Belonging Forum

2026 Belonging Barometer

Disability Pride Month

1 July 2026

A foreword

Belonging, disability and everyday life

For more than two decades I've had the privilege of studying belonging and learning that it is never experienced in the abstract. It is shaped by who we are, how others see us, the places we can access, and whether we are heard by those in power.

That is why I wanted to publish this report – which draws from data in the 2026 Belonging Barometer, a nationally representative survey of 10,000 UK adults – to mark the great work of Disability Pride Month.

The month is an opportunity not only to celebrate the achievements, contributions and identities of people with disabilities, but also to reflect on what helps people be recognised, respected and included in everyday life. The report aims to build on this work to show, in clear population-level evidence, how disability shapes belonging and how that experience intersects with other parts of identity.

Disability Pride Month has powerfully championed this intersection, recognising that people's lives cannot be understood through a single lens. It has become an important moment for people with disabilities and their allies to come together as a community, share experiences, start conversations, celebrate resilience, and challenge negative attitudes. It is also an opportunity to understand what helps people be included, valued and connected within their communities.

The findings published in this report are stark and show why this approach is needed more than ever.

People with disabilities are almost twice as likely as people without disabilities to say they do not have a sense of belonging to their communities. People with disabilities who identify as LGBT+ are even more affected, with two in five reporting weak belonging. And more than a third (37%) of people with disabilities often feel lonely, compared with 25% of people without, rising to nearly half among disabled LGBT+ people.

Safety is central to this: the report finds women and younger people with disabilities feel especially unsafe. This is a significant barrier to social connection as safety defines whether people go out, use public spaces, meet others and participate in community life.

Yet this report is not only a story of exclusion. Running through the findings is resilience and connection.

Friendship satisfaction is almost the same among people with disabilities as those without. They are just as likely to know their neighbours well and are slightly more likely to help or interact with neighbours regularly.

The commonality raises important questions. Are people being drawn together by shared experiences of marginalisation? Are allies stepping up in meaningful ways? Are people finding community through disability identity, LGBT+ identity, faith, online spaces, neighbourhoods, work or activism?

The answer is likely all of the above. Belonging rarely comes from one place or person alone. It is built through many relationships, spaces and acts of recognition.

But resilience should never be mistaken for the absence of injustice.

People need to feel safe where they live. They need to feel welcome in parks, libraries, cafés, pubs, gyms, community centres and all the informal "third spaces" where social connections are formed. Yet people with disabilities are less likely to spend time in many of these places, and say physical health issues are the primary reason that stops them spending more time outside of work and home. Access, safety and belonging are connected.

Representation sits above all this. Our politics and institutions are always relevant, even when they feel distant. This report finds that very few people with disabilities believe the UK considers their wants and needs when making decisions. If this group, which makes up around a quarter of the UK population, does not feel heard by those with power, it becomes harder for them to fully belong.

The purpose of this report is not to tell us what to think, but to present the realities of the experiences of people with disabilities, and to invite us to consider the kind of society we want to build together.

Importantly, belonging is not an abstract idea or a distant aspiration. It is practical, tangible and actionable. It is shaped by the decisions we make about the places we create, the opportunities we provide, the voices we listen to and the barriers we choose to remove. Belonging can be strengthened or weakened through everyday actions, public policy, community life and institutional decisions.

Belonging is never just one thing. It is built through our connections to people, the places where we live, our sense of purpose, and whether we feel heard by those with power. For many years, I have spoken about belonging through these four dimensions. Together, this framework helps us understand not only whether people are connected, but why.

Through this report, we can see that disability shapes belonging across every dimension. It affects relationships and wellbeing. It affects access to neighbourhoods and shared spaces. It affects opportunities to contribute. And it affects whether people believe they are represented, heard and valued.

By measuring and understanding where belonging is strongest and where it comes under pressure, we can better understand both the barriers that remain and the sparks of hope that can be nurtured to burn brighter. In doing so, we can better identify the changes needed to help more people be connected, valued and included.

Because a society that cares about people with disabilities is better for everyone. A society that seeks to understand the experiences of people with multiple and intersecting identities, and actively creates the conditions for belonging, is a society that is truly striving to become better.

Kim Samuel

Founder and Chief Architect, Belonging Forum

Executive summary

The Belonging Barometer explores how people experience belonging across a variety of dimensions. This report focuses on the experiences of people with disabilities across the UK and examines the factors that strengthen or weaken their sense of belonging.

