

Inclusive volunteering in sport

Supporting young Disabled people to get and stay involved

British Blind Sport

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Executive summary

British Blind Sport's See My Voice sports leadership programme has supported young Disabled people to volunteer in sport since 2018. While successful, delivery of the programme has highlighted systemic challenges around the recruitment and sustained involvement of young Disabled people as sports volunteers.

British Blind Sport – alongside the other six National Disability Sports Organisations – commissioned this research to understand how to overcome these challenges and help young Disabled get and stay involved in sports volunteering.

The research aimed to identify the key drivers to incentivise young Disabled people to volunteer, what helps them to volunteer and what barriers hinder them, and what could be improved across the sports sector. It consisted of 19 interviews with young Disabled people who had or were interested in volunteering.

The research was exploratory: a review found little to no existing evidence on the motivators or barriers to sport or general volunteering for young Disabled people.

What motivates young Disabled people to volunteer in sport?

Motivators for young Disabled people to volunteer included the potential to:

- feel good through seeing and helping others to succeed;
- increase the number of Disabled people playing in sport, to increase competition, strength and depth of squads, and visibility of sports;
- help others to be physically active and experience the benefits – in line with the wider evidence base for Disabled adults and all young people – especially where young people had experienced this themselves;
- gain skills and experience to help them in their career – in line with the evidence base for all young people – or sport; and
- share their lived experience and skills with others, especially when people's participation had been affected by an acquired or progressive disability.

How do young Disabled people volunteer in sport?

Most young Disabled people who had volunteered in sport said they had been proactively approached. Only a few had sought roles out for themselves.

Young Disabled people had volunteered or wanted to volunteer in a range of roles, most of these were directly involved with sporting activity (e.g. coaching, officiating). What these roles looked like in practice were highly individualised to young people's circumstances and needs.

The main factors helping young Disabled people to volunteer were support, an open-minded inclusive culture and familiarity with the environment.

The main barriers that hindered were: fear of stigma and judgement; lack of confidence; transportation and commitment; and life stage transitions. These findings align with the evidence for marginalised young people and Disabled adults.

What helps young Disabled people to volunteer in sport long-term?

There were only a few reasons as to why young Disabled people would stop volunteering outright. These included experiencing tokenistic or short-termism approaches to inclusion – which can be overcome by organisations ensuring flexible, inclusive approaches are continued throughout the volunteer journey – and major changes to health or life stage transitions.

Three main areas were raised that could influence whether a young Disabled person would keep volunteering or not included seeing progress or benefits in the people you support, recognition of effort and social benefits from roles.

Conclusions and ideas for action

The findings from this qualitative study offer valuable insights for organisations who want to motivate, recruit, and retain young Disabled people in sports volunteering.

The research has shed light on the appetite that exists among some young Disabled people to get involved sports volunteering, despite the societal barriers they face. It also highlights the scope for NDSOs to support sports organisations around the country to be better at creating opportunities that are inclusive, accessible, and that maximise returns for the volunteers, the people they support and organisations.

Messaging around volunteer recruitment should focus on the difference that young Disabled people can make to sports participation. This builds on the main motivating factors of helping others enjoy sport, benefit from, and become better at it, as well as to 'give back' and increase the number of Disabled people playing (a) sport.

Some young Disabled, potential volunteers need to be directly approached to engage them in sports volunteering. Asking about or applying to volunteer roles can

feel scary for young Disabled people: only a few that we spoke with were confident enough to approach staff, seek out a role, or respond to an open advertisement.

Young Disabled people want to see sports organisations ‘practice what they preach’ with inclusive approaches before they commit to volunteer roles. Evidence that an organisation understood their needs and would adapt and support them as required was one of the main deciding factors in whether to volunteer somewhere or not. Young people also want an overall sense that organisations are welcoming, inclusive and support positive attitudes towards disability.

Organisations need to be prepared to provide additional encouragement and words of affirmation to support young Disabled people who are worried they will not be able to do a role, make a difference, or compete with non-disabled people, as well as those who fear stigma from participants or parents because of their impairment.

The continued involvement and contribution of young Disabled people is most likely to be affected by changes in health or life circumstances. Changes in health can be temporary (e.g. fluctuating health) or more permanent (e.g. progressive conditions) and may necessitate a change in how or how often volunteers can volunteer.

Seeing the positive impact of their efforts on other people is one of the main factors that influence whether young Disabled people continue to volunteer or not. This was especially the case for young people whose main motivation was to make a difference in others’ lives or who were concerned about whether they could make a difference. Volunteers should also be recognised for their hard work, especially where they have overcome specific challenges because of their impairment.

Sports organisations need further support to recruit, engage and welcome young Disabled people as volunteers. A key part of removing barriers is ensuring that sports organisations have the policies, training, and tools to ensure that staff are fully aware of the cultural and attitudinal barriers young Disabled people experience, how these can be overcome, and are confident in their role in this.

The contribution of Disabled people as volunteers needs to be made more visible and celebrated. Representation of Disabled sportspeople and sports volunteers remains low, with few role models and ‘stories to inspire success’ for young Disabled people. More coverage and more Disabled volunteers (of all ages) at major sports events would help normalise Disabled people in sports volunteering roles.

Further research in this area would strengthen these initial findings. This research only spoke with a few young people with hearing impairments or young people with any form of cognitive impairment, which means the findings do not present a complete picture across all the main types of impairment.

Introduction

British Blind Sport helps blind and partially sighted people to get active and play sport. It encourages adults and children to participate in activities at all levels, from grassroots to the Paralympic Games.

