decision-makers and public authorities towards activities of organizations and stakeholders operating in the fields of culture, leisure, and tourism most respondents think that is Conducting research and preparing reports (25%), Organization of training and workshops for staff (25%), Organization of consultations with experts (20%) and Organization of integrating meetings of accessibility coordinators and experts (15%).

About the involvement of individuals with disabilities and varied needs in the creation and review of accessibility policies in our region most respondents (60%) think they are involved, 20% think that it is Neutral and 10% think they are not very involved. To conclude this section as the top reason and main challenge in implementing accessibility policies in Riga Planning Region by 80% of respondents are seen budget constraints, followed by 50% mentioning lack of expertise. 20% of representatives of policymakers and public authorities also see the complexity of regulations.

Therefore, one could conclude this section by saying that the obstacles are mostly objective and due to real circumstances and not to people's attitude, such as lack of empathy/awareness or resistance to change.

2nd survey: Organisations and stakeholders in cultural heritage sites, focusing on the implementation of policy aspects and provisions.

In this section, the task was to address the widest and most diverse number of respondents. We addressed the invitation to participate in the survey both to those natural and cultural objects in Riga and Pierīga that are known for their accessibility solutions, such as the Latvian National Art Museum, the Puppet Theater and others, as well as to those that currently stand out with poor accessibility and are looking for the necessary solutions.

In this survey, we received 19 responses, 10 people were from Riga and the rest from the municipalities surrounding Riga.
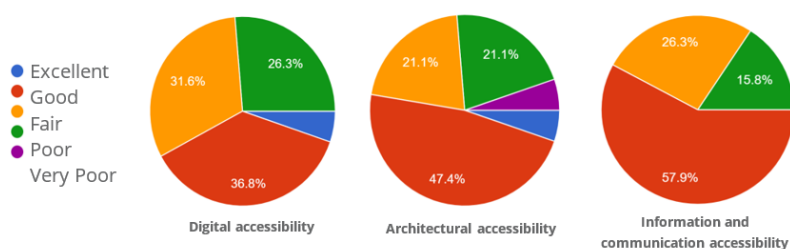

Figure 8 the current state of accessibility at the organization/institutions.

Figure 8 shows that the representatives of the institutions evaluate the types of accessibility in different ways, the situation with the accessibility of information and communication is relatively better evaluated and the architectural and digital accessibility is evaluated worse.

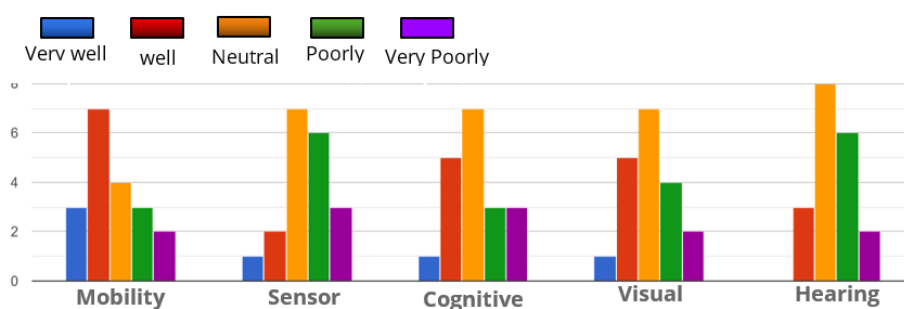**The implementation aspects of existing policy frameworks.**

Figure 9 how well are the specific needs of individuals with different types of disabilities currently

In the answers about the effectiveness of the existing policy, 53% of respondents stated that it is neutral, 21% stated that it is effective and 26% that it is ineffective.