The findings reveal a nuanced picture. Many people with disabilities maintain strong friendships, support their neighbours and play an active role in their communities. Yet they are also more likely to experience loneliness, weaker connections to place, barriers to participation and lower levels of representation than those without a disability. These experiences are not felt equally across the disabled community, with some groups (including younger people, women, LGBT+ people and those who live alone) often reporting greater challenges.

By understanding where belonging is strongest and where it comes under pressure, we can better understand the changes needed to ensure everyone has the opportunity to participate, contribute and feel connected within society.

About the Belonging Barometer

The Belonging Barometer measures how people experience belonging across four dimensions:

People
relationships, friendships and social networks

Place
connection to neighbourhoods and shared spaces

Power
voice, representation and trust in political institutions

Purpose
opportunities to contribute and participate

The research was conducted by Opinium between 1–17 December 2025 with 10,001 UK adults aged 18+. The sample is nationally and politically representative of the UK population.

People

Relationships, wellbeing and belonging

Belonging starts with relationships

This report finds that people with disabilities report weaker overall levels of belonging than those without a disability.

People with disabilities are almost twice as likely as people without disabilities to say they do not have a sense of belonging to their communities (34% vs 18%). This gap widens further among people with disabilities who are part of the LGBT+ community, where two in five (40%) report weak belonging.

> **Two in five people with disabilities who report being LGBT+ do not feel a sense of belonging**

Other demographics within the disabled community that report weak levels of belonging include renters (40%), people who do not belong to a religion (41%) and people who live alone (also 41%).

However, disability does not appear to weaken everyday relationships. Levels of friendship satisfaction are similar between people with and without disabilities (67% vs 69%), and the number of close friendships reported is broadly comparable. However, levels of friendship satisfaction differ across age groups. Although younger people with disabilities are not outright dissatisfied with the quality of their friendships, older people with disabilities are more likely to report being satisfied with the quality of their friendships (67% of 55-64 year-olds with disabilities and 76% of over 65 year-olds with disabilities).

People without disabilities tend to report higher levels of friendship satisfaction across all age groups. Yet, they show a similar pattern where older people without disabilities are more satisfied (74% of 55-64 year-olds without disabilities and 78% of those over 65 without disabilities) with the level of their friendships than younger people without disabilities (66% of 18-24 year-olds without disabilities). People with disabilities who are religious also have higher levels of satisfaction with the quality of their friendships (70%).