British Blind Sport – in partnership with UK Deaf Sport and Sport Birmingham – has also supported young Disabled people to volunteer in sport since 2018.

The See My Voice sports leadership programme – originally for blind and partially sighted young people but since extended to become a pan-disability programme – has supported over 159 young Disabled people to contribute 2650+ hours of time to clubs, events and sports organisations since 2018. The programme also aims to support providers to offer more meaningful volunteering experiences, and support organisations to adopt inclusive volunteering practices.

While successful, the delivery of the programme has highlighted structural inequalities and systemic challenges around the recruitment and sustained involvement of young Disabled people as sports volunteers.

These challenges are in line with wider research around Disabled people and volunteering more generally, which identifies that stigma and stereotypes affect the recruitment and retention of Disabled people as volunteers, and acknowledges that volunteering needs to be more inclusive and accessible to a wider range of people.¹

At the same time, volunteering and disability is still an under-researched area. Existing research tends to refer to Disabled people as a single homogenous group, with little exploration or evidence around the impact of different ages, types of impairment or other intersecting identities.

Research background

The research was informed by a light touch rapid evidence assessment to identify relevant academic and non-academic literature about young Disabled people, volunteering, and volunteering in sport.

The rapid evidence assessment confirmed that there is:

¹ [Disability and social participation: The case of formal and informal volunteering – PubMed \(nih.gov\)](#)

- little to no evidence on the motivators and barriers to sport volunteering for young Disabled people;
- little to no evidence on young Disabled people and general volunteering;
- some evidence around Disabled adults and volunteering, including sports;
- some evidence around young people and volunteering, including enablers and barriers;

Little is therefore known about volunteering and the experience of young Disabled people with different types of impairment, nor their specific experience of sports volunteering.

Research aims and scope

The research was commissioned by British Blind Sport and developed in partnership with the other six National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs).²

It aims to better understand how to improve recruitment and sustain the involvement of more young Disabled people in the sport volunteering workforce.

This report answers the following questions:

- What are the key drivers to incentivise young Disabled people to take up and commit to volunteering in sport?
- What are the barriers faced by young Disabled people when considering volunteering in sport?
- What needs to be improved across the sport sector to encourage increased recruitment and retention of young Disabled people into volunteering roles?

The focus of this report is therefore more formal volunteering that happens through sports organisations or clubs. Sports volunteering is defined as where people provide unpaid help to take part in sport. This can involve direct (e.g. coaching, officiating), or indirect (e.g. a marshal at races, helping to organise/run events) support.

The research is also framed within the social model of disability, which sets out that while people have impairments, discrimination and exclusion is not an inevitable consequence of this - rather, people are disabled by attitudes and barriers in society.³

Disability within this report includes people with physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments, and learning disabilities and difficulties (including people who are

² NDSOs are impairment specific organisations that provide sporting opportunities and offer advice and support: British Blind Sport; Cerebral Palsy Sport; Dwarf Sports Association UK; LimbPower; Special Olympics Great Britain; UK Deaf Sport; and WheelPower.

³ [The Social Model of Disability – Inclusion London](#)

neuro-diverse). However it is important to acknowledge that these are not the only facets of people's identity and these likely intersect with other identities, experiences, and circumstances.

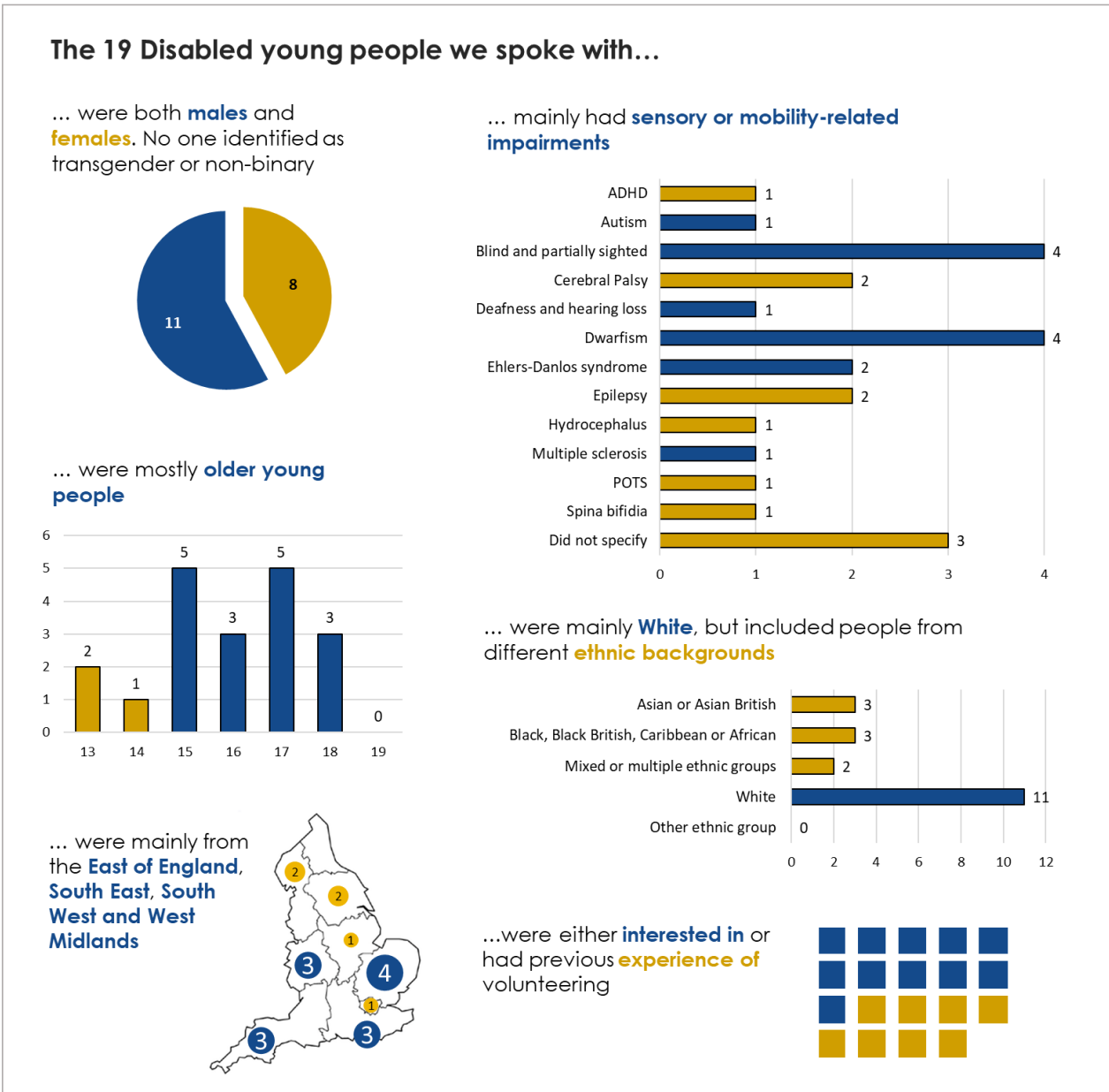
The research findings will inform the development of the See My Voice programme and the wider advocacy and practice of the NDSOs.

