

# The impact of COVID-19 on disabled people

Summary of secondary  
research

Updated May 2021

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# Introduction

The coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak has caused significant challenges for many people, affecting our health, lifestyles, and wellbeing.

Disabled people face additional barriers in many areas of life, including being physically active.

Activity Alliance has published five previous versions of this document. Previous updates outline the social impact of the pandemic and restrictions on disabled people, and the impact on physical activity levels. This update (01 May 2021) focuses on changes to physical activity levels and attitudes (Slides 4 to 15). Previous data on social impact can be found in the appendix. References to the relevant research can be found at the end of the document.

[View previous updates on Activity Alliance's website.](#)

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# Impact of COVID-19 on physical activity

# Inactivity levels for disabled people were decreasing before coronavirus

Disabled people were seeing a decrease in inactivity, from 43.3% in May 15-16 to 40.4% in May 19-20. Activity Alliance's Annual Disability and Activity Survey 2020/21 showed that this was accompanied by positive changes in attitudes: disabled people were more likely to say physical activity was for people like them, and more likely to relate to inclusive motivations.

The latest release, with data from Nov 19-20, shows the impact of the pandemic. Inactivity levels rose to 42.5% for disabled people, with a peak of inactivity at 46.5% during the first lockdown.

## Proportion of people who were inactive Nov 19-20 (doing less than 30 mins of physical activity per week)



The most popular physical activities that disabled people participate in are:



Walking for leisure and travel



Fitness activities



Fitness classes



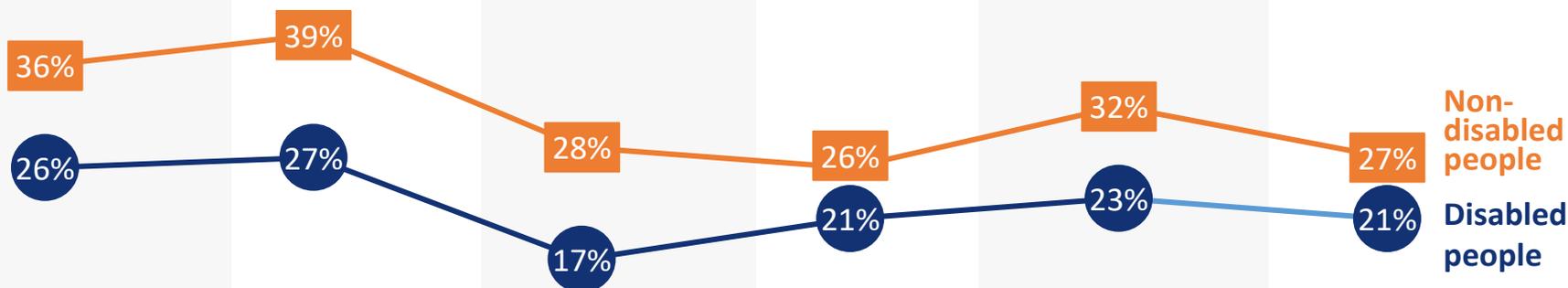
Cycling



Swimming

# Disabled people continue to be less active as we come out of the third national lockdown

Proportion of people doing at least 30 mins of physical activity five times or more in the last week



## 3-6 April

**Phase 1: Full lockdown**  
**Mid-March to mid-May:**  
 Activities restricted, with facilities closed

- Recognition of the importance of physical activity
- Inequalities emerging
- Peak activity levels and positive attitudes at end of this period

## 15-18 May

**Phase 2: Mid-May to mid-Sept:**  
 Restrictions lift with facilities reopening.

- Physical activity starts to fall as society starts to reopen
- Attitudes and motivations become less positive

## 23-26 Oct

**Phase 3: Mid-Sept to end of Oct:** New restrictions to indoor sports and the rule of 6 introduced, followed by new national restrictions

- Physical activity and motivations settle at new lower level

## 27-30 Nov

**Phase 4: Nov to Dec:** second full lockdown.

- Some improvements in motivations, but increased concerns about exercising.
- Inequalities continue.

