



See Sport
Differently



See Sport Differently

Research findings on physical activity and sports participation among people with sight loss

Executive summary

- Blind and partially sighted people are less physically active compared to the general public – they are twice as likely to be inactive.
 - People under 35 and living with sight loss have similar levels of activity to sighted people, but participation levels decrease after this age.
 - Although there is a desire to be more active, half of blind and partially sighted people feel that having sight loss stops them from exercising as much as they want to.
 - Accessibility and awareness, cost, confidence and transportation are all key barriers to accessing sport and physical activity for blind and partially sighted people.
 - Half of the general public do not strongly believe that blind and partially sighted people can play sport.
- Blind and partially sighted people are half as likely to attend live sporting events compared to the England average. Venue accessibility is a major barrier.
 - There is a lack of confidence among coaches to work with blind and partially sighted people.
 - Sporting clubs and governing bodies struggle to reach blind and partially sighted people, and they lack awareness of the barriers faced by people with sight loss trying to access sports.
 - Many disability-specific programmes received a funding cut during the Coronavirus pandemic, adding to pressures on clubs and governing bodies.



Foreword:

Challenging the UK to See Sport Differently

Introducing See Sport Differently, a three-year Sport England funded programme to increase participation and improve blind and partially sighted people's experience of sport and physical activity. We believe that working together, RNIB and British Blind Sport can make a significant difference to the lives of people with sight loss.

Sport and physical activity has the power to be transformational. It can create community and belonging, provide challenge and identity, and is the most wonderful way to stay healthy while having fun.

The latest evidence, as outlined in this report, provides a stark message about the importance of See Sport Differently. Blind and partially sighted people are twice as likely to be inactive, and less likely to participate in sport or physical activity compared to people without sight loss.

A key theme from our research is that no matter where someone is on their sight loss journey, perceptions of blindness and sight loss, stop people from engaging with sport and physical activity in the way they want. Many barriers faced by people with sight loss derive from a lack of awareness and understanding of sight loss across the sports sector – an issue reflected by the sporting workforce themselves.

The impact of COVID-19 has been significant across so many spheres of life, but it does provide an opportunity to re-engage people in sport. We've

seen that coronavirus has had an even greater impact on physical activity levels of disabled people. This research has shown us that there is a very clear desire from people with sight loss to be more active, linked to feelings of coming out of lockdown.

We now have a real opportunity to turn the dial on blind and partially sighted people's involvement with sport and physical activity. And based on the insight from this report, we have a clear plan of action to address barriers and change behaviours through See Sport Differently.

Together, we have developed a programme of activity to empower blind and partially sighted people with the knowledge, motivation and confidence to get active; and for those working in the sports sector, a greater understanding of sight loss so they can facilitate participation.

Together, we will See Sport Differently.



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Chapter 1:

The experiences of blind and partially sighted people

This section summarises our research into blind and partially sighted people's experiences of sports participation and physical activity.

Blind and partially sighted people are less physically active and participate less compared to the general public

Blind and partially sighted people are twice as likely to be inactive (that is doing less than 30 minutes of physical activity a week) compared to the UK average (53 per cent compared to 27 per cent) [1].

Blind and partially sighted people are **twice as likely** to be inactive compared to the UK average.

People with sight loss are also less likely to participate in physical activities compared to the England average and other disabled people. Using findings from the Active Lives Survey, at an overall population level, participation in the last 28 days was:

- 75 per cent for the whole population
- 61 per cent for all disabled people
- 52 per cent for blind and partially sighted people [1]

Younger blind and partially sighted people's activity levels are comparable to those without sight loss in the same age group, but the gap in activity widens significantly for people aged 35 plus

Blind and partially sighted people aged 16 to 34 have comparable levels of overall participation to the England average, but this group are still likely to face additional barriers to accessing a range of sporting opportunities.

Participation levels decrease significantly for blind and partially sighted people aged 35 and over. Among older age groups, the gap in activity between people with sight loss and the England average is consistent [1]. This means we can be more confident that the gap in participation is linked to barriers caused by sight loss rather than other factors such as age.

Personal perceptions of sight loss is a key barrier that stops blind and partially sighted people from feeling like they can participate in sport and physical activity

Half of blind and partially sighted people feel that having sight loss stops them from exercising as much as they want to.

