



Activity Alliance
Annual Disability
and Activity Survey

2021-22

**Research
briefing**



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Introduction



Now in its third year, our Annual Disability and Activity Survey continues to track disabled people's perceptions and experience of sport and activity. Last year, we showed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled people's lives and their ability to be active. This year's survey gives an indication of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead as we recover and reinvent from the pandemic.

This report complements Sport England's Active Lives Adult Survey. It provides greater detail on issues of importance to disabled people. Active Lives is the authoritative source of data on activity levels and participation and can be found at sportengland.org.

The survey was conducted by IFF Research from October to December 2021 and 1,842 disabled and non-disabled adults aged 16+ took part. In this study, we defined a disabled person as anyone who has a long-term health condition, impairment or illness that has a substantial effect on normal daily activities. Of those, 20 survey participants also took part in a series of online focus groups. Participants shared their reactions to the findings and led discussions on what recommendations should be made.

The report's findings and recommendations are split into four key themes:

1. 'I am being left out of the return to activity'
2. 'I feel less connected to sport and activity'
3. 'When I do take part, my experiences are less positive and inclusive than last year'
4. 'I still do not feel physical activity is suitable or safe for my impairment'

Many of the findings portray negative changes and show stark differences between disabled and non-disabled people. However, we recognise the hard work of those involved in encouraging and delivering activity during this unprecedented time. We collaborated with disabled people and our members to develop a set of robust recommendations. They set out the steps that we, Activity Alliance, will take to achieve fairness for disabled people in sport and activity. And also what people organising and delivering activity, commissioners and strategic organisations can do to support disabled people to be active.

This document is a summary of the report's key findings and recommendations.

The full report is available on our website:

activityalliance.org.uk/annual-survey.



Further information

Please contact our research team to discuss how to access, interpret and use the data, or how to implement the recommendations:



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Key findings and recommendations



Theme 1: 'I am being left out of the return to activity'

Disabled people want to be more active but are not feeling encouraged or looking forward to taking part in activities after the pandemic.



8 in 10 (77%) disabled people want to be more active.



Only 3 in 10 (28%) disabled people feel encouraged to return to being active, compared to 50% of non-disabled people.



Disabled people are less likely to look forward to taking part in face-to-face activities (**30% vs 44%** of non-disabled people).

Recommendation 1: ‘Involve me as we recover from the pandemic’

Disabled people must be included in all sport and physical activity offerings as we recover and reinvent from the pandemic. Engaging with disabled people is vital to tackle the rise in inactivity and widening inequalities seen during the pandemic.

“ Instead of saying to people ‘this is here’, it would be better to ask people ‘what is it you need?’ ”



What Activity Alliance will do:

- We will champion disabled people’s voices, build our movement and raise our profile.
- As activities reopen, we will strengthen our work with partners to support them to effectively include disabled people.
- We commit to developing our co-production approach and help others to do the same.



We call on people organising and delivering activities to:

Encourage disabled people back to (or to try) activities by:

- Reviewing your offer to understand where disabled people could be being excluded (online and in-person), using insight and co-production with disabled people.
- Increasing awareness of opportunities that are flexible, welcoming and creative. Consider sessions of different lengths, intensities and at different times of day or offering trial sessions. These could be free or offered at a reduced rate. Or initiatives to tackle changes in their health and confidence.



We call on commissioners and strategic organisations to:

- Prioritise co-produced and inclusive opportunities that meet disabled people’s needs.
- Invest in services and partnerships that offer affordable activities that can improve disabled people’s mental and physical health.



Further reading and useful resources

- Read and consider [Activity Alliance’s Reopening Activity: An inclusive response guidance](#) and [Sport England’s reducing inequalities learning resource](#) and [inclusive physical activity evaluation resource](#).
- Check out our [Get Out Get Active programme learning resources](#) on **engaging different community groups** and **creating activities that put people’s needs first**.
- [Co-production guidance from Disability Rights UK](#).



Theme 2: 'I feel less connected to sport and activity'

This year, disabled people are less likely to feel sport and physical activity is for 'someone like them'. This is much lower than for non-disabled people. The positive progress made in this area over the last two years has been reversed.

Figure 1: Proportion of people agreeing with each statement.

	Disabled people in 2019-20	Disabled people in 2020-21	Disabled people in 2021-22
'Sport is for someone like me'	32%	35%	31%
'Physical activity is for someone like me'	51%	57%	47%

Disabled people are less likely to choose almost all reasons to be active, suggesting a general decrease in motivation or connection to these reasons.

In line with previous years, improving physical health, losing or maintaining weight, getting fit and improving mental health were the top motivations for disabled people to be active.

There has been some positive change in perceptions about marketing and representation of disabled people. This year, disabled people were more likely to agree that:

- 'Disabled people were included in advertising and/or at the activity' (**increase from 43% to 54%**).
- 'Advertising didn't just focus on impairments or disability' (**increase from 59% to 65%**).
- 'Advertising reassured me that I would be welcome' (**increase from 66% to 69%**).

Recommendation 2: ‘Support me to feel like being active is for someone like me’

Attitudes and cultures of sport and activity need to be more inclusive and representative and recognise the needs of individuals and diverse populations.

“ Sport and activity organisations need to be positive to everyone, be as diverse as possible, and open to all levels of fitness. ”



What Activity Alliance will do:

- We will challenge societal perceptions about disability, inclusion and sport, tackle inequalities and promote a person-centred approach through collaboration with our members and partners.
- We will continue to push to ensure that the diversity of the sport and physical activity workforce reflects that of society.