## 26 Feb-1 March

**Lockdown roadmap released**

- Activity levels improve for non-disabled people but not for people with disabilities

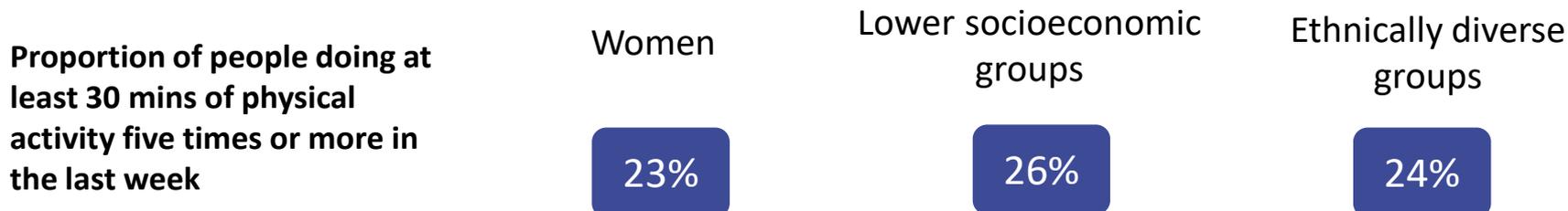
## 21-24 May

**Easing of restrictions**

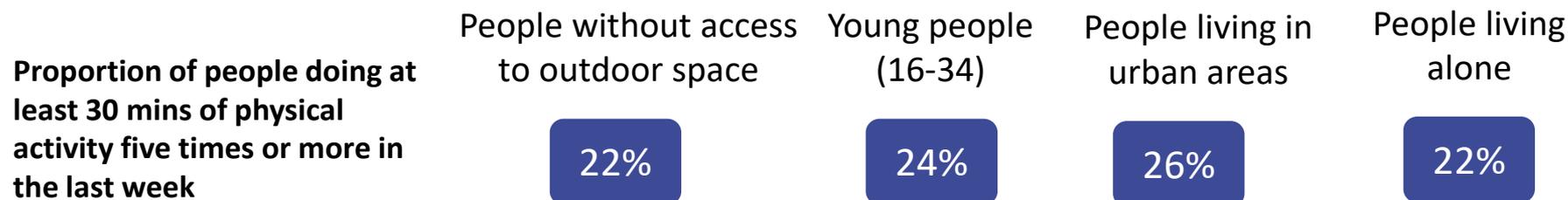
- Rule of six lifted, indoor sports allowed, facilities open.

# Other inequalities have also worsened over this period, include a recent decline for most groups

## Traditional inequalities in activity levels have continued during the pandemic



## New inequalities have also emerged



These figures have all decreased since the last update (March 2021), except for ethnically diverse groups which remained the same.

# Disabled people are less likely to feel they have the ability to be active because of coronavirus

**57%**

Just over half feel they have the opportunity to be physically active (compared to 75% of non-disabled people)

**48%**

Half are worried about leaving their home to be active (compared to 33% of non-disabled people)