Research approach

The research involved semi-structured online and face-to-face interviews with 19 young Disabled people. A methodology can be found in **Appendix A**.

A summary of who we spoke with is included below.

Fig A: Summary of participant demographics



This report

This report is a thematic summary of what we heard from young Disabled people who were volunteering or interested in volunteering in sport.

It is divided into three chapters:

- What motivates young Disabled people to volunteer in sport?
- How do young Disabled people volunteer in sport?
- What helps young Disabled people to volunteer in sport long-term?

Each chapter presents an overview of what is known from the wider evidence base around volunteering and disability, followed by a thematic analysis of young Disabled people's views.

It concludes with answers to each of the main research questions and recommendations for British Blind Sport and the other NDSOs, as well as sports providers.

What motivates young Disabled people to volunteer in sport?

Summary

- There is little existing evidence about what motivates young Disabled people to volunteer in sport, or volunteer more generally.
- Young Disabled people we spoke with in this research said motivators for them to volunteer included the potential to:
 - feel good through seeing and helping others to succeed;
 - increase the number of Disabled people playing in sport, to increase competition, strength and depth of squads, and visibility of sports;
 - help others to be physically active and experience the benefits – in line with the wider evidence base for Disabled adults and all young people – especially where young people had experienced this themselves;
 - gain skills and experience to help them in their career – in line with the evidence base for all young people – or sport; and
 - share their lived experience and skills with others especially when people's participation had been affected by an acquired or progressive disability. This contrasts with the evidence base for all young people, for whom this is not a motivator.
- Messages to motivate young Disabled people volunteer should emphasise the difference young Disabled volunteers can make, and make them feel valued; provide an overview of activities and benefits, such as social benefits, training or 'freebies'; and include real-life stories and images.

What we know from the evidence base

There is little existing evidence about what motivates young Disabled people to volunteer in sport or volunteer more generally.

There is evidence on what motivates Disabled adults to get involved in general volunteering.⁴ The main motivators include:

⁴ [Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People – Spirit of 2012](#)

- Making a difference, including wanting to improve things/help people or feeling there was a need in the community;
- Having spare time;
- Having a personal connection with a particular cause/organisation;
- Having a chance to use skills and wanting to meet people/make friends; and
- Volunteering as an alternative to, or transition into, paid work.

There is also evidence on what motivates young people (aged 18-24) to volunteer. While younger people's main motivations were also having a personal connection to a cause or organisation and wanting to make a difference, they were much more likely to cite volunteering to help them progress in their career/to get a recognised qualification (25% compared to 2% of those aged 55 years and over).⁵

Findings from this research

This section outlines what motivates the young Disabled people we spoke with to volunteer in sport, and explores what messages they think would help more young Disabled people to get involved.

What motivates them?

Five main motivators were raised: the potential to feel good; increasing the number of Disabled people playing a sport; helping others to have the same opportunities to be physically active and experience the benefits of this as they had; gaining skills or experience; and sharing expertise and skills to the benefit of others.

The potential to feel good was one the most common motivations to volunteer among both young people interested in volunteering and those with experience of it. This was linked to what it would feel like to see the people they supported improve and achieve their best, and having a sense of pride in their contribution towards this.

“Being able to see a swimmer and know that you helped them overcome their fear... the pride I would have in that would be immense. Pride in myself, the swimmer; knowing that I had helped someone to get their goal.”

– Female, 15, blind and partially sighted

It also stemmed from the idea that young people thought volunteering in sport would be a fun, enjoyable experience, both in terms of helping people, being involved with sports that they enjoyed, or doing it alongside others.

