

Activity Alliance
Annual Disability
and Activity Survey

2023-24

**Research
briefing**





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Introduction

Now in its fifth year, our Annual Disability and Activity Survey continues to track disabled people's perceptions and experiences of sport and activity. This evidence helps us, and our partners, achieve fairness for disabled people.

Our survey 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 between October and November 2023. 2,320 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. 18 disabled people also took part in a series of co-facilitated online workshops with disabled co-researchers to discuss the findings and ideas for future action. We thank our participants and co-researchers for their time and expertise.

Along with core questions on experiences, perceptions, and attitudes, this year's survey includes insights on how being active is affected by four key themes:

- **The legacy of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis**
- **Outdoor spaces and active travel**
- **Mental wellbeing and loneliness**
- **Representation and belonging**

These themes were developed from conversations with disabled people, and feedback from organisations that deliver and promote activity.

Since the survey began in 2019, there have been few positive trends in disabled people's participation and experiences. The findings highlight the continual need to collaborate with disabled people and sports and physical activity providers to achieve fairness in sports and activity.

This document is a summary of the report's key findings and recommendations. The full report is available on [our website](#).



Further information

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



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Participation and experience



- Sport England Active Lives data shows disabled people are consistently twice as likely to be inactive compared to non-disabled people (20.7% vs 40.8%).
- A significant ‘activity gap’ remains, only four in 10 (43%) disabled people feel they have the opportunity to be active as they want to be, compared to seven in 10 (69%) non-disabled people.
- Three-quarters (76%) of disabled people express a desire to be more active.
- The top motivation to be active continues to be about being healthy. Findings show an increased awareness of the benefits of being active, but there have been no improvements in attitudes about disabled people taking part in sport and physical activity.
- There was a feeling of not being understood and valued by society in the workshops.
- Two-thirds (65%) of disabled people enjoyed the last time they took part compared to three-quarters (78%) of non-disabled people.
- The top barrier to being active for disabled people is their health condition or impairment.

“ Obviously, being active has a positive effect on people’s mental health and doing something where you’re around other people will make you feel better.

Disabled person

”

Workshop participant suggestions for increasing participation include:

- Consult and collaborate with disabled people and their supporters to offer subsidised membership and activities across age groups and genders.
- Addressing and being aware of practical barriers and perceived expenses, as well as emotional barriers to participation and how to create a sense of belonging.
- More inclusive representation in marketing and communications.
- Provide tailored and targeted information regarding ease of access, subsidised activities, travel, and support provided in their local area.

“ There’s still discrimination. There (are) still negative attitudes.

Disabled person

”



Key findings

The legacy of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis



- There is a perceived decline in tailored opportunities since the COVID-19 pandemic and during the cost of living crisis.
- The rising cost of living is now affecting everyone's activity levels and how much people socialise, creating broad societal impact.
- Our findings show cost of living is disproportionately impacting disabled women, younger disabled people, ethnically diverse disabled people, and disabled people with five or more impairments.
- Low-income earners in the workshops were particularly concerned by the rising costs of basic bills such as energy and food, making it difficult to justify expenditure on paid membership, sport, and physical activity.
- Disabled people are more likely to consider sport and activity to be a luxury rather than a necessity.
- Just over two-fifths of disabled people (44%) agreed that when money is tight, the cost of being active is one of the first things they look to reduce.
- There is a consistent fear between years that being active will result in benefits or financial assistance being taken away, around two-fifths (38%) of disabled people have this fear.

“ Everybody's being affected by it, whether you're an individual person or whether you're a multinational company, you know, everybody's feeling that crunch.

Disabled person

”

“ The prices are sky high and with the cost of living at the moment, you have to make a choice.

Disabled person

”

Workshop participant suggestions for improving the legacy of COVID-19 and the cost of living crisis include:

- Implement subsidised membership and activities for disabled people.
- Remove cancellation fees for disabled people.
- Consult with disabled people on how to create more subsidised, targeted, and tailored opportunities with flexible schedules.



Outdoor spaces and active travel



- Consistent with findings from last year, disabled people want to take part in physical activity in outdoor spaces like parks, countryside, or woodland.
- However, less than half (44%) of disabled people say it is easy for them to physically access outdoor spaces (vs 78% of non-disabled people).
- Only 14% of disabled people say 'nothing stops me from being active in outdoor spaces' compared to 29% of non-disabled people.
- Planning outdoor activities can add a degree of anxiety for those who feel vulnerable about accessing and using these spaces due to the limited information on access and support, or the perceived cost of getting there.
- Travel via public transport can be daunting for disabled people compared to non-disabled people, particularly for users of mobility aids.
- Just under half (46%) of disabled people have a preference to actively travel.
- Travelling to an activity is considered a form of activity and exercise in its own right.

