

## **Supporting disabled people** from low-income households to be active

Being physically active is an important part of maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Regular physical activity provides many benefits such as improving mental and physical health, quality of life, wellbeing and independence.

In 2019, the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMO) published guidelines on the recommended amount of physical activity disabled people should be doing for general health benefits. The guidelines provide guidance to disabled people, health professionals, policymakers and others working to promote physical activity, sport and exercise. [View the CMO physical activity guidelines for disabled adults, young people and children.](#)

There are many barriers that can prevent disabled people from accessing opportunities to be active. This includes having the financial resources or essentials for a minimum standard of living. If a person's basic human needs cannot be met, it is often referred to as poverty. This can affect whether some disabled people can or want to take part in various activities.

We have created a series of effective engagement factsheets that encourage you to think about the different ways to include disabled people in physical activity. This factsheet provides insight on how poverty can affect disabled people's lives and their opportunities to be active.



# Poverty among disabled people

Poverty is a complex problem that affects millions of people in the UK. The causes and consequences of poverty are wide-ranging. They include social, economic and political elements.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>1</sup> have identified a relationship between disability and poverty:



**13.4 million UK adults** live in poverty.



**Nearly a third (29%)** of disabled people are in poverty.



**Just under half of all people in poverty** are either disabled themselves or live with a disabled person (around 6.7 million people).



A disabled working-age adult is **almost twice as likely to be in poverty** as a non-disabled working-age adult (35% vs 18%).

# Activity levels among low socioeconomic groups

Insight from Sport England<sup>2</sup> shows:

- Disabled people from lower socioeconomic groups are much more likely to be physically inactive than disabled people from higher socioeconomic groups (45% vs 29%).
- Disabled people from lower socioeconomic groups are nearly three times more likely than non-disabled people from higher socioeconomic groups to be physically inactive (45% vs 17%).

Despite this, we know that nearly four in five disabled people (77%) want to be more active.<sup>3</sup> So here lies the challenge. How can we support disabled people from lower socioeconomic groups to be more physically active?



# How low socioeconomic status impacts activity

It is important to understand the impact that poverty can have on activity levels. Here, we highlight some of the factors that can influence disabled people's engagement in activity.

## Unemployment and low income

Low or unreliable income can prevent disabled people from accessing certain activity options. For example, signing up for a direct debit at the gym is often cheaper than the pay as you go option.

- The disability employment rate was 52.6% in July to September 2022, compared to 82.5% for non-disabled people – the disability employment gap is wider for disabled people with no qualifications.<sup>4</sup>
- On average, disabled people earn a sixth (16%) less than non-disabled people and take home £2.05 less an hour than non-disabled people. Disabled women face the biggest pay gap.<sup>5</sup>
- Six in 10 disabled people (60%) who receive disability benefits said they rely on them to be active.<sup>6</sup>

## Personal experience and perceptions

Negative experiences and personal perceptions of sport and physical activity can lead some disabled people to see being active as a low priority in their lives.

- Disabled people in lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to have positive perceptions and experiences of physical activity and its outcomes.<sup>7</sup>
- Just under two in five disabled people (37%) say the fear of losing their disability benefits prevents them from being active.<sup>8</sup>
- Only a third of disabled people (33%) in skilled manual labour jobs think that 'sport' is for someone like them, compared to 40% of disabled people in higher managerial positions.<sup>9</sup>
- Parents of disabled children in lower socioeconomic groups find it more difficult to get their children involved in sports and physical activity.<sup>10</sup>

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# £2.05

less an hour, compared to non-disabled people.



## Extra living costs

Financial strain can affect some disabled people's involvement. Disabled people are likely to have a lower standard of living because they face extra inescapable costs. These include both necessities such as shelter, heating and clothing, and specialist goods and services. These extra living costs combined with cost of living increases can lead to financial vulnerability.

- On average, disabled people face an extra £975 per month in costs.<sup>11</sup>
- 91% of disabled adults are worried about energy bills for the winter of 2023.<sup>12</sup>
- 22% of disabled people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds say lack of money or finances stops them being active.<sup>13</sup>
- It costs more for disabled people to be active. The average spend each month for active disabled people is £68, compared to £46 for non-disabled people.<sup>14</sup>

## Social connections and neighbourhood environments

Loneliness, limited social connections and financially deprived neighbourhoods can reduce disabled people's opportunities to be active. Individuals may not know what options are available locally, barriers could include cost, the design of the local environment or inaccessible and unaffordable transport. There can also be a lack of suitable facilities and access to inclusive open spaces for sport and physical activity.