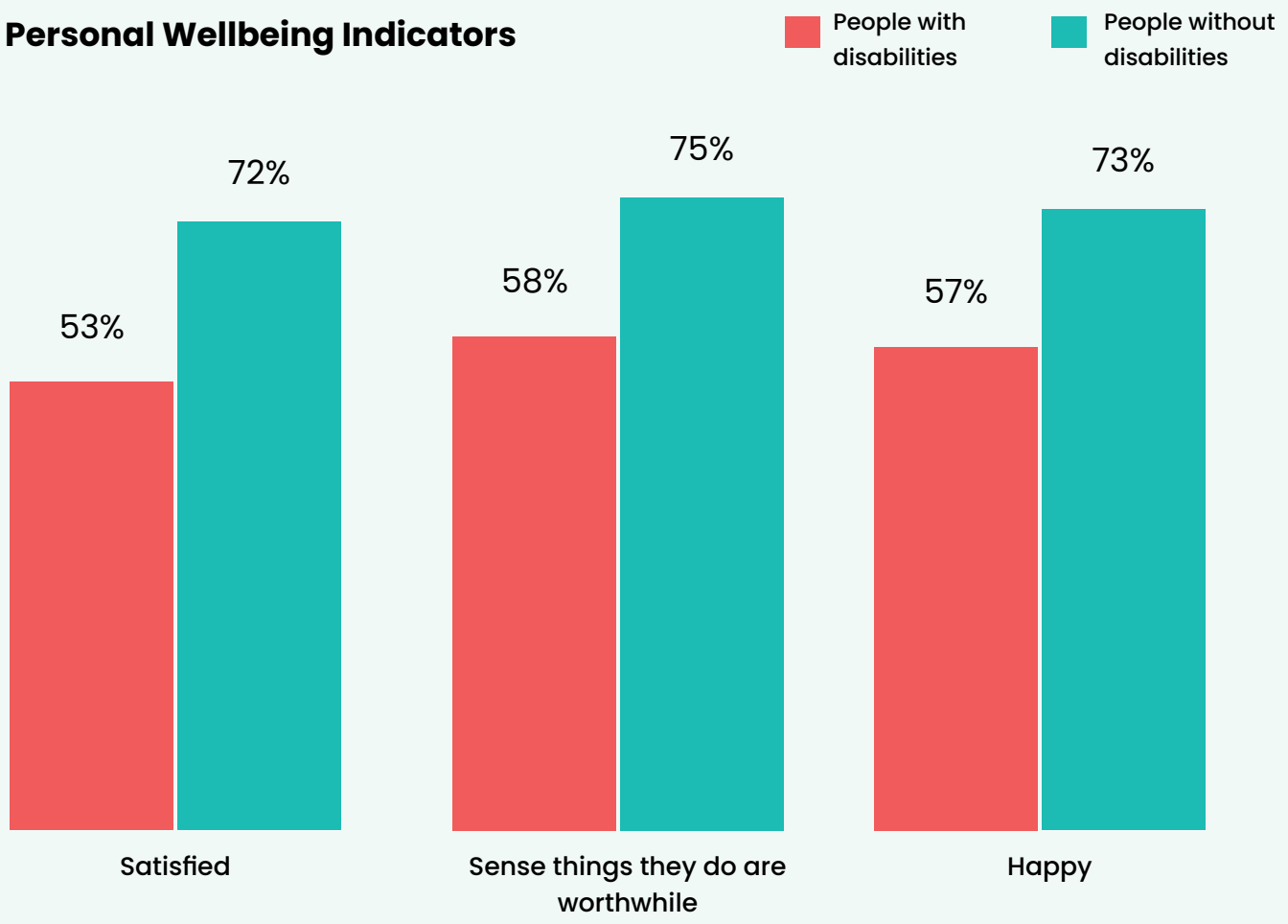
This suggests that while overall belonging is lower, the core social ties that underpin connection remain intact.

Loneliness and emotional strain

People with disabilities face significant emotional pressures in their lives, which put a strain on their sense of belonging. Loneliness is more frequently experienced by people with a disability, with nearly two in five (37%) people with disabilities feeling lonely often, compared with a quarter (25%) of people without a disability. Concerningly, this rises to nearly half (48%) of people with disabilities in the LGBT+ community who experience loneliness often.

A person's living situation influences their feelings of loneliness. Over a third (36%) of those who live alone say they feel lonely often or some of the time, compared to only 25% of those living with others who say the same. Loneliness rises among both people with disabilities who live alone (43%) and people with disabilities who live with others (34%). In contrast, just 29% of people with disabilities who live alone say they hardly ever or never feel lonely, which rises to 36% for people who live alone overall. There is also a notable gender divide on this issue, with considerably more women with disabilities reporting frequent loneliness than men with disabilities (42% vs 29%).

Among people with disabilities, almost half of 18-24 year-olds (49%), 25-34 year-olds (45%), and



35-44 year-olds (51%), say they feel lonely at least some of the time. In comparison, only a quarter of those over 65 say the same (25%). In contrast, 52% of those over 65 say they hardly ever or never feel lonely, compared to 15% of 18-24 year-olds who say the same.

A similar pattern emerges when looking at people without disabilities. Younger people without disabilities tend to report feeling lonely at least some of the time more often than older people without disabilities (41% of 18-24 year-olds, 29% of 25-34 year-olds, and 31% of 35-44 year-olds 18% of 55-64 year-olds and 11% of those over 65). 69% of people over 65 without disabilities say they hardly ever or never feel lonely, compared to only 1 in 5 18–24 year-olds without disabilities (21%).

Although there is a similar pattern of loneliness among both people with and without disabilities, people with disabilities tend to feel more lonely than their peers without disabilities.

In the chart above you will see that emotional wellbeing is under strain among people with disabilities, with these levels being consistently lower among people with disabilities when compared to people without a disability. Levels of satisfaction (53% vs 72%), a sense of worthwhileness (58% vs 75%) and happiness (57% vs 73%) are all lower among people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities. Across all of these metrics, people with disabilities in the LGBT+ community fare even worse, demonstrating the pressure this intersectional group faces.