⁵ [Time Well Spent 2023: A National Survey on the Volunteer Experience – NCVO](#)

Increasing the number of Disabled people playing a sport was another common reason for wanting to volunteer and help other young Disabled people get involved in sport. For some, this was rooted in personal interests:

"I'd be interested in doing it because basically all the people [at my club] don't have any impairments like me. For me, it is harder because of my impairments – it's fast paced, you're meant to be ducking, hitting people – and the group that I'm in is just [non-disabled] girls. It'd be nice if I were able to help coach [more Disabled] people [to do a sport that I enjoy]."

– Female, 15, blind and partially sighted

Others were motivated by wider ambitions. For example, helping to increase the popularity of more niche sports such as blind football (compared to goalball), or to increase the competitive strength of their teams and clubs.

Helping others to be physically active and experience the benefits of this was also cited as a reason to volunteer, in line with the evidence base for Disabled adults and children and young people more generally. Most of the young people who said this had experienced improvements in their own health, strength, or experience of their condition through physical activity, and wanted others to experience these benefits.

"I enjoy sport. It helped me with strengthening. I can now do my own transfers... I want to support people who haven't had that chance to be more independent."

– Female, 14, paraplegic and experiences seizures

Also linked to this was the idea of **giving back** to a sport. Young Disabled people wanted to help to ensure that others had the same opportunities as them. Several of these young people remembered being helped by volunteers when they started.

The potential to **gain skills or experience** that might help them in their career or sport was mentioned, also in line with the wider evidence around volunteering motivations for all children and young people. Several young people with experience of volunteering spoke about how they had gained experience that would help them to work towards professional roles such as a PE teacher, coach, or dietician:

"I want to do coaching in the future, I know more of what to do now, I've tried different things and have more skills now"

- Male, 15, Cerebral Palsy and ADHD

Benefits such as this were not always career focused. One young person spoke about observing how others played while volunteering helped them to improve their

own game. Another young person that volunteered as a ballboy at a local football club was motivated in part by the chance to meet the first team players.

Older young Disabled people often saw volunteering in sport as an opportunity to **share their expertise and skills to the benefits of others**. This goes against the wider evidence base for children and young people, where only a small minority (9%) of 18–24 year-olds cited this as a motivation.⁶ These were typically young people who had previously played a lot of sport, but their participation had been affected by an acquired or progressive disability, or young people who came from 'sporty' families and had technical knowledge of the sport. These young people also saw volunteering as a chance **to stay involved with a sport** they loved in a different way.

Linked to this, several young people were motivated to volunteer in sport because they felt their **lived experience of disability** would give them a better understanding of the anxieties, challenges and how to overcome them, and therefore make them more relatable and approachable than non-disabled volunteers.

Volunteer portrait: Imran

Imran is interested in volunteering as part of the coaching team at his local Badminton club. He is 17 years old and lives with Multiple Sclerosis. He comes from a sporty family and has been interested in and benefited from sport since an early age; he wants other young people to have that opportunity.

"Badminton is a family sport, I got interested from my dad. He's a very good player – he almost became a professional player. I enjoyed going to sport with him and doing it with him... I was really involved with the sport and loved being around the stadium. From then on, my interest in the sport has continued improving – it's a very good way for me to relax and enjoy myself. It's also good for my physical health too.

Because of my condition, I cannot be a very efficient player even if I wish to, but because of my relationship with my dad, I learnt a lot about techniques and skills in the sport... I feel like I can contribute that.... I've always been looking for opportunities that can make me volunteer in that capacity. Maybe a group of children... since I have the knowledge and can't use it for myself.

Being someone who really got into sport at a young age... I understand it and like that atmosphere. This is more like my opportunity to make that come true and make it possible for younger kids. It's also a thing of pride for me to volunteer, contribute and help kids be happy."

⁶ [Time Well Spent 2023: A National Survey on the Volunteer Experience – NCVO](#)

What messages might encourage more to volunteer in sport?

Young Disabled people were asked what messages sports providers could share to motivate them or other young Disabled people for a particular role. Their answers build on the findings previously outlined in this section:

- Emphasise the difference that volunteers make in the lives of others, in terms of them taking part in sport and wider benefits – supported by stories or photos;
- Provide an overview of what types of activities a volunteer would do (with an emphasis on fun, if possible), whether it will be with others (i.e. social benefits);
- Make young Disabled people feel valued – emphasise the importance of their lived experience and how it can help sports providers and participants;
- Offer training to provide early reassurance to more anxious participants and appeal to those interested in gaining skills or experience;
- Include clear information on any benefits or 'perks' you can offer e.g. freebies, experiences/opportunities.
- Include stories from young Disabled volunteers about how they found the experience (e.g. feeling good) or how they benefited from volunteering.
- Several young Disabled people felt that increased representation of Disabled athletes or Disabled volunteers on TV and at major sport events would help motivate more young people to volunteer, through changing their mindset about what is possible.

How do young Disabled people volunteer in sport?

Summary

- There is little existing evidence about how young Disabled people start volunteering in sport, or what might help and hinder. Some evidence is available for marginalised young people and Disabled adults.
- Most young Disabled people we spoke with in this research who had volunteered in sport said they had been proactively approached. Only a few had sought roles out for themselves.
- Young Disabled people had volunteered or wanted to volunteer in a range of roles, most of these were directly involved with sporting activity (e.g. coaching, officiating). What these roles looked like in practice were highly individualised to young people's circumstances and needs.
- The main factors helping young Disabled people to volunteer were support, an open-minded inclusive culture and familiarity with the environment.
- The main barriers raised were: fear of stigma and judgement; lack of confidence; transportation and commitment; and life stage transitions.
- These findings largely align with the wider evidence for marginalised children and young people and Disabled adults.
- Key information to help young people decide on a role included: commitment, timings, and flexibility; purpose of the role and activities; support available and a demonstration of the organisation's understanding of disability and openness to adaptation.