More than half of blind and partially sighted people do not feel they can play sport. [2]

Blind and partially sighted people have a desire to be more active

The vast majority (80 per cent) of blind and partially sighted people agree that it is important to them to do exercise regularly and only six per cent disagree.

A third of blind and partially sighted people said there were sports or fitness activities that they would like to try but haven't been able to. Swimming, cycling, gym activities, tennis, horse riding, and archery are just a few of the variety of sports given. [2]

Accessibility, awareness, cost, confidence and transportation are all key barriers to accessing sport for blind and partially sighted people

A third of people with sight loss did not feel they had enough information about how sports like football, cricket or tennis can be made accessible for blind and partially sighted people.

The four main themes around barriers to accessing sport and physical activity were accessibility, awareness, cost, confidence and transportation. [2]

Only half

of the general public have a strong conviction that blind and partially sighted people can play sport.

Blind and partially sighted people are half as likely to attend live sporting events

Data from the Active Lives Survey highlights that blind and partially sighted people are less likely to attend live sports events compared to the England average.

10 per cent of blind and partially people had attended two or more live sports events in the last year. This compares to 21 per cent for the whole population [1].

Commentary could be made more accessible at live sporting events

Blind and partially sighted people expressed that there was not enough emphasis placed on accessible commentary and audio description for live sporting events, making them hard to engage with. Some commented that radio is the preferred commentary option and expressed a desire for the same level of commentary to be available on TV and at live games – especially as there was a view that sporting events may be too visual for people with sight loss, especially without the commentary [2].

“All the sports I’ve watched live I end up listening to on local radio or 5 Live as I have no vision to see the game. It’s an expensive day out even with a free carer, with travel, parking etc. it builds up.”
(Research participant)

seating, which is often in the same place, does not give disabled people the same freedom of choice. There is usually no option to get closer to where the sport is happening, meaning blind and partially sighted people are often excluded from being able to watch the sport.

“You don’t have the same choice as other people but also those areas are usually for people with mobility difficulties, this solution doesn’t suit all disabilities. One solution doesn’t fit all.”
(Research participant)

There is also a lack of information available on official venue websites to say what is available to disabled people (e.g. facilities), and what support may be available to blind and partially sighted people and those with additional needs. [2]

Venue accessibility prevents blind and partially sighted people from attending live sports

Blind and partially sighted people reported that there were often steep steps and high seats in sporting venues, which were ultimately not accessible to them. The placement of disabled



Credit: Football Association

Georgie's story

Georgie has Macular Degeneration. First playing Goalball as a teenager, she is now a British Paralympian who plays Internationally for Great Britain.

Accessibility is one of the key barriers that prevents blind and partially sighted people from participating in sport, and it was an issue Georgie faced at school.

"I've always enjoyed sport, but being at a mainstream school, it was hard for me to participate, because there weren't any games for partially sighted people."

Goalball has been designed for blind and partially sighted people, and is played on a volleyball sized court, with a goal the full width of the court at each end. The ball is the size of a basketball, but heavier with bells inside. All players are blindfolded and there are three people on each side. The aim of the game is to throw the ball at the opposition to try and score in their goal. Georgie explains:

"You dive across the floor to try and block the ball coming into your goal, using your body. It's all about split second reactions, concentration and is both a power and endurance sport."

At age 14, Georgie attended a Paralympic talent identification day, and began training with the GB Women's and Men's Goalball Team. She went from being unaware of Goalball to competing in the 2012 Paralympics and has also competed in eight European Championships, a World Championship and two Paralympic

qualifiers. But not everyone competes professionally. Like everyone else, people with sight loss are involved in all kinds of sport and activity at all levels.

"I'd say there's no such thing as a non-sporty person, you just need to find the right sport. Whatever the game, it's not just to do with being fit or competing, but how it makes you feel. I enjoy goalball so much, there's no way of replicating that adrenaline rush from winning a game."



Chapter 2:

Trends among sport clubs and governing bodies

This section summarises our research into the landscape of sport and exercise for blind and partially sighted people, from the perspective of both sports clubs and National Governing Bodies (NGBs). See reference [4].