## Disabled people were less likely than non-disabled people to:

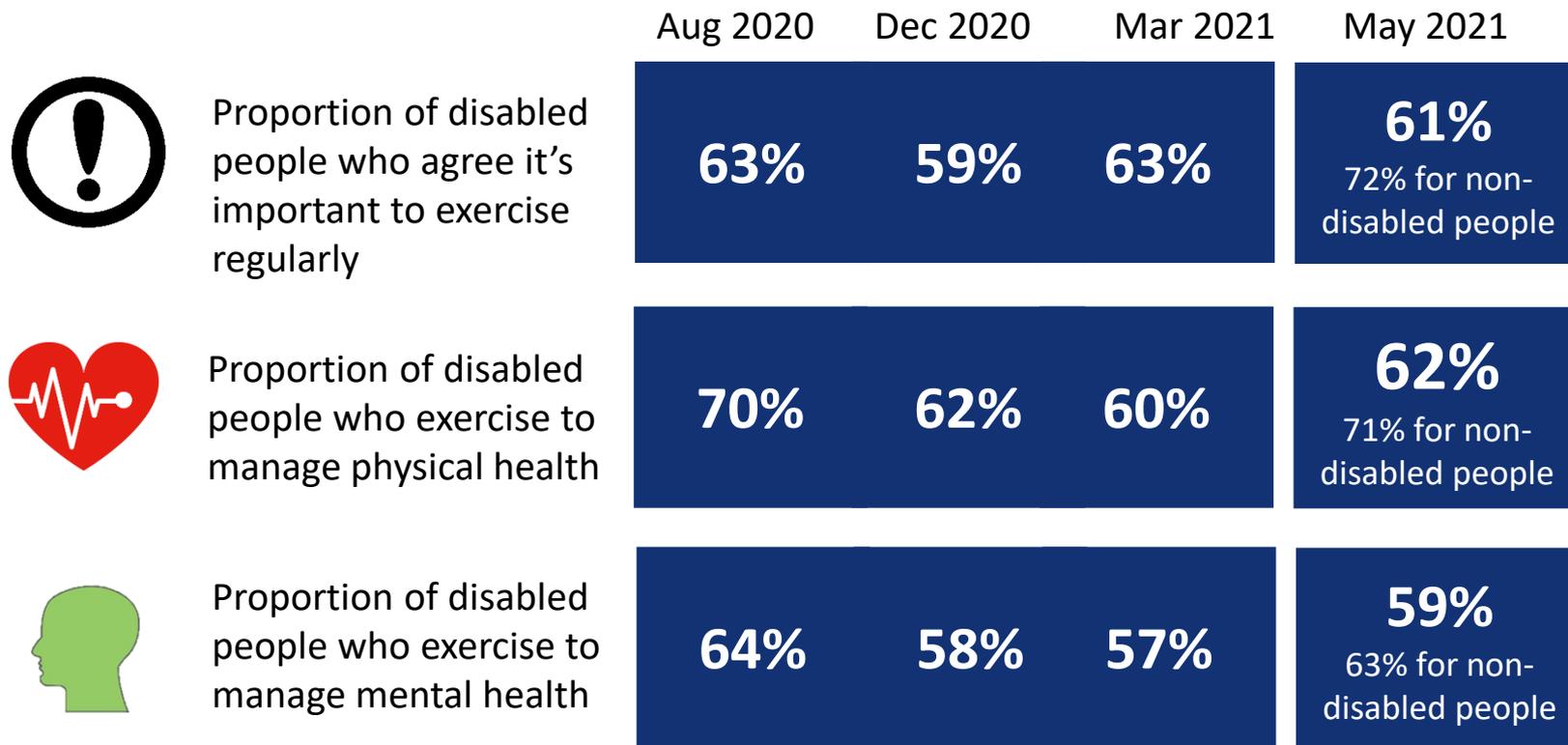
Have found new ways to be active during the pandemic

Be using exercise to manage their physical or mental health

Have more time for physical activity

There has been a slight increase in opportunity (from 54% in Feb/March) and a decrease in the proportion worried about leaving their home (from 56%)

# Attitudes and motivations have fallen since August and are lower than for non-disabled people



Proportions remain similar to the Feb/March update

# Disabled people are more likely to say not being fit enough, being unwell or self-isolating are challenges to being active

(% ranking as top 3 challenges)	Disabled people	Non-disabled people
Too tired/lacking energy	37%	34%
I'm not fit enough	<b>35%</b>	<b>19%</b>
Bad weather	28%	35%
Unwell or self-isolating	<b>20%</b>	<b>7%</b>
Working commitments	15%	28%
I just don't want to	15%	20%
I'm worried about COVID-19	16%	18%
I don't have anyone to exercise with	11%	9%
Childcare	9%	13%
Don't have right space/equipment	7%	8%
I can't afford things I need to be active	6%	10%
My preferred activities aren't available	6%	7%
Other caring responsibilities	7%	5%
Can't book activities I want to	5%	5%
Limited or no internet access	3%	2%

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Physical activity for disabled  
people after lockdown

# Participation is similar for activities that are reopening, like gym classes and swimming

	Disabled people (% taking part in the last week)	Non-disabled people (% taking part in the last week)
Walking	58%	65%
Running or jogging	15%	22%
Home activity – offline	14%	16%
Home activity - online	14%	14%
Gym or exercise class away from home	13%	14%
Cycling	9%	13%
Swimming	10%	9%
Informal play/games	11%	9%
Team sports	6%	5%

# Disabled people want to be more active

78%

Almost 8 in 10 disabled people say they would **like to do more physical activity**, compared to 57% of non-disabled people (in summer 2020)

60%

6 in 10 disabled people agree it's **more important** to be active during the pandemic compared to other times – the same proportion as non-disabled people



## The top motivations for disabled people are:

- Improving physical health
- Losing or maintaining weight
- Getting fit
- Improving mental health

Motivations like **taking part to relax, have something to do, and to socialise** are becoming more important for disabled people. Activities should appeal to personal values, including independence and improving self-esteem.