Yet, some groups report higher levels of satisfaction. 58% of religious people with disabilities, 59% of employed people with disabilities, and 61% of retired people with disabilities all reported a sense of satisfaction with life, higher levels of happiness and the belief that the things they do in life are worthwhile.

Place

Community, neighbourhoods and everyday connection

Local belonging matters

Disability is also associated with weaker connection to place, though many still retain a sense of local belonging.

Nearly three in five (58%) people without disabilities state they are strongly attached to their neighbourhood / street, dropping to 49% of people with disabilities. This lowers even further to 38% of people with disabilities who are also part of the LGBT+ community. There is a similar pattern in terms of being connected to one's local area, with 58% of people without disabilities reporting a sense of belonging compared to 50% of people with disabilities. People with disabilities who live alone also report lacking a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood/street (51%) and their local area (53%).

However, disability is not an impediment to getting to know one's neighbours. Among both people with disabilities and people without disabilities, 57% say they know their neighbours well, rising to 67% among those who are religious and disabled.

> **67% of religious people with disabilities know their neighbours well**

Therefore, while place-based belonging is weaker among people with disabilities, everyday social contact with their neighbours remains comparable to those without disabilities.

Mutual support and community life

Neighbourly relationships remain a stable source of connection for people with disabilities. Levels of interaction and support are broadly similar to those seen among people without disabilities, with people with disabilities slightly more likely to report helping or interacting with neighbours regularly (63% vs 59%). Rates of receiving support are almost identical (56% vs 55%), suggesting mutual exchange is equally embedded across both groups.

These everyday interactions play a critical role in reinforcing belonging. Around two thirds of people with disabilities say that helping neighbours strengthens their sense of connection (65%), with a similar proportion reporting the same when support is reciprocated (67%). Older people with disabilities over 65 report both helping their neighbours (73%) and receiving help (65%) more frequently than younger people with disabilities, leading them to also say this helps to strengthen their sense of connection with their neighbours more than younger age groups. This highlights the importance of low-level, routine exchanges in sustaining belonging, even where wider structural barriers remain.

Feeling safe and included in public life

People with disabilities report slightly lower levels of perceived safety in their local area. While the majority feel safe close to home, gaps are evident when intersectional groups are considered. During the day, four in five people with disabilities say they consider themselves safe walking alone near their home (79%), compared with 84% of people without disabilities. Women with disabilities (76% compared to 84% of women without disabilities) and younger people with disabilities (64% of 18-24 year-olds and 67% of 25-34 year-olds) are less likely to say they feel safe when walking alone near their home. While young people without disabilities generally feel safe walking alone near their home, 18-24 year-olds say they feel safe less frequently (69%) than 25-34 year-olds (81%).

Differences are more pronounced after dark. Six in ten people with disabilities report feeling safe alone near their home at night (60%), while around a third feel unsafe (34%).