“ My top theme would be ‘outdoors’ – having (somewhere to go) where I feel confident and comfortable... and I can get out and do something outdoors.

Disabled person

”

Workshop participant suggestions for encouraging greater use of outdoor spaces and active travel include:

- Consult with disabled people to identify the support they need when travelling to and visiting outdoor spaces.
- Provide tailored and targeted information regarding ease of access, travel and support provided in local areas.
- Provide subsidised travel.
- Ensure there are available accessible parking spaces, more benches and accessible public toilets on walking trails and in other outdoors spaces.



Key findings

Mental wellbeing and loneliness



- Disabled people are still experiencing significantly poorer mental wellbeing and higher levels of loneliness than non-disabled people.
- Disabled people are significantly more likely than non-disabled people to say that they 'often' or 'always' feel lonely (20% vs 11%).
- Two-thirds of disabled people agree that being active could help them feel less lonely (66%).
- Loneliness is more common among certain groups of disabled people. These groups include disabled women, LGBT+ disabled people, disabled people in a lower social grade, those with five or more impairments, and younger disabled people.

“ (Activity) is important and it has helped with my mental health, knowing that I'm going somewhere every week and meeting up with loads of disabled people... feeling understood and included (makes a difference).

Disabled person

”

Workshop participant suggestions for the promotion of better mental health and wellbeing include:

- Consult with disabled people of all ages as to the type of opportunities they would like to see created.
- Create opportunities for disabled people of all ages and genders and ensure the environment is accessible, supportive, and inclusive.
- Ensure sport and physical activities are affordable and there is flexibility with regard to when they are provided.



Representation and belonging



- Disabled people are more than half as likely to ‘see people like me’ participating, working, and volunteering in sport and physical activity.
- Disabled people often feel over-looked and under-represented in many areas including the sport and physical activity sector.
- The Paralympics was considered a positive example of positive representation for disabled people, but most could not relate to Paralympic athletes and felt this did little to improve understanding for them on an individual and personal level.
- Only 9% of disabled people agree they have the opportunity to become a coach or take on a role in delivering sport or physical activity (compared to 24% of non-disabled people).
- Disabled men, younger disabled people, and disabled people in lower social grades are more likely to want the opportunity to become a coach or take on a role in delivering physical activity.
- Creating a sense of belonging for disabled people is just as important as having accessible opportunities.
- There has been a small increase from last year in disabled people saying activity leaders ‘included me in the session’ and ‘met my needs’ (83% and 75% respectively, up from 79% and 72% last year).

“ Disability still seems to not be at the forefront of a lot of people’s minds. It seems to be one of the forgotten things which I find really challenging.

Disabled person

”

Workshop participant suggestions for improving representation and creating a sense of belonging for disabled people:

- Recruit and train disabled and non-disabled volunteers and staff to provide support for disabled people to access and feel secure while engaging in sport and physical activities.
- Consult with disabled people on how best to reach and inform them about workforce-related opportunities.
- Provide tailored information about support and opportunities available for disabled people working and volunteering in the sector.
- Provide financial incentives and additional support for disabled people to transition to the workforce.
- Increase the representation of disabled people participating in, and delivering sport and physical activities on websites and marketing materials.



Based on the insight gathered from the research findings, we have identified key areas for improvement in collaboration with disabled people and organisations:

1. ‘Consult and collaborate with me and others from different backgrounds to create and shape accessible and inclusive opportunities’



Key findings:

Three-quarters of disabled people want to be more active. Disabled people feel there is still a lot of ignorance and discrimination within the sector. Characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic status, and multiple impairments can increase disparity.



What Activity Alliance will do:

- Continue to champion disabled people’s voices and person-centred approaches.
- Commit to continuing to build a framework that supports us to involve disabled people in shaping our work.
- Share our learning of working with disabled people with partners to empower them to do their own consultation and collaboration.



We call on sport and physical activity organisations to:

- Prioritise and value collaboration with disabled people and their supporters to create and shape opportunities for disabled people.
- Work together with local government and health providers to provide information and advice, and consult on opportunities that can be created for disabled people in the local area.
- Review your offer to make sure you are meeting disabled people’s needs for all ages and genders.



Further reading and useful resources

- Use Activity Alliance’s [Talk to Me ten principles](#) to understand the needs, wants and desires of disabled people in sport and physical activity.
- [Co-production guidance](#) from Disability Rights UK.
- [Check out our Get Out Get Active programme learning resources](#) on engaging different community groups and creating activities that put people’s needs first.