# However, disabled people are likely to face more challenges to taking part

- An increased number of people agree that the vaccine roll-out is making them less worried about being active (56% of disabled people, compared to 44% in March). This is still less than for non-disabled people (61%).
- Many of the challenges faced by disabled people during the pandemic will persist following the easing of lockdown restrictions.
  - 51% of 'clinically vulnerable people (2.2 million people) are still shielding, despite the restriction lifting in April.
  - Disabled people were more likely to say their strength and physical fitness has declined since before the pandemic, indicating potential 'deconditioning' as well as challenges with confidence and perceptions of ability.
- Organisations and deliverers working in the sector expect also challenges. In particular, a loss of confidence and support for disabled people, concerns about safety and risk, as well as changes to resourcing and infrastructure.
  - Research from the Sport and Recreation Alliance shows the disability sport providers are expecting a lower proportion of participants to return post-pandemic – only 53%, compared to 75% on average.

# Overcoming challenges to support disabled people to be active: case studies

- Plan for and provide safe opportunities to be active for those who are comfortable  
[Case study 1: Geddington Newton Bowls Club](#)
- Provide online physical activities that are designed to increase connectedness, providing social and mental health benefits.  
[Case study 2: #DSCathome, Disability Sports Coach](#)
- Connect with community organisations to help people be active at home (including those without digital access).  
[Case study 3: Get Out Get Active, Activity Alliance](#)

## What else is important?

- Provide clear information on safety and risk using Government and Sport England guidelines.
- Use [inclusive communication](#) and accessibility guidance.
- Ensure inclusion is at the heart of any redevelopment plans using our '[Reopening activity: An inclusive response](#) resource.
- Recognise that many people's health or impairment have become harder to manage due to COVID-19 and lockdown.
- Inspire those who are less motivated by connecting with wider values and new needs (e.g. managing mental and physical health, social opportunities).

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Wellbeing and support (updated  
December 2020)

# Disabled people remain more at risk from coronavirus than non-disabled people

**6 in 10**

Disabled people account for 6 in 10 of the deaths from COVID-19 from Jan 2020 to November 2020 (similar to data from Mar-May 2020)

**3x**

The risk of death is three times higher for disabled people than for non-disabled people. Among disabled people, women and people with a learning impairment are more at risk.

# Disabled people are more worried about the impact COVID-19 is having on their lives

78%

Almost three quarters of disabled people are "very" or "somewhat" worried about the effect that coronavirus is having on their life