We call on people organising and delivering activities to:

- Improve promotion to and communication with disabled people by understanding inclusive and preferred methods. Use trusted sources and relevant influencers to focus the reach and appeal of your messaging.
- Take a person-centred approach when planning and delivering activities. Look beyond standard demographics and connect with people’s individual needs.
- Recognise your responsibility for creating a more inclusive environment that welcomes disabled people.



We call on commissioners and strategic organisations to:

- Take ownership and accountability for your role in creating inclusive and sustainable culture change.
- Increase the diversity of your workforce and take action to ensure your practices are inclusive at all levels.



Further reading and useful resources

- Read [Activity Alliance’s resource on taking a person-centred approach](#) to planning and providing activity opportunities.
- Reach more people with [Activity Alliance’s inclusive communication resources](#).
- Read the **driving organisation and system change** document from our [Get Out Get Active programme learning resources](#).
- Improve training and workplaces for disabled people in the leisure and activity sector with [EmployAbility Leisure guidance](#).



Theme 3: ‘When I do take part, experiences are less positive and inclusive than last year’

Only 1 in 5 disabled survey participants have taken part in organised activities in the past year and many of them reported negative changes.



Only half of disabled people (53%) said that returning to activity after the pandemic was a positive experience compared to 70% of non-disabled people. This appears to be related to a less positive customer experience and challenges faced relating to the delivery of activities.



Disabled people are less likely to say activity leaders:

- ‘Met their needs’ (**68% vs 79% in 2020**)
- ‘Include them’ (**72% vs 77% in 2020**)

Recommendation 3: ‘Your workforce can make it a better experience for me’

Despite many examples of positive change, we are at risk of losing the progress made in recent years. We are calling on all organisations to actively review and refresh their workforce training programmes to increase people’s confidence and competence in engaging with disabled people.

“ Understand that people have different abilities – it doesn’t mean they don’t want to do that activity, it means they may need adaptations. ”



What Activity Alliance will do:

- We will support a wide range of organisations to embed inclusive practice into their work.
- We will also raise awareness and share positive examples of good practice.



We call on people organising and delivering activities to:

- Upskill your workforce, ensuring all employees and volunteers complete disability awareness training. Equip them with the skills to embed inclusive practice and improve accessibility for disabled people.
- Share these learnings and encourage the professional development of peers.



We call on commissioners and strategic organisations to:

- Agree to minimum professional standards relating to inclusion and disability for professionals involved in physical activity.

- Prioritise inclusion and accessibility within investment for spaces and facilities.
- Lead by example by ensuring your organisation follows inclusion principles.



Further reading and useful resources

- [Activity Alliance’s Inclusive Activity Programme](#) provides training and development opportunities for sport coaches, community leaders, and health professionals.
- Use [Inclusion Club Hub](#) to improve disabled people’s experiences at your sports club.
- [Delivering an Excellent Service for Disabled Customers eLearning Course](#) for people working in the leisure sector.
- Read the **creating a workforce that gets me** document from our [Get Out Get Active programme learning resources](#).
- Check out [CIMSPA ReTrain](#) to ReTrain support, resources, and training programmes.



Theme 4: 'I still do not feel physical activity is suitable or safe for my impairment'

8 in 10 (78%) disabled people say their impairment or health condition is the top barrier that stops them from being active (which is consistent with previous years). This is true for all impairment types and increases with age.

Figure 2: Impairment barriers to participation in physical activity.



Some disabled people felt that those involved in delivering sports and activities lacked knowledge on safety and risk and did not understand their impairment well enough.

As in previous years, disabled people want advice on physical activity from health professionals they know and trust:

- **60%** want advice from GPs, doctors, and nurses.
- **57%** want advice from physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and other medical professionals.

Recommendation 4: ‘Involve the health professionals I trust the most’

Many disabled people want reassurance and tailored advice on how to be active in a way that works for them. The health and sport and activity sectors need to work in partnership to promote the evidence that shows physical activity is safe and has many benefits for disabled people.

“ Every public area like GP surgeries should publicise health, fitness, and wellbeing sessions run by local organisations. And during every contact with a health worker, the benefits of physical activity should be discussed and encouraged. ”



What Activity Alliance will do:

- We will support a greater connection and engagement between the sport and health sectors.
- We will grow our connections with the health sector and our insight on disabled people’s concerns and other factors that lead to low confidence and a fear of physical activity.



We call on people organising and delivering activities to:

- Develop your understanding of how people’s impairments and health conditions affect them. Listen to people’s concerns and offer personalised advice.
- Continue to show there are ways for everybody to be active and build more relationships with health organisations to increase and improve how disabled people are engaged across our communities.



We call on commissioners and strategic organisations to:

Improve links between health organisations, health professionals and activity providers so they can:

- Promote positive and consistent messages that physical activity is safe for disabled people.
- Encourage referrals and signposting to inclusive and appealing activities.



Further reading and useful resources

- [Moving Medicine’s risk statement](#) and [2019 Chief Medical Officer’s guidance for disabled people](#) for health and sport professionals on recommending physical activity.
- [Chartered Society of Physiotherapy’s Stronger My Way campaign](#) provides insight, training, and resources for health professionals.
- [The Richmond Group of Charities physical activity resource packs](#) for health, care, and physical activity workforce.
- Signpost to [Get Out Get Active](#) and [Get Yourself Active](#) activities, plus specific support from [National Disability Sports Organisations](#) and [We Are Undefeatable](#).

In addition to the findings and recommendations above, our full report includes findings on other important topics raised by disabled people and organisations in the sport and activity sector.

These topics include the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, finances and benefits, and differences between different groups of people. The full report provides more detail on how the findings differ by age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, number of impairments, and activity levels of disabled people.

Visit activityalliance.org.uk/annual-survey to view our Annual Disability and Activity Survey 2021-22 full research report.



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This document is also available in Word format. Please contact us if you need more support. Report published in June 2022.

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