Coaches lack the confidence to work with blind and partially sighted people

Coach confidence is a core contributing element to positive experiences and continued engagement in sports. Despite this, more than half (55 per cent) of NGBs reported a lack of

confidence among coaches to work with people with sight loss as the main barrier to sports participation [4]. However, only a quarter (26 per cent) of sports clubs reported this to be an issue [4].

Educational development can combat the issue, allowing coaches to become more inclusive of blind and partially sighted people within their sport. Additionally, sports clubs told us that staff and volunteers working at their clubs needed practical experience of working with blind and partially sighted people, rather than classroom-based learning.



Kathryn's story

Kathryn has Retinitis Pigmentosa. When she was looking for an activity to boost her spirits, she took up rowing four years ago, and is the only blind rower at her club.

"I discovered rowing a few years ago, when I was looking for something to help my mental and physical health. I went through a really bad patch at the beginning of 2017 – my partner nearly died, and I was having anxiety."

"With rowing, there's a particular way of hearing what's going on around you and concentrating on moving the boat. You also get the feel-good sensation from doing exercise."

There is a lack of confidence among many coaches to work with blind and partially sighted people, but Kathryn has been fortunate in this respect. She explains:

"My coach Peter really enjoys what he does and finds it a challenge. He's also received a civic award from our local Mayor for his role. I think if I'd had anybody else at the beginning, I might not still be rowing."

"Peter was saying recently, that I'm a different person now to when I started. I don't know what the future holds. But I'm willing to grab what I can at the moment with both hands, especially with rowing."



Sporting clubs and governing bodies struggle to reach blind and partially sighted people

Clubs and NGBs tell us that despite opportunities for blind and partially sighted people existing within sport, there is a highly limited uptake of these opportunities, and they find it difficult to reach blind and partially sighted people.

While some had casual ties to local sight loss organisations, there was a desire for more formalised connections between clubs, NGBs and the sight loss sector. Some NGBs suggested partnerships as a way of developing and advertising opportunities to help target blind and partially sighted people.

- Only 40 per cent of National Governing Bodies have an awareness of local sight loss organisations, and of these, 60 per cent feel they have limited connection to them. [4]



Promoting opportunities in an accessible way

Very few NGBs use British Blind Sport's "Activity Finder" when advertising their engagement opportunities. Clubs and NGBs both make use of social media to promote engagement opportunities. While social media can be a good way to attract new audiences, there can be issues around images and graphics not being accessible for those using screen readers (unless alt text is provided). Additionally, two thirds of blind and partially sighted people are over 75 and may have difficulties using social media [4]. NGBs also make use of mailing lists – but as these require prior engagement, they would not be useful in attracting and engaging new people.

The formats used by clubs and NGBs were broadly accessible – Word and PDF, with clubs more likely to use the more accessible Plain text format. However, both made significant use of images, which need to include alt text to ensure accessibility.

There is a lack of awareness about the barriers faced by blind and partially sighted people trying to access sports

NGBs and sports clubs lack awareness of the barriers that blind and partially sighted people face within sport – including the need for accessible marketing, how people with sight loss might participate (which relates to coach confidence and sight loss awareness among other staff and volunteers) and transport to venues.

Transport

Although transport is recognised as a barrier, for example just over half (52 per cent) of sports clubs were aware that transport to access venues and events was an issue for blind and partially sighted people, this is still low, and for NGBs this awareness falls to a quarter (25 per cent) [4]. Although 75 per cent of clubs use public transport timetables to plan their sessions, only 20 per cent of NGBs consider transport when planning events [4].

- Only 50 per cent of NGBs have awareness of public transport timetables and locations (such as bus stops) near their venues.
- 60 per cent of NGBs do not share information about public transport options prior to an event.
- Only 50 per cent of clubs put public transport information on their advertisements (but encouragingly, all those we spoke to offer meet and greet options). [4]



Additional barriers to participation from the point of view of clubs and NGBs

In addition to the key barriers recognised by the sports sector – such as coach confidence and transport – clubs and NGBs identified a number of other barriers which they believe contribute to low participation in sport and physical activity among people with sight loss.

Poor messaging around the importance of sport for blind and partially sighted people

NGBs told us that there is not enough strong messaging to encourage blind and partially sighted people to take up sport. This leads to many people with sight loss thinking that sport is either not for them or not accessible to blind and partially sighted people generally.