What we know from the evidence base

There is existing evidence about how young Disabled people start (or think they would start) volunteering in sport, or what might help and hinder.

There is some evidence around how Disabled adults start volunteering. Most Disabled adults choose where, when, and how they volunteer, and contact

organisations themselves. Some are referred to volunteering, others begin as a participant or service user and evolve over time into a volunteer role.⁷

There is some evidence around how children and young people start volunteering, including that organisations need to reach out and engage those who are typically left out of, excluded from, or do not engage with volunteering opportunities.⁸

There is some evidence around how Disabled adults volunteer and what helps and hinders. People's individual conditions shape how, what, when and how long they volunteer for. Personalisation, flexibility, and an understanding of disability are of critical importance to enable volunteers to contribute and look after themselves. Some of the main barriers include poor accessibility, stigma, lack of confidence, practical barriers (e.g. time and money) and lack of support from carers.⁹

There is some evidence around how children and young people volunteer and what helps and hinders. Enablers include diverse opportunities with targeted outreach to raise awareness, an openness to youth-led, flexible, and personalised roles suited to individual needs, supported by a sense of belonging within 'something bigger'. Some of the main barriers include lack of awareness, practical barriers (e.g. time, money) and lack of self-confidence, self-efficacy, or fear of rejection.¹⁰

Findings from this research

This section outlines how young Disabled people we spoke with in this research got involved or think they would get involved in sports volunteering, what helps them volunteer, what challenges they face and how they can be supported with these. It also explores what information young Disabled people think should be shared about volunteering roles to appeal to young Disabled people.

How do they start volunteering in sport?

Most young Disabled people who volunteered had been a participant or service user at a local sports club or organisation and then **been proactively approached** by a coach or staff member. This is also how some young people interested in sport volunteering imagined they would get involved in a role, though one young person

⁷ [Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People – Spirit of 2012](#)

⁸ [Embedding Inclusive Practices in Opportunities for Youth Social Action – The National Development Team for Inclusion \(NDTi\)](#)

⁹ [Volunteering Together: Inclusive Volunteering and Disabled People – Spirit of 2012](#)

¹⁰ [Embedding Inclusive Practices in Opportunities for Youth Social Action – The National Development Team for Inclusion \(NDTi\)](#)

felt roles shared like this should still be open to others. This is in line with evidence around how marginalised young people and Disabled adults start volunteering.

“I worked with [a local] Arts centre. I’ve been involved with them for ages... I want to be a dance teacher, they know that, so when the volunteering opportunity came up, they emailed me and asked me.”

– Female, 16, Cerebral Palsy

A few young volunteers had **approached clubs themselves** and asked if they could volunteer, while some young people interested in volunteering said they might try this – though only in specific circumstances (mainly if they were already a member of, or knew people at the club).

“I could reach out because my mum knows the instructor. I think I could suggest if there were other classes or with younger people I could help people with.”

- Female, 15, Blind and partially sighted

However, more young Disabled people than not said they would find it scary to reach out, especially in the younger age range. Linked to this, only a small minority of participants said they would proactively look for a role in their area, though for one person this also related to perceived competition: they thought they would be unlikely to get a role, over a non-disabled person.

How do they volunteer?

Young Disabled people volunteered in **direct and indirect roles** (e.g. coaching or officiating versus organising/supporting), all of which were **face-to-face**. Of the eight young people we spoke with who had volunteered in sports:

- three had volunteered as an assistant or junior coach
- two as a coach
- two in official (e.g. umpire, linesman) or assistant roles (e.g. ballboy, steward);
- one had volunteered as a welcome buddy at an event

Among those who were interested in sports volunteering, most also wanted to volunteer in a coach, assistant coach, or junior coach role. However indirect roles were felt to be less pressured compared to direct delivery roles, potentially suited to less confident individuals at first.

In line with the evidence base, what these roles looked like in practice were **highly individualised** to their needs and life circumstances. Almost all participants spoke in some way about how their role had been adapted to their needs or how their participation was flexible based on their health or life circumstances (e.g. exams).

What helps them to volunteer?

Three main factors were raised: volunteer support; an open-minded inclusive culture; and familiarity with the environment.

Clear information on how they would be supported by staff was the most important issue. Most spoke about how it was essential for them to know that coaches and other staff members at a club were there and ready to provide back-up.

“Support would be that thing that would make it or break it.”

– Male, 17, Multiple Sclerosis

Examples of support that young people had received or wanted included: being there to answer questions, provide reassurance, provide feedback, provide emergency support in event of an accident or health-related issue, and to support inclusion. Linked to this, young people felt that it was important for staff to provide support in an inclusive, non-judgemental manner, to set an example to participants.

An **open-minded, inclusive culture** was another significant factor, in line with the evidence base for Disabled adults and children and young people. Young Disabled people wanted to volunteer in a welcoming, supportive environment, free from judgment and with a genuine understanding of disability, inclusion, and accessibility.

“Sometimes there is still the rhetoric that disabled people are not capable of sport, or working. [Organisers of sport volunteering opportunities] need to make it clear they think differently. It's important that they make it clear to me that I can do something like this, and that it's accessible – the building, obviously, but also that it will be genuinely inclusive – not just like, they are letting me join in.”