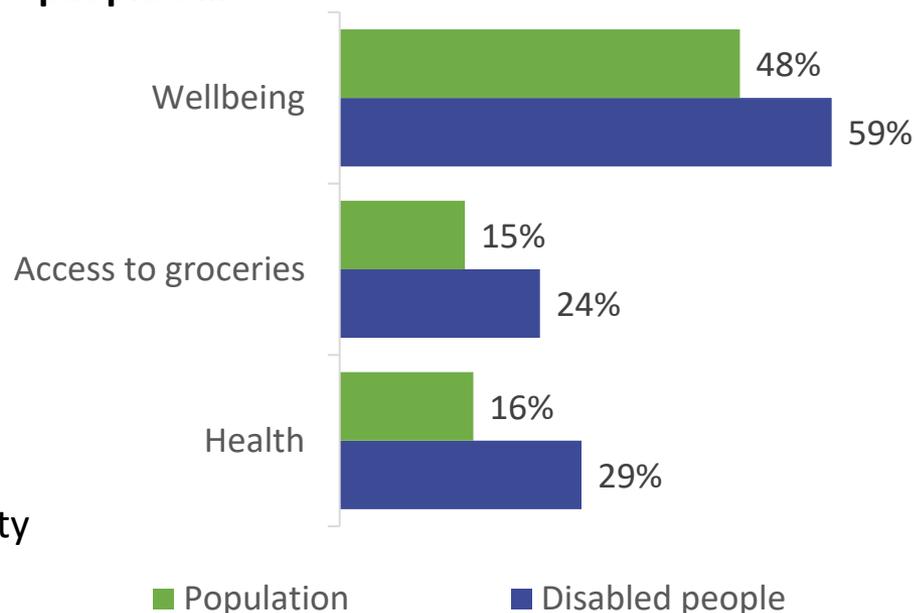
x2

People with a health condition are twice as likely to feel lonely than the overall population.

42%

Four in ten people with a health condition report high levels of anxiety (compared to 36% of general population)

## COVID-19 is having a greater impact on disabled people's ...



Compared to the data from November, disabled people are more worried about the impact of the virus on their lives, more likely to experience high levels of anxiety, and feel the virus is having a greater impact on their wellbeing and health.

# Disabled people were left without the social care they needed over the first lockdown, and unpaid carers are still lacking support

## In June:

51%

Over half of disabled adults who previously received care are no longer receiving home visits from health care professionals.

31%

Almost one third of disabled people are concerned about the level of care they are currently receiving and how it is provided.

An October study found that 34% of disabled people feel less safe receiving care than before the pandemic

## This has led to an increased strain on unpaid carers. In September:

- Only 12% of unpaid carers feel they had enough support from social care
- 64% of carers were providing 50 hours or more of care a week
- 54% of carers had given up or reduced paid work because of responsibilities

# The medical care of people with health conditions has also been affected, leading to a negative impact for many

**35%**

A third of people with a long-term health condition said they had been able to access the same level of medical care in December as they had before COVID-19.

**48%**

Almost half of those whose care had been reduced or cancelled said their health has gotten worse because of this.

Compared to the data from October and November, a similar proportion of disabled people were able to access the same level of care in December. However, more people who couldn't access care said their health had gotten worse (an increase from 42%)

# COVID-19 is having a negative impact on disabled children and their parent's health



Parents of disabled children report worsening emotional and mental health for both their children and themselves



Nearly half (45%) say their disabled children's physical health has declined

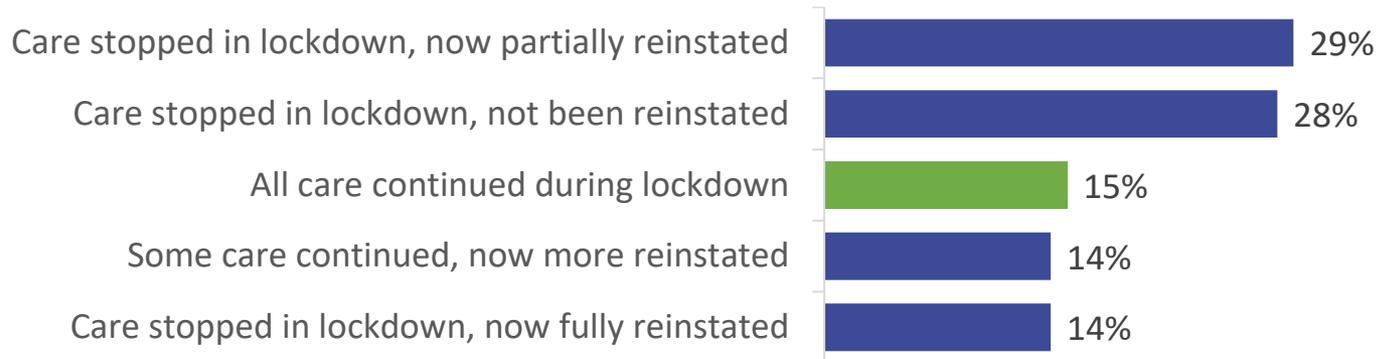
With just over half (54%) saying the same about their own health