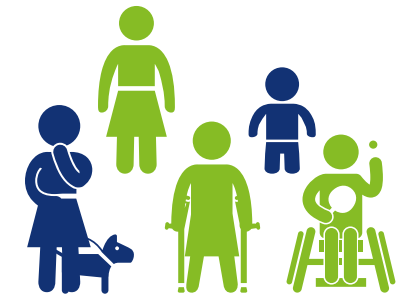
- Almost two thirds (61%) of disabled people are now chronically lonely, rising to seven in 10 (70%) of young disabled people.<sup>15</sup>
- 26% of disabled people in the lowest socioeconomic grades feel lonely.<sup>16</sup>
- One-third (32%) of disabled people do not have basic digital skills. This increases to more than half (56%) of adults with multiple impairments.<sup>17</sup>
- Nearly half (44%) of people living in the most financially deprived tenth of the population are disabled.<sup>18</sup>
- Across England, there are higher rates of disability in areas with higher levels of local poverty.
- Disabled people in lower socioeconomic groups are less likely to be active in outdoor spaces.<sup>19</sup> But we know, access to natural spaces is not equal. People living in areas of high poverty are less likely to visit natural spaces.<sup>20</sup>



## Wellbeing and mental health

A person's mental health can have a big impact on their desire to be active. Someone experiencing low mental health may struggle with motivation to be active. They may be experiencing feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, loss of confidence and increased isolation. This could mean sport or physical activity feels unimportant or too challenging at that particular time.

- Higher rates of mental health problems are associated with poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. 40% of disabled people in the lowest socioeconomic grade report low happiness levels. Characteristics, such as gender, disability, age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation and family status also influence the rates.<sup>21</sup>
- Disabled people report lower levels of overall wellbeing than non-disabled people. Wellbeing measures include life satisfaction, happiness, feeling things in life are worthwhile, feeling able to achieve goals, anxiety and loneliness. Over two thirds (70%) of disabled people now say that social isolation is affecting their mental health and wellbeing, with two in five (40%) reporting an impact on their physical health.<sup>22</sup>
- Two-thirds of disabled people who felt lonely agreed being active could help them feel less lonely.<sup>23</sup>
- Since the pandemic, nearly half (46%) of disabled people are less able to be active due to changes to their mental health.<sup>24</sup>



## Two in five

disabled people with mental health problems said they felt anxious yesterday.



# Considerations for successful engagement and delivery

Engaging disabled people from low-income households to take part in sport and physical activity requires understanding and flexibility of approach. When planning and delivering opportunities, sport and activity providers should aim to:

**Be informed** about how poverty and intersectionality can affect some disabled people's lives and the barriers this creates to being active. It is not just about having enough money. Personal safety, job security, previous experiences and mental wellbeing are also key.

**Recognise** that it is realistic and appropriate for disabled people from low-income households to give physical activity little or no priority. Life pressures and cost implications can be overwhelming. Activity providers should consider the affordability of their offer.

**Be flexible** in your approach and prepared to offer people extra support to overcome barriers such as low self-esteem, anxiety or a lack of confidence. Positive and considerate interactions at an early stage can be crucial.

**Make time** to get out into your community and ask disabled people what would encourage them to be more active. Tapping into personal motivations and understanding their values is key to changing behaviours.

**Involve disabled people** when designing and planning activity sessions. This is known as co-production or co-design. This is an important process that empowers individuals, builds confidence and ensures the activity is suitable and meets the needs of participants. Engage with organisations that support disabled people. Ask disabled people what being active means to them, and what would encourage them to be more active.

**Collaborate** with local health agencies, primary care networks, voluntary sectors, local authorities, schools and disabled people's user-led organisations. This will help to reach the least active disabled people in your community.

**Celebrate and share** your success through positive storytelling, showing the impact your activities and events have through the lens of people's lived experience. Sharing success stories can encourage others to give it a go.

For more information and guidance read [Activity Alliance's 10 Principles Resource](#) for effective engagement. These principles support sport and leisure providers to deliver more appealing and inclusive opportunities for disabled people.



# Reference list

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- 1 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, UK Poverty Report 2023.
- 2 Sport England, Active Lives Adult Survey, November 2021/22.
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- 4 Office for National Statistics, Employment of disabled people, 2022.
- 5 Trades Union Congress, Disability Pay Gap, 2022.
- 6 Activity Alliance, Annual Disability and Activity Survey, 2022/23.
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- 10 Activity Alliance, My Active Future, 2020.
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This factsheet is part of a series of [Activity Alliance engagement resources](#) available on our website.

This factsheet was originally created in partnership with Professor Tess Kay, Deputy Dean and Head of Sport at the University of Stirling.

**Version two:** Publication date November 2023.

**Photo credits:** British Blind Sport.

This document is available in Word format. Please contact us if you need support. Activity Alliance is the operating name for the English Federation of Disability Sport. Registered Charity no. 1075180.

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