– Female, 16, Cerebral Palsy

A key part of this involved **adaptation**: meaningfully engaging with and listening to young people to understand what they want to do, understand their needs, and work out how to best adapt responsibilities and activities. **Flexibility** was also key: understanding that roles or frequency of volunteering may need to change based on health conditions, as well as wider changes in young people's lives (e.g. exams).

Familiarity with the environment – or in line with the evidence base a sense of belonging somewhere – was also raised as a factor that would help them volunteer. Some young people had (or thought they would) feel safer if they already knew and trusted that staff would support them if they needed help, or if they already had relationships and felt comfortable around the people they would support.

“If I had a good connection, if I feel like I was welcomed, if they ignored how I adapt, that would give me more confidence... knowing that they weren't judging or

saying something about me. To have that connection would boost my confidence and I would feel a lot more comfortable taking on the role."

– Female, 15, Blind and partially sighted

Knowing your way around the venue could also increase confidence.

Volunteer portrait: Charlotte

Charlotte is 18 and plays a range of disability sports and volunteers as a junior coach in gymnastics. She is 18 and lives with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome (which can cause joint hypermobility and fragile skin) and Autism. She is the only person that uses a wheelchair at her local gymnastics club.

"The coaches asked if I wanted to help by being an honorary junior coach - helping whenever and however. I've always wanted to do it, but I didn't want to ask. All through my life if I've asked to do something, the answer has been 'no'. If the coaches hadn't asked me, I probably wouldn't be volunteering now.

I help the young people during my normal training hours, whenever I have a break, it's not set... I support them to improve their skills, to be the best they can be.

I basically do what the coach does, though I'm not as technical or qualified... but the coaches don't know everything... I have experience of being Disabled and can help people when they're struggling because of their disability - help them find the right way. They also come to me as I'm not as scary as the coach!

[I volunteer] in an environment where most people know me... and I know them. I know I've got coaches I trust as a back-up... their flexibility about it has been amazing... they have an attitude of 'you're in a chair, so what?'.... they're not fazed by that and they are always pushing me to do my best. Some of the younger children have never seen someone in a wheelchair so it's all new to them, there is no judgement.

It was hard at the beginning because I didn't know how to help... I knew what they needed to do, but I can't physically show them how to do it, but also struggled to describe it to them...over time I learned who could do what and would call them over to demonstrate, but that requires confidence to call someone over and ask them to show someone else something. That confidence comes from knowing people at the club."

What barriers do they face and how can they be supported?

Four main barriers were raised: fear of stigma and judgement; lack of confidence; transportation and commitment and life stage transitions.

These are in line with the evidence base where most concerns or encountered challenges related to either attitudinal or cultural barriers from organisations, staff, other volunteers or the public, or practical barriers around volunteering.

Fear of judgement through stigma, stereotypes or bias was the main concern raised or experienced by young Disabled people. This appeared to also intersect with young people's anxieties around self-efficacy more generally.

"...If you asked me to referee a game I would be slightly hesitant, not only because I feel like my vision is a big letdown, but secondly, when you don't have good vision I find that normal people don't take you seriously. So if normal people see me like that, I wouldn't doubt that young kids would see me like that as well."

– Male, 16, Blind and partially sighted and hearing loss

Familiarity with the environment, trust, and the critical role of coaches in setting an example (especially to younger children) and ensuring people were being inclusive were all linked to helping people overcome these fears.

Lack of confidence was the other main barrier raised by young Disabled people, in line with the evidence base for both Disabled adults and children and young people. For some young people this focused on whether they would be able to do a volunteer role due to their impairment, and effectively undertake the activities they agreed with an organisation. For young people who had volunteered, this focused on anxieties around whether they would be able to communicate with the Disabled people they supported.

"Some people I'm helping, I may not know how to communicate with, e.g. [people with] mental impairments. I wouldn't know how to approach it and I wouldn't want to offend anyone. I'd be uncomfortable even if they had a similar demographic as me..."

– Male, 15, Hydrocephalus and Spina Bifida

Providing training or friendly practice sessions was suggested to overcome this anxiety when working with people with different types of impairment, as well as a strong practical and emotionally orientated support offer from coaches etc. Another young person who worked with non-disabled people said that communication was a learning curve and finding your own way to do this (with support) just took time, and that confidence grew from becoming more familiar with where you are volunteering.

Transportation had also been a practical barrier for some, and was anticipated to be a potential challenge by others, in line with the wider evidence base around disability. This could affect the ability to volunteer or frequency of volunteering. Transportation challenges were exacerbated where volunteering opportunities were not close to home, where parents or carers were not available to give lifts or support use of public transport, where finances for private or public transport were limited, or where activities were at odd times. Suggestions were limited, but included transport expenses as a volunteer reward.

“What made it difficult was mobility... getting access to on the stadium... I think we had provisions for busses to help us down, but I always struggled, so maybe I would have preferred if I had tips that I could use transport on my own.”

– Male, 17, Epilepsy

Temporary changes in health or commitments also presented challenges to young Disabled people, in line with the evidence base for Disabled adults (regarding health conditions) and children and young people (regarding educational commitments and exams). These could be overcome by organisations taking a flexible approach to roles, ensuring there was cover available and varying/adapting roles and levels of involvement over time.

What do young Disabled people want to know about a volunteering role?