2. ‘Support me with affordable ways to be active’



Key findings:

Disabled people continue to face financial challenges due to the increased cost of living and extra expenses. They recognise the benefits being active has on mental health and wellbeing. However, they are more likely to see sport and activity as a luxury rather than a necessity and cut back on paid activities compared with essential items such as energy bills and food.



What Activity Alliance will do:

- We will commit to improving our insight to inform the sector of better practices and support more disabled people to be active.
- We will continue to advocate about **The Activity Trap** research and for funding to focus on tackling inequalities.



We call on sport and physical activity organisations to:

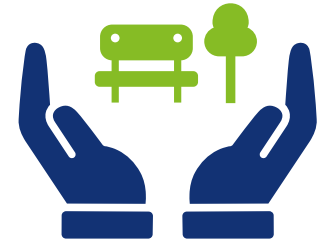
- Understand the financial challenges disabled people are facing and consider the affordability of your offer and be flexible.
- Recognise the financial benefits of engaging with disabled people in your local area.
- Be creative in the ways you plan and deliver activities, such as offering flexible bookings, and taking on a person-centred approach.



Further reading and useful resources

- **Sport England’s cost of living guidance and insight** on how to reduce energy costs and manage the impact of higher costs.
- Consider **supporting disabled people from low-income households to be active.**
- Consider the **spending power of disabled people.**
- Share inclusive opportunities through **Every Body Moves website.**
- Read our top asks for the next government in our **Manifesto.**

3. ‘Support me to confidently access outdoor spaces’



Key findings:

The majority of disabled people prefer to be active outdoors, particularly during a cost of living crisis when paid activities can seem expensive. They acknowledge that being active outside has a positive effect on their health, but less than half (44%) find it easy to physically access outdoor spaces. Disabled people are more likely to face barriers to being active in these spaces.



What Activity Alliance will do:

- Continue to raise awareness about the inequalities disabled people face to access outdoor spaces and share our insight with national and local partners.



We call on sport and physical activity organisations to:

- Provide information about access and support available to help disabled people feel more confident accessing outdoor spaces.
- Promote walking, wheeling, and cycling to places where people are active.
- Embed accessibility in your communication plans and across channels.



Further reading and useful resources

- [Sport England’s Active Design guidance](#) helps you to create and maintain active environments.
- Find out more from [Sustrans](#).
- Access our [inclusive communications resources](#).
- Learn about the challenges with access to outdoor spaces in [Groundwork UK Out of Bounds report](#).
- Read our top asks for the next government in our [Manifesto](#).



4. ‘Your workforce can help to foster a greater sense of belonging for me and other disabled people and help drive positive change’



Key findings:

The findings highlight that disabled people feel marginalised and overlooked when seeking opportunities to participate, work, and volunteer in the sport and physical activity sector. Making disabled people feel welcome in all areas, and challenging negative attitudes will motivate more disabled people to take part in sports and physical activities and transition into volunteer roles and/or the workforce.



What Activity Alliance will do:

- Maximise opportunities to work with our members and address inequalities through collaboration.
- Support organisations to embed inclusive practices into their work and across their workforces.



We call on sport and physical activity organisations to:

- Focus their attention on reviewing their workforce training programmes to increase confidence and competence in including and supporting disabled people in activities.
- Raise awareness about inclusive approaches and improve representation of disabled people across the workforce.
- Increase allyship and advocate for disabled people, challenge discrimination, and lead by example.
- Increase inclusive opportunities and create a more diverse community.



Further reading and useful resources

- Use Activity Alliance’s **Inclusive Activity Programme (IAP)** eLearning and **inclusive workforce practices** to equip workforces with the skills to provide more inclusive experiences.
- Improve your organisation by taking part in our **Leading Inclusion Training**.
- Use Mind’s resources to prioritise mental health alongside physical health, including **Mental health and physical activity toolkit** and **Mental Health Awareness in Sport eLearning**.
- **Moving Medicine’s risk assessment** helps address concerns around risk.
- Learn about **We are Undefeatable’s** movement supporting people with a range of long-term health conditions.

The **full report** includes useful resources and references for further reading for all sections.

In addition to the findings and recommendations above, our full report includes more data and insight on the topics presented in this summary. It includes more detail on how the findings differ by age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, and number of impairments.

Visit activityalliance.org.uk/annual-survey to view the full report.



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ActivityAlliance



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This document is also available in Word format. Please contact us if you need more support. Report published in June 2024.

Photo credit: Dwarf Sports Association UK, Special Olympics Great Britain and Cerebral Palsy Sport.

Activity Alliance is the operating name for the English Federation of Disability Sport. Registered Charity No. 1075180.