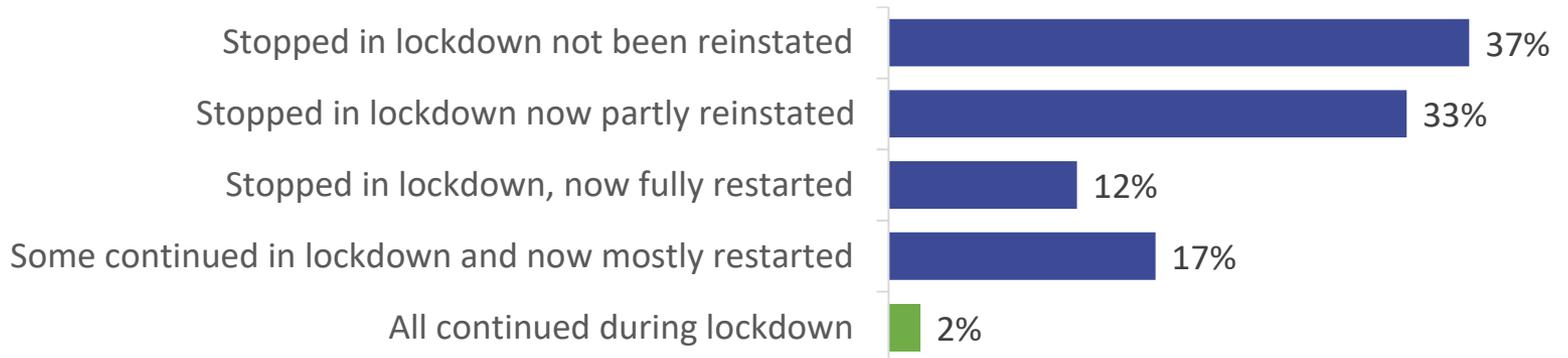
Over two thirds (68%) say a health or social care assessment has been delayed due to the lockdown.

# Most families had social care and therapies stopped in lockdown; for many this is still not fully reinstated

## Social care: only 15% had all of their child's social care continue over lockdown



## Therapies: only 2% had all of their child's therapies continue during lockdown



# A quarter of disabled children have not fully returned to school and others are not getting the support they need

## School attendance:

24%

A quarter of disabled children had not returned to school or were only attending part time.

### Reasons why....

**44%** - Family are shielding (school seen as unsafe)

**26%** - Child too anxious to return

**19%** - Educational support not in place

**14%** - Child happier at home

**12%** - Health support not in place

## Support in school:

32%

Only a third of disabled children had all provision from their Education, Health and Care Plan provided.

**EHCP support:** 39% had some provision provided, and 8% had no provision. 9% were waiting for the plan to be agreed or assessed; half of this group had been waiting for more than 6 months.

**School support:** Parents feel schools prepared well for the return to the classroom but there were areas for improvement:

- More blended learning to help transition
- Mental health and emotional support
- School transport

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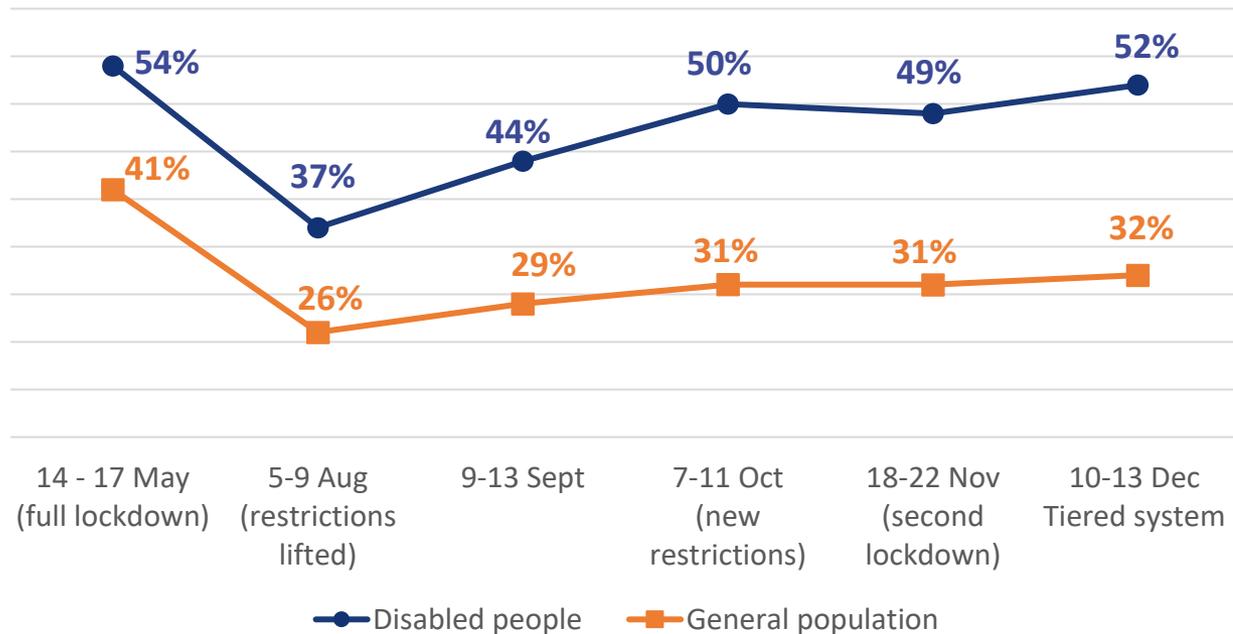
# Shielding and self-isolation (updated December 2020)