Young Disabled people were asked what information they would want to receive about a role to help them decide whether to volunteer. Their answers build on the findings previously outlined in this section:

- What commitment (if any) is required, frequency, timings and how flexible these are
- What the purpose of the role is and what activities it might involve, who they will support (e.g. Disabled, non-disabled people, impairment types, younger or older people etc.)
- What support is available – how many other staff or volunteers will also be there, formal support, as well as practical support (e.g. expenses)
- A commitment to and demonstration that an organisation genuinely understands inclusion and accessibility, for example, offering the basic or initial details of a role but being clear that these could be adapted in discussion with the volunteer.

What helps young Disabled people to volunteer in sport long-term?

Summary

- There is little to no existing evidence about what helps young Disabled people to keep volunteering in sport. There is some evidence what helps Disabled adults to keep volunteering in general.
- The young Disabled people that we spoke with raised few reasons as to why young Disabled people would stop volunteering outright. These included experiencing tokenistic or short-termism approaches to inclusion – which can be overcome by organisations ensuring flexible, inclusive approaches are continued throughout the volunteer journey – and major changes to health or life stage transitions.
- Three main areas were raised that could influence whether a young Disabled person would keep volunteering: seeing progress or benefits in the people you support; recognition; and social benefits.
- Organisations can help young Disabled people to stay motivated and keep volunteering by helping them understand the impact of their work, get social benefits, acknowledge, and support personal ambitions, maintain regular contact, and continue to activities, and recognise and reward their contributions

What we know from the evidence base

- There is little to no existing evidence about what helps young Disabled people to keep volunteering in sport.
- There is some evidence about helps Disabled adults to keep volunteering in general. Enablers to Disabled adults staying involved in volunteering include¹¹:
 - maintaining engagement through regular contact;

¹¹ [The Volunteering Fund: Guide to Inclusive Volunteer Engagement – Sport England](#)

- showing appreciation of volunteers and the impact of their volunteering (this is also evidenced for children and young people more generally¹²);
- keeping opportunities fresh and relevant;
- using incentives and rewards; and
- embracing co-design and engagement.

Findings from this research

This section outlines what might cause the young Disabled people we spoke with to stop volunteering, what aspects of the volunteer experience can influence retention and what organisations can do to help young people keep volunteering.

Why might they stop volunteering?

Young Disabled people raised few reasons as to why they would stop volunteering with a sports organisation outright.

Tokenistic or short-term approaches to inclusion was one of the main reasons young Disabled people would drop out of volunteering. Young people felt it was important that inclusive and adaptive approaches were maintained throughout the volunteering experience, ensuring that activities (and any changes to them) continued to be adapted to young people's individual needs.

“Sometimes it can feel tokenistic – oh we’ll get a Disabled person to be around, then they will be there but actually there’s nothing they can do. If there is nothing to do, that wouldn’t be motivating.”

– Female, 16, Cerebral Palsy

Most of the young Disabled people we spoke with emphasised the importance of flexible approaches to adapting volunteer roles, activities, and hours, and managing time off due to health or other short-term commitments was critical to long-term volunteering in sports.

More serious changes in health were also one of the main factors as to why young Disabled people would drop out of volunteering, especially for people with progressive conditions. Young people did not think organisations could help with this if they had already made every possible adaptation to activities.

¹² [Embedding Inclusive Practices in Opportunities for Youth Social Action – The National Development Team for Inclusion \(NDTi\)](#)

“I think if I start having recurrent episode or recurrent not as suspected, you know, I would have to take time out to understand what's wrong. I would not want to be involved in any activity.”

– Male, 17, Epilepsy

Life stage transitions were also raised by several young people as a reason to stop, such as moving away from home to college.

Volunteer portrait: Anthony

Anthony is 17 and lives with Epilepsy. He volunteered at his local football club as a steward and ballboy. He found it easy to volunteer, but a change in his health meant he had to stop.

“I enjoy football... [I was] looking at how much I could stay involved in the footballing because I have to be cautious of my health needs... volunteering is one of the things that keeps me involved with the sport.

I really had little challenge [in the role] because you know it's voluntary and I feel like it was something that was so cool, and I could at any point in time just you know talk it out or stop volunteering. It was something that I was enjoying, so it was quite easy. [Sessions were] usually in the evening... I did not have issues with that... my parents were cool with me being there until 6 or 7... I would call my dad to pick me up.

[The football club] made me feel like a very recognised fan, I wasn't just a fan, I was a volunteer. That recognition... I became very familiar with a lot of [the players] and more like friends with them. It was really easy to go back.

I started to have seizures more frequently so I couldn't continue because I had to take a rest and stop any form of activities until I was back to some level of wellness again. I can see myself doing it again, especially if I don't have seizures and all that, but right now I am looking for college... maybe if I get an opportunity in college in London... I will always try to get involved in sport even though I can't participate... If that comes up I might do it if it's not too demanding on my time.

[Things that would help me to keep volunteering as a student] would be things that have to do with expenses because you also want to be sure that you're not going to be expending yourself too much on that role. Probably things like transportation to help you get to the club or back home. Also, time and you know the strictness of time... you want it to be flexible.”

What parts of the volunteer experience can influence retention?

Three main areas were raised that could influence whether a young Disabled person kept volunteering, all of which link back to either the main motivations for young Disabled people to volunteer, or factors that can help or hinder participation, in the first place. These are: seeing progress or benefits in the people you support; recognition; and social benefits.

Seeing someone develop or experience positive benefits through sport – and the feeling that comes from knowing you have had a role in this – was listed by most young Disabled people as one of the main motivations to keep volunteering.