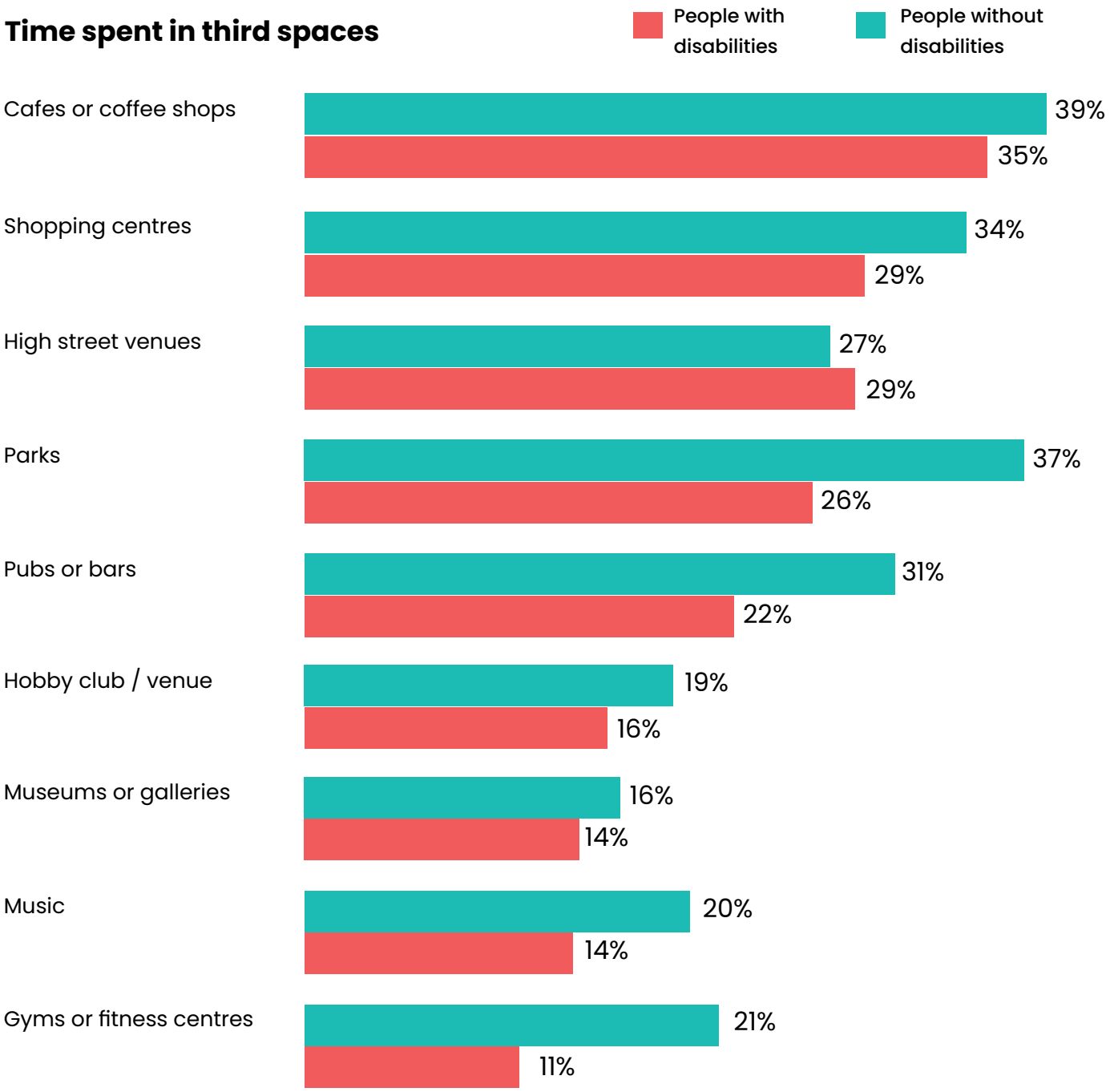
> **More than a third of people with disabilities feel unsafe alone near their home at night**

This is especially pronounced among disabled women (42% vs 51% safe) and 18-24 year-olds (50% vs 46% safe). By contrast, people without disabilities report higher levels of safety (70% safe vs 24% unsafe), suggesting that concerns about personal safety are more acute among people with disabilities, particularly outside daylight hours.

The spaces that support belonging

Disability is associated with lower engagement in third spaces outside the home. Gaps are most evident when looking at time spent in shared public and social settings, including parks (37% non-disabled vs 26% disabled), gyms or fitness centres (21% vs 11%), and pubs or bars (31% vs 22%). This

Time spent in third spaces



suggests that access to, or participation in, these spaces is more limited for people with disabilities, potentially limiting opportunities for informal social connection.

People with disabilities report many of the same barriers to spending time in third spaces as people without disabilities, such as cost (24% disabled vs 19% non-disabled). Cost is a big barrier for younger people with disabilities, as almost a third of them cited this as a reason they don't spend more time in third spaces (30% of 18-24 year-olds and 35% of both 25-34 and 35-44 year-olds). A big difference between people with and without disabilities however is that those with disabilities report their physical health issues are a more significant barrier to spending time in third spaces (23% disabilities vs 3% of people without disabilities).

Changes to public services since 2020 have broadly weakened the sense of connection that people with disabilities feel to them. Half (48%) of people with disabilities feel less connected to their GP service, three times higher than those who feel more connected (16%), with 32% reporting no difference. Women with disabilities (52%) and older people with disabilities (53%) feel especially less connected to their GP service. Most people without disabilities say the changes to public services have made no real difference to their sense of connection with their GP (36%), while 1 in 5 feel more connected (20%) and 33% feel less connected. Similarly, women without disabilities (38%) and older people without disabilities (42%) feel less connected to their GP, albeit to a lesser extent than those with disabilities.