# Disabled people are more likely to be shielding and feel uncomfortable leaving the house



**2.2 million people** were classed as clinically extremely vulnerable by the Government. Guidance on shielding was paused in August, but reinstated later in the year as restrictions and lockdowns were implemented. There are many disabled people who may not be on the 'list' but consider themselves to be at risk.

**Disabled people continue to feel more uncomfortable leaving their home. This figure has increased since early Autumn.**



**Disabled people are also more likely to:**

- Stay at home except for essential reasons (39% compared to 26% of the general population in October)
- To be self-isolating (12% compared to 6% of general population in December, compared to 41% and 29% in April)

# Disabled people are feeling overlooked and are less sure how to keep themselves safe

## In October:

71%

Almost three-quarters feel that the needs of disabled people have been overlooked during the pandemic

65%

Many feel that the pandemic has had a negative impact on the rights of disabled people.



Disabled people are less likely to feel they have enough information on how to protect themselves from coronavirus

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Finances, benefits, and work  
(updated December 2020)

# Disabled people use benefits to support them day to day, including for being active



65%

Almost two thirds of disabled people rely on benefits to be active:

- Travel
- Paid for exercise
- Specialist equipment

3.5  
million

3.5 million disabled people of working age receive benefits.

x2

A disabled working-age adult is more than twice as likely to be in poverty than a non-disabled adult.

£538

Disabled people face over £500 a month in extra costs related to their impairment or condition.

2  
million

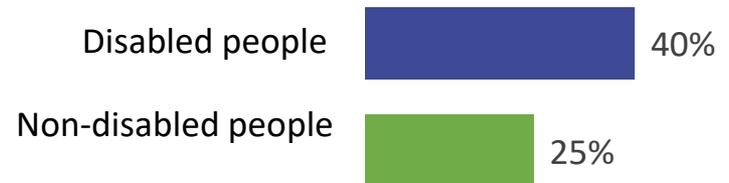
2 million people on legacy benefits\* did not benefit from the £20 uplift given to those on Universal Credit during the pandemic.

\*Legacy benefits were established before the new Universal Credit system (e.g., Employment Support Allowance), and are often received by disabled people

# Disabled people are more likely to face acute financial challenges because of coronavirus and have worries about work

## Financial pressures:

- During the pandemic, disabled people were more likely to say they would be unable to pay an unexpected expense of £850 (May 2020).



- A January 2021 report by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation found that the pandemic has had a “catastrophic effect” on those already struggling with poverty.

## Impact on jobs:



A quarter of disabled people are worried about losing their jobs as a result of the pandemic (August 2020)

**41%** are anxious about not going back to work  
**48%** are worried about using public transport  
**87%** fear others won't respect social distancing rules, putting them at risk

In October, 8% of disabled adults had left their job due to health concerns related to the pandemic – this increased to 16% for 18–34-year-olds.