As seen in Figure 10 as the three main reasons for ineffectiveness of such policies is lack of funding mentioned in 95% of answers, lack of coordination and clear guidances (63%) and lack of knowledge and skills (32%).
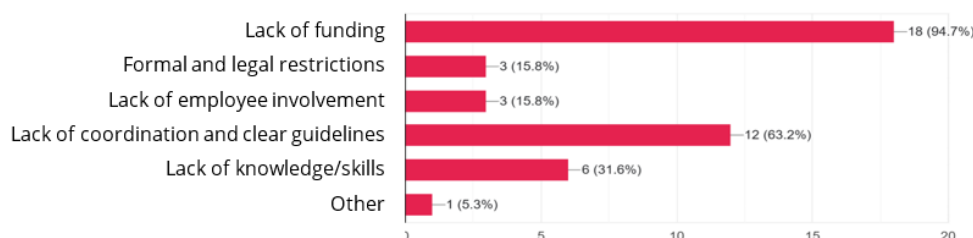

Figure 10. Main barriers and challenges to implementing a regional policy

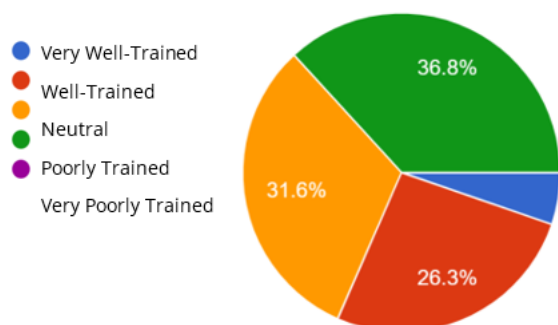**The awareness and learning levels of staff in cultural sights.**

Figure 11 How well-trained is the staff.

In the question of what kind of training cultural and natural resources employees receive on accessibility issues, 42% of respondents indicated Customer service training, 26% - Technical training on accessibility equipment and Emergency response training, while 15% noted Disability awareness training. Interestingly, almost 32% of respondents have not received any training. Figure 11 shows that only 6% consider themselves as very well trained, 26% as well trained, and approximately 69 % as neutral or poorly trained.

3. Survey: for persons with different needs and their assistants;

We received 21 responses to this survey
The specific needs of individuals with disabilities and varied needs.
In the survey, 19% of the respondents were from the city of Riga, the rest from the counties and cities of the Riga region. 43% of the respondents were Individuals with disabilities and/or varied needs and 57% were family members or caregivers of an individual with disabilities and/or varied needs. Looking through the prism of the nature of disability/varied needs, 53% of respondents had mobility needs, 53% Cognitive needs, 5% visual needs and one respondent did not want to specify.

In response to the question, how familiar are you with the policies regarding accessibility of cultural resources in your region, about 33% of respondents do not know or rather do not know the policy of the region, while 57% know it or know it very well.

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As seen in Figure 12 for all groups of objects, the respondents indicated the need for improvements, however, museums and galleries are rated as slightly less important, while national and public parks are the ones where various levels of improvement are the most necessary.
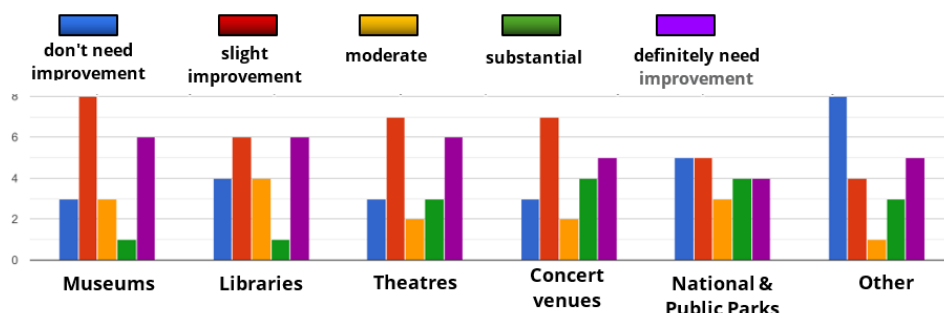

Figure 12. Types of cultural and natural resources are most in need of accessibility improvements in Your region

The perceived barriers and challenges.