Low confidence among people with sight loss

Alongside low confidence of coaches to work with blind and partially sighted people, just over a quarter (26 per cent) of clubs mentioned a lack of confidence among blind and partially sighted people to take part in sport [4].

Fewer competitive opportunities

NGBs also felt that blind and partially sighted people have fewer opportunities to compete alongside their peers and identified this as a barrier to longer term engagement with sport.

Lack of funding, equipment, and venues

Local clubs are unable to access venues, resources or equipment suitable for blind and partially sighted people. In addition, clubs may not have a stable or consistent venue which is required for blind and partially sighted people to continuously take part.



Credit: British Blind Sport

Addendum:

The impacts of COVID-19

Blind and partially sighted people reported being less likely to be active during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was due to people exercising from home more. However, two in five people of working age with sight loss reported wanting to be more active in the future because of the pandemic [2]. This reduces to a third of people aged 65 and over [2].

NGBs and sports clubs were also asked about the impact of COVID-19. There was an agreement that there were problems surrounding access to transport and venues, as well as a lack of funding and staff available, and there has been a general cut in funding for sporting programmes, especially those for disability. Those who were involved in sport prior to coronavirus were eager to return, but there was some nervousness from those who used public transport to access venues [4].

References

1. Active Lives Survey 2019/20 (Sport England, 2021)
2. See Sport Differently: research on sports participation and physical activity among blind and partially sighted people (RNIB, 2021, Unpublished)
3. Public attitudes towards sight loss: 2020 survey, ICM Unlimited (Feb 2021, unpublished)
4. See Sport Differently: National Governing Body and Sports Club Research (British Blind Sport, 2021, unpublished)

Appendix 1: Methodology

Study 1: See Sport Differently: research on sports participation and physical activity among blind and partially sighted people (RNIB)

This study considered the experiences and perspectives of blind and partially sighted people trying to engage with sporting activities. The report is based on four research strands, implemented so RNIB could provide an in-depth investigation into the experiences of blind and partially sighted people from a mix of sources.

The first strand of the research was a literature review surrounding sports and physical activity among blind and partially sighted people. This was comprised of a range of published journal articles and specific research studies.

The second strand was RNIB's Connect Voices Tracker survey; a regular survey of blind and partially sighted people designed to understand their experiences, as well as spot and monitor real-time developments to measure how RNIB performs. The specific dates of data collection for this strand of research were between May and July 2021. 416 people in total were reached via phone and online channels.

Focus groups were the third strand. These groups ran every quarter and consisted of questions for blind and partially sighted people about engaging with sport and maintaining exercise levels. Over the quarter, there were two monthly focus groups consisting of a

total of 10 participants. All participants were either blind or partially sighted and had varying degrees of involvement with RNIB.

Finally, a secondary analysis of the Active Lives Survey was completed. This survey is an annual survey and aims to understand areas involved in health lifestyles and leisure. It is conducted on behalf of government agencies including Sport England and Public Health England. The survey is administered by Ipsos MORI.

For the final phase, we were able to identify someone as having sight loss in the Active Lives Survey sample based on their answers to the following questions:

- Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses that have lasted or are expected to last 12 months or more?
- Do these physical or mental health conditions or illnesses have a substantial effect on your ability to do normal daily activities?
- Does this disability or illness affect you in any of the following areas: Visual - includes total blindness and low vision that cannot be corrected with standard glasses or contact lenses.

Only respondents who answered "yes" to all three questions have been included in the blind and partially sighted grouping. This identified 2,500 respondents who were blind or partially sighted (1.4 per cent of the total survey sample).

Study 2: See Sport Differently: National Governing Body and Sports Club Research (British Blind Sport)

The research conducted by British Blind Sport consisted of three stages. Firstly, 31 sports clubs/sports providers and 20 National Governing Bodies were surveyed. Then an in-depth survey was offered and received

14 responses. Finally, five National Governing Bodies took part in an interview. These governing bodies were identified as 'project partners', and the interviews were designed to gain a better understanding of the specific environments for delivering inclusive sport for blind and partially sighted people. The five National Governing Bodies included in the interviews were the FA, the LTA, Swim England, Goalball and England Athletics.





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