# Parents of disabled children also face additional financial pressure



**In June, many parents of disabled children were facing financial pressures**



**With one fifth believing they will end up in debt because of coronavirus**

**61%**

6 in 10 had seen an increase in costs (36% home schooling costs, 32% specialist equipment, 15% PPE).

**39%**

Almost two fifths had seen a reduction in income.

**76%**

Over three quarters have had no increase in benefits.

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The digital divide (updated  
December 2020)

# COVID-19 is magnifying the digital divide; disabled people are likely to be more affected by this

9

million

9 million people struggle to use the internet independently in the UK. Those most affected are:

- Unemployed or retired people
- Disabled people
- Those living on a low income
- Those with few or no qualifications
- Older people
- People living in rural areas
- People whose first language is not English
- Homeless people

4.8

million

Almost 5 million people never go online at all.

35%

Disabled people are 35% less likely to have essential digital skills than non-disabled people.

**Key factors contributing to the digital divide are:** difficulties with access (paying a monthly fee or buying equipment), a lack of literacy or digital skills, low motivation and interest, and accessibility for those with different needs.

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# Overcoming COVID-19 challenges: Case studies

# Get Out Get Active, Activity Alliance

Get Out Get Active (GOGA) is a programme that runs across the UK. It supports the very least active disabled and non-disabled people to enjoy being active together.

COVID-19 has had a huge impact on the different activities GOGA provides, but the teams across the country have come up with some helpful ways to continue to support people being active

## Examples of what has been offered:

- Personal telephone calls to offer words of encouragement and listen to what individuals have been doing to keep active.
- Weekly emails with information on home workouts (sourced locally or nationally)
- Exercise postcards mapping suitable exercise programmes for people to follow from their home.
- Social media accounts sharing exercise suggestions and online classes and activity challenges
- Delivering equipment to care homes and individuals to help them be active (adapted bikes /badminton / foot golf)

# #DSCathome, Disability Sports Coach

Disability Sports Coach empowers disabled people to lead more active lives by providing affordable weekly opportunities to get active and meet friends. The charity also trains coaches, leaders and teachers with the skills to deliver high quality accessible sport activities for disabled people.

Schools closing and lockdown meant they have had to cancel or postpone their regular coaching programmes and community clubs. To help with motivation and to keep participants active, they developed a programme using online and offline resources.

## Examples of what has been offered:

- Sending out over 300 equipment packs to members of Community Clubs
- Provide bespoke activity card downloads online
- Running live Zoom activity sessions four times a week – including mindfulness, yoga, dance, and multi-sports
- A weekly social session and quiz on Zoom
- Weekly challenges for participants to achieve personal goals

## Impact of the programme:

- Increasing connectedness and reducing social isolation
- Increased reach to new participants
- Ensured vulnerable participants continued to keep active during lockdown

# Geddington Newton Bowls Club

## The offer:

Following the easing of lockdown and the re-opening of the club, the committee realised many of their members were fearful of a return to bowls due to being at risk or unsure of mixing outside their own household.

- Therefore 'extra safe' bowling sessions were offered: Members could have the bowls green to themselves; the gates were opened ready for their arrival; equipment was put out and disinfected to minimise the need to touch any surfaces.
- Sessions have proved hugely popular with many feeling so satisfied with the safety measures in place that they have felt confident enough to book a regular session. A video has been made to demonstrate all the safety measures that have put in place at the club. [Watch the Geddington Newton Bowls Club video](#).

## The impact:

- The club has enabled its members to return to the sport at their own pace, whilst gaining confidence to leave their homes and socialise in a safe environment
- The number of extra safe sessions being booked has now reduced as members feel comfortable with the safety measures in place
- A 'Buddy Scheme' has now been introduced, for individuals who want an opponent to be paired up
- Other clubs have implemented similar 'extra safe' models in order to encourage members who are wary of returning to the sport
- Committee members continue to meet regularly via Zoom so as to assess the club's progress and any arising issues

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# The pandemic has created new barriers for disabled people

Key barriers to being active during the pandemic are: self-isolating, the impact on health, the fear of contracting the virus, and concerns about social distancing. Disabled people are also more affected by a lack of space at home and a lack of support.

## Proportion selecting each as barrier to being active caused by coronavirus