Describing how often respondents face obstacles when accessing natural and cultural objects, about 10% say that it happens always and 57% point out that it happens often, it happens sometimes or rarely, respectively 14% and 19% of respondents. Figure 13 represents the evaluation of the most important obstacles. 81% of respondents state that they are physical barriers, 52% are economic barriers, followed by lack of sensory accommodations with 28%, unsuitable websites and/or apps 24% and no translations into sign language 14%.
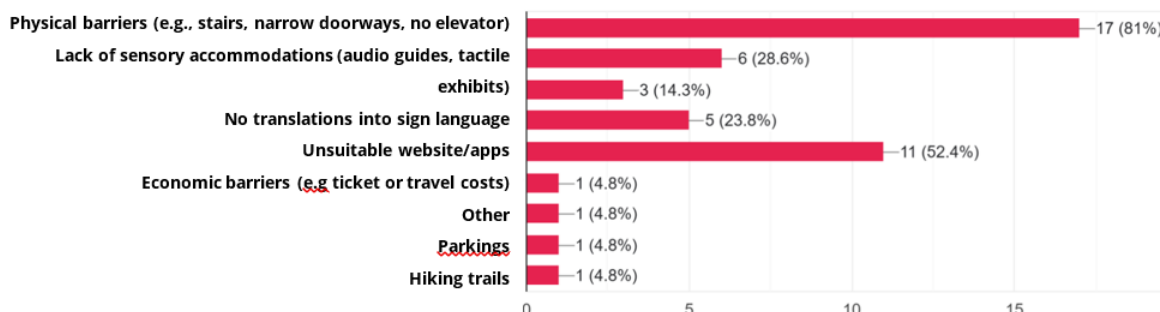

Figure 13. Most significant barriers faced by people with disabilities and varied needs

The implementation aspects of policy frameworks.

Evaluating the overall accessibility of natural and ultural objects in the region, almost 24% answer positively, 14% negatively and 62% that they are partially accessible to persons with disabilities. 91% of respondents indicate that they have not been involved in the creation and review of regional accessibility policies, 9%

Figure 14. Satisfaction with the current state of accessibility of cultural and natural resources
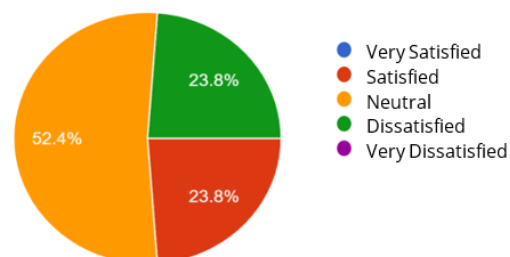
have had such experience. As can be seen in Figure 14 about 24% of the survey participants are satisfied with the level of accessibility to various natural and cultural objects in the region, they are also not satisfied, while a larger part, about 52%, is neutral towards this issue.

Conclusions

Although the question of accessibility to cultural and natural sites is framed differently for each group, a general comparison of respondents' attitudes toward accessibility can still be made. The responses indicate that employees of cultural and natural institutions are significantly more positive about the accessibility of their sites compared to civil servants and policymakers. People with different needs, as well as those close to them, tend to respond more critically to this issue.

Another noteworthy observation is the prioritization of specific accessibility barriers by each group. Policymakers, along with people with different needs, identify physical barriers as the most significant. In contrast, employees of cultural and natural institutions consider the lack of sign language translation to be the greatest obstacle, even though this issue is seen as less important by the target group respondents.

There also seems to be a missing question for the target group regarding how they assess the readiness and preparedness of employees at cultural and natural institutions to work with people with different needs. Including this question could allow for a comparison with the data on employees' preparedness, which indicates that most staff members are not adequately trained. The Ministry of Welfare has responded by providing suggestions for revising the questionnaire texts, signalling their attention to this issue.