A similar story emerges across other public services where people with disabilities are more likely to feel less connected to mental health services (25% less vs 10% more, 35% no difference) and public transport (23% less vs 14% more, 45% no difference). Almost half of people without disabilities report no difference in their ability to access public transport since 2020 (48%), with only 17% saying they feel less connected. Levels of connection to libraries and community centres have remained broadly similar for people with disabilities (16% more vs 17% less, 46% no difference) and those without (21% more vs 13% less, 49% no difference).

Power

Representation, voice and feeling heard

Voice in Public Life

Political dissatisfaction at a national level is widespread across the UK population and is particularly pronounced among people with disabilities. Two thirds (66%) of people with disabilities feel poorly represented by the UK government, with only 11% saying they are well represented, dropping further to only 8% of women with disabilities.

> **Two in three people with disabilities feel poorly represented by government**

Similarly, two-thirds (67%) of people with disabilities do not feel the UK considers their wants and needs when making decisions, with less than one in ten (9%) thinking they do.

Political dissatisfaction is also present at a local level as people with disabilities feel poorly represented by their local MP, albeit to a lesser extent than at the national level (36% poorly vs 21% well).

These findings suggest that for many people with disabilities, feelings of exclusion extend beyond social life and into perceptions of how political institutions respond to their needs.

Purpose

Participation, contribution and meaning

Being part of something bigger

People with disabilities are less likely to have a sense of purpose than people without disabilities.

Nearly half (47%) of people with disabilities say they rarely or never feel they are working together with others to solve common problems and only 14% say they experience this always or often (compared to 32% of people without disabilities who rarely or never feel this way and 21% who always or often have a sense of purpose). As people with disabilities get older, they tend to report they rarely or never work together with others to solve a common problem more frequently. While 21% of 18-24 year-olds and 28% of 25-34 year-olds report these feelings, this rises to 57% among 55-64 year-olds and 53% of those over 65. Among people without disabilities, comparatively fewer felt a lack of shared sense of purpose than people with disabilities (21% always/often and 32% rarely or never).

Among people with disabilities who derive a sense of purpose from working with others, this is felt most commonly when volunteering with community initiatives/charity work (34%), in work (33%) and as part of an online community or forum (27%).

> **A third of people with disabilities derive a sense of purpose from work**

Work, identity and social connection

While work brings many benefits to people without disabilities, it appears people with disabilities struggle to find the same sense of belonging and connection through the workplace due to lower employment levels. People with disabilities consistently report less satisfaction with working environments compared to people without disabilities (33% vs 52%). Similarly, people with disabilities are less likely to make close friends through work compared to people without disabilities (37% of people with disabilities vs 47% of people without disabilities).

The findings also suggest people with disabilities are less likely to report being integrated in their workplace teams. People with disabilities state that they face issues of exclusion at work, with 31% feeling part of a team with people they work with, rising considerably to 53% of people without disabilities. Women with disabilities are even less likely to feel they are part of a team with their colleagues, with just over a quarter (28%) saying this is true for them.

Conclusion

Belonging is built through connection, participation and inclusion

The findings from this report show that people with disabilities continue to build strong friendships, support their communities and contribute to society. However, barriers relating to participation, access and representation mean that many experience belonging differently from those without a disability.

Across the four dimensions of belonging, several key themes emerge.

Key insights

People

- Strong friendships remain an important source of belonging for people with disabilities, with levels of friendship satisfaction similar to those without a disability.
- Yet people with disabilities are more likely to experience loneliness, anxiety and lower wellbeing, particularly among people with disabilities who also identify as LGBT+.

Place

- People with disabilities report being less connected to their neighbourhoods and local areas, despite being just as likely to know and support their neighbours.
- Access to public spaces, services and community infrastructure plays a critical role in shaping opportunities for connection.

Power

- Many people with disabilities do not think their needs are adequately considered by government and report low levels of political representation.
- Being heard and valued by political institutions is an important part of belonging, alongside connection to people and place.

Purpose

- People with disabilities are less likely to feel they are working alongside others towards shared goals and are more likely to feel excluded in the workplace.
- At the same time, many find purpose through volunteering, work, online communities and other forms of participation.

Belonging Forum

contact@belongingforum.com
www.belongingforum.org