The main challenges in implementing accessibility policies in the Riga Planning Region are largely objective, stemming from real constraints such as budget limitations, lack of expertise, and the complexity of regulations, rather than from people's attitudes, such as a lack of empathy, awareness, or resistance to change.

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3. Regional Review Meetings (Focus Groups) results

3.1 Description of the focus group methodology (e.g., duration and setting of sessions, participant demographics).

The ORC_2st regional project meeting utilized a focus group and moderated discussion methodology. The meeting took place on February 6, 2025, from 11:00 to 15:00 at The European House in Riga. It involved 13 participants from various organizations, including NGOs like "Apeirons," government departments like the Department of Nature Conservation, and cultural institutions like the Latvian National Botanical Garden and the Latvian National Art Museum.

The meeting was divided into segments: a presentation of regional survey results followed by a discussion among stakeholders, and a workshop where participants discussed mapped regional good practices and developed future good practices.

3.2 Summary of main points of discussion from each section of the focus group.

The first segment focused on the presentation of regional survey results of three target groups, followed by a discussion among stakeholders to complement the survey findings and deepen understanding of regional dynamics. Survey terminology (e.g., "sensory skills") needed clarification. The meaning of "accessibility" in the context of cultural and natural resources was questioned (availability vs. actual access and usability). Contradictory responses in survey assessments of necessary improvements were noted. Concerns about the representativeness of the surveys due to the small number of respondents were raised. The need for public education on accessibility topics and terminology was highlighted.

The second segment was organized as a workshop where participants discussed the already mapped-out regional good practices by Riga Planning Region. The importance of implementing accessibility policies, not just having them in place, was emphasized. Cultural institutions expect the state to organize and direct training for their employees on working with people with disabilities. Finances are crucial for promoting inclusivity and adapting environments for different types of disabilities. Changing mindsets and raising awareness of accessibility obstacles is an important but slow process. While the need for accessibility solutions in cultural institutions is generally accepted, challenges remain with historic buildings that are inherently inaccessible.

Participants then worked in two different groups to develop two separate possible good practices for the future. One idea was an "Accessible Tourism Products Hackathon" to create a complex hospitality offer including hospitality and accessibility solutions. Another concept was an event called "The Future Library" to discuss library accessibility for people with hearing impairments, involving lecturers with hearing impairments and aiming to find practical solutions.

3.3 Analysis of the discussions, highlighting areas of consensus, divergent views, and notable quotes from the participants.

Additional comments included questioning the survey methodology and suggesting improvements, such as using more representative data, and noting that the focus group could have been broader and more diverse. There was also a need to improve the questions used in surveys, and that many things need to be improved for culture to become truly accessible to people with disabilities. Accessibility of cultural resources will be verified in the summer.

Further discussion acknowledged the importance of addressing accessibility issues at all levels and in various formats. Cooperation and information exchange with target groups (people with various functional impairments) is necessary. The meeting generated various thoughts and ideas on how to improve work in participating institutions. Participants found it valuable to learn about the study's results and evaluate their usefulness in analyzing their services. The meeting facilitated the exchange of experiences and the development of new ideas. The need to seek funding for implementing improvements was identified, and there were suggestions to test ideas in practice.

4. Recommendations/Suggestions for the Region

Based on survey and focus group findings, recommend strategies to overcome identified barriers and weaknesses.

4.1 General Strategies:

- *Enhance Education and Expertise:* Provide training and workshops for staff in cultural and natural institutions on working with people with disabilities. This includes customer service training, technical training on accessibility equipment, emergency response training, and disability awareness training.
- *Improve Coordination and Guidance:* Establish clearer guidelines and improve coordination among different departments and organizations. Ensure policies are effectively implemented and enforced.
- *Raise Public Awareness:* Conduct public education campaigns to improve understanding of accessibility issues and terminology. Promote empathy and inclusivity in society.
- *Involve People with Disabilities:* Actively involve individuals with disabilities and varied needs in the creation and review of accessibility policies. Ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met.
- *Lead by Example:* Government bodies and leading institutions should implement accessibility solutions in their own buildings and services. This sets an example for other organizations to follow.
- *Establish Recognition and Awards:* Create national awards for cultural organizations that have successfully implemented accessibility solutions. This can provide positive motivation and encourage further progress.

4.2 Specific Strategies:

- *Address Physical Barriers:* Prioritize the removal of physical barriers such as stairs, narrow doorways, and lack of elevators. Implement solutions like tactile paving systems, color-contrasting markings, and accessible signage.
- *Improve Information Accessibility:* Provide translations into sign language, audio guides, tactile exhibits, and easy-to-read information on websites and apps. Ensure event-specific accessibility details are readily available.
- *Enhance Digital Accessibility:* Improve website and app accessibility by following easy-to-read language principles and providing clear information about accessibility features.
- *Promote Accessible Tourism:* Develop accessible tourism products and services, including hospitality and accessibility solutions. Create databases of accessible locations and promote them to target audiences.
- *Improve Library Accessibility:* Organize events and discussions focused on library accessibility for people with hearing impairments, involving lecturers with hearing impairments to find practical solutions.

4.3 Recommendations for Different Stakeholders:

Ministry of Culture:

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- Set an example by implementing accessibility solutions in its own building.
- Actively develop sectoral policies and implement uniform solutions.
- Delegate functions to NGOs for training and awareness-raising.
- Establish a national award for accessible cultural organizations.

Riga City Council:
- Improve responsiveness and coordination among departments.
- *Ensure timely resolution of accessibility issues.*

State Culture Capital Foundation (SCCF):
- Incorporate key cultural accessibility criteria into project competition guidelines.
- Consider reactivating the "KultūrELPA" program for accessibility solutions.

4.4 Propose initiatives or policies to address the specific unmet needs highlighted through the assessment process.

Initiatives:
- *Accessible Tourism Products Hackathon:* A collaborative event to develop comprehensive hospitality packages that include both standard tourist amenities and tailored accessibility solutions. This could involve technology developers, tourism providers, and accessibility experts.
- *The Future Library:* An event focused on improving library accessibility for people with hearing impairments. The event would include discussions, workshops, and potentially feature lecturers with hearing impairments to brainstorm and implement practical solutions.
- *Accessibility Audits and Consultations:* Offer free or subsidized accessibility audits for cultural organizations, conducted by certified accessibility experts. Follow up with consultations to help organizations implement the recommended improvements.
- *Community Accessibility Workshops:* Organize workshops for community members, including people with disabilities, to identify local accessibility barriers and develop community-led solutions.
- *Digital Accessibility Hub:* Create an online resource center that provides guidelines, tools, and best practices for creating accessible websites, apps, and digital content.
- *Accessibility Ambassador Program:* Recruit and train individuals with disabilities to serve as ambassadors who promote accessibility awareness and provide feedback on the accessibility of cultural and natural sites.
- *Intergenerational Accessibility Projects:* Develop projects that bring together different generations, including older adults and young people, to work on accessibility improvements in their communities.

Policies:
- *Mandatory Accessibility Training:* Implement policies that require all staff in cultural and natural institutions to undergo regular accessibility training, including disability awareness, customer service, and technical skills related to accessibility equipment.
- *Accessibility Standards for Funding:* Incorporate strict accessibility criteria into the guidelines for all public funding programs that support cultural and natural sites. This ensures that funded projects are accessible and inclusive.

- *Enforcement of Accessibility Regulations:* Strengthen enforcement mechanisms for existing accessibility laws and regulations. This could include regular inspections, fines for non-compliance, and a system for reporting accessibility violations.
- *Accessibility Impact Assessments:* Require all new cultural and natural site developments or renovations to undergo an accessibility impact assessment to ensure that the project meets accessibility standards.

4.5 Strategic recommendations for stakeholders to support the accessibility for people with disabilities and varied needs.

For Government Bodies (National and Local):
- *Develop and Implement Comprehensive Accessibility Strategies:* Create and enforce clear, actionable accessibility strategies at both national and local levels. These strategies should include specific targets, timelines, and evaluation mechanisms.
- *Increase Funding Allocation:* Significantly increase funding for accessibility initiatives, including infrastructure improvements, training programs, and public awareness campaigns. Earmark specific budgets for accessibility within relevant ministries and departments.
- *Strengthen Legislative Frameworks:* Review and update existing laws and regulations to ensure they align with international best practices, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Enforce these laws rigorously.
- *Promote Inter-Ministerial Coordination:* Foster better coordination and communication between different ministries and departments involved in accessibility, including those responsible for culture, social welfare, transportation, and construction.
- *Lead by Example:* Ensure that government buildings and services are fully accessible. This includes websites, digital platforms, and physical spaces. Public sector organizations should serve as models for other stakeholders.

For Cultural and Natural Institutions:
- Conduct Accessibility Audits: Regularly conduct comprehensive accessibility audits of facilities, services, and programs. Use these audits to identify areas for improvement and develop action plans.
- Provide Accessibility Training: Implement mandatory and ongoing accessibility training for all staff. This training should cover disability awareness, customer service, and technical skills related to accessibility equipment and technologies.
- Offer Diverse Accessibility Options: Provide a range of accessibility options to meet the needs of different individuals. This includes sign language interpretation, audio descriptions, tactile exhibits, easy-to-read materials, and accessible digital content.
- Improve Communication and Information: Ensure that information about accessibility features and services is readily available and easy to find. This includes websites, brochures, maps, and signage.
- Engage with the Disability Community: Establish ongoing dialogue and collaboration with people with disabilities and their representative organizations. Seek their input and feedback on accessibility initiatives.

For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Advocacy Groups:

- Advocate for Policy Changes: Advocate for stronger accessibility policies and increased funding from government bodies. Monitor the implementation of existing policies and hold decision-makers accountable.
- Provide Training and Resources: Offer training and resources to cultural and natural institutions on accessibility best practices. Develop and disseminate accessibility guidelines and toolkits.
- Raise Public Awareness: Conduct public awareness campaigns to educate the public about accessibility issues and promote inclusivity. Challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about disability.
- Support Individuals with Disabilities: Provide support and advocacy services to individuals with disabilities, helping them to access cultural and natural resources.

For All Stakeholders:

- Adopt Universal Design Principles: Embrace universal design principles in all projects and initiatives. This means designing environments and services that are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design.
- Promote Collaboration and Partnerships: Foster collaboration and partnerships between different stakeholders, including government bodies, cultural institutions, NGOs, and people with disabilities. Share knowledge, resources, and best practices.
- Collect and Analyze Data: Collect data on accessibility and use it to track progress, identify gaps, and inform decision-making. Monitor the effectiveness of accessibility initiatives and make adjustments as needed.
- Celebrate Successes: Recognize and celebrate successful accessibility initiatives. Highlight organizations and individuals who are making a difference in promoting inclusivity.

5. References

1. **Act on Disabilities [Invaliditātes likums]**

2. **Disability Determination Law:** This law, along with Cabinet of Ministers Regulation No. 805 (December 23, 2014), governs the procedures for determining disability, including the issuance of documents certifying disability.

3. Cabinet of Ministers Regulation **No. 143 March 1, 2022:** "Cultural Policy Guidelines 2021-2027: 'Kultūrvalsts'". Published in *Latvijas Vēstnesis.*

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8. Latvian open data sourcel: https://data.gov.lv/dati/lv/group/6c65a496-cf64-4af1-8259-fcb73cc180fb ?organization=veselibas-undarbspeju-ekspertizes-arstu-valsts-komisija

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