“Seeing people develop, it's nice to know you're helping someone, it's nice to know you're having an impact on people... seeing a good outcome from something, that would help me carry on wanting to do it in the future.”

– Female, 15, Blind and partially sighted

Young Disabled people described the impact of helping make a difference in someone's life as 'inspiring', 'empowering' and a source of enjoyment. For some young people, this was particularly important and appeared to link back to their anxieties about whether they could volunteer and make a difference (self-efficacy). In other words, feel useful. For others, seeing the impact of their support linked back and fulfil their motivations to volunteer in the first place – to feel good, help others be physically active and experience the benefits of this, and give back to a sport. This is in line with wider evidence for Disabled adults and for children and young people.

Several young people said that not seeing any impact as a result of their volunteering might be a reason to stop.

Being recognised for their volunteer work could also influence how people felt about their volunteering and whether they continued, in line with the evidence base for Disabled adults. Recognition that made people valued could take different forms – from progression and increased responsibility to small incentives as appreciation.

“The incentives that I am getting [would motivate me to continue]... maybe a voucher, free medical checks, could be anything, groceries, utilities, a bag, anything that shows you are appreciated.”

– Male, 17, Epilepsy

In addition, several young Disabled people wanted organisations to recognise how some elements of volunteering required extra effort or might be more difficult for them; not necessarily in terms of rewards, but in terms of their behaviour towards them.

“If they recognise that some things are harder for Disabled people than others... sometimes I am asked to help people for hours... and sometimes just a few people in the final session. I have POTS - the pool heat throws me off, if I'm putting in time and wasting my energy, not feeling well, it's really annoying if that time and energy isn't used.”

– Female, 16, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome and POTS

Lack of recognition, progression, or reward could cause young people to feel 'used' and want to drop out.

Social benefits were another significant factor in how much some young people enjoyed volunteering and how motivated they were to keep doing it. Volunteering was viewed as an opportunity to meet different types of people, while seeing and speaking with friends and colleagues introduced a social motivation to go each time.

“I enjoy the social interaction... I meet new friends. And then I think it's something worthwhile. That's one of the things that would encourage me [to keep volunteering].”

– Male, 17, Epilepsy

Several young people said that it was important to them that their place of volunteering felt like a 'family' or 'team' that they belonged to – a positive environment that struck a balance between working and a more social, friendly side. As with other factors, the converse was also true – feeling unwelcome was a potential reason to drop out.

What can organisations do to support ongoing participation?

Young Disabled people were asked what organisations could do to help them stay motivated and keep volunteering:

- Support them to get 'close' to the benefits of their work and understand their impact, e.g. conversations between them and the person they support
- Incorporate social elements into the volunteering experience
- Acknowledge personal ambitions, make plans to them support them and provide ongoing support, e.g. review meetings
- Maintain regular contact about how volunteers are doing and feeling – and continue to adapt volunteering roles, activities, and hours in response
- Recognise and reward their contributions – through acknowledgement of effort, progression, and incentives/rewards

Conclusions and ideas for action

The research identified at its outset that there is little to no existing evidence about the motivations, enablers, and barriers to sports or general volunteering for young Disabled people, and only some evidence on these for Disabled adults and volunteering and young people and volunteering.

Within this context of scarce evidence, the findings from this small, qualitative study offer valuable insights for organisations looking to motivate, recruit and retain the involvement of young Disabled people in sports volunteering.

The research has shed light on the appetite that exists among some young Disabled people to get involved in direct and indirect sports volunteering, despite the societal barriers they face. It also highlights the scope for NDSOs to support sports organisations around the country to be better at creating opportunities that are inclusive, accessible, and that maximise positive returns for the volunteers, the people they support and organisations.

Implications for practice in the sports sector

Messaging around volunteer recruitment should focus on the difference that young Disabled people can make to sports participation. The main motivations for young Disabled people we spoke with focused on helping others enjoy sport, benefit from, and become better at it, as well as to 'give back' and increase the number of Disabled people playing (a) sport. Although for some young people volunteering was also a vehicle to helping them achieve other goals.

- Share stories of success from relatable role models, supported by quotes and photos of volunteers and the people they have supported.
- Provide clear information on benefits for volunteers themselves, from social to work/career-based experiences, to freebies or other rewards.
- Acknowledge personal ambitions, make plans to them support them and provide ongoing support once volunteering starts, e.g. review meetings.

Some young Disabled, potential volunteers need to be directly approached to engage them in sports volunteering. Asking about or applying to volunteer roles can feel scary for young Disabled people: only a few that we spoke with were confident

enough to approach staff, seek out a role in their local area, or respond to an open advertisement.

- Sports organisations should directly approach young Disabled people they think might be interested in, good at and/or benefit from volunteering.
- Sports organisations should also approach others and/or still openly advertise opportunities to ensure this is done fairly and people do not feel left out.

Young Disabled people want to see sports organisations ‘practice what they preach’ with inclusive approaches before they commit to volunteer roles. Evidence that an organisation understood their needs and would adapt and support them as required was one of the main deciding factors in whether to volunteer somewhere or not. Young people also want an overall sense that organisations are welcoming, inclusive and support positive attitudes towards disability.

- Have clear policies and training for all staff members to ensure that they understand the social model of disability, can practice person-centred approaches, and adapt activities.
- Make it clear that proposed volunteer roles are open to discussion and adaptation in response to young people's individual needs, and be upfront if there are elements of the role that cannot be changed and explain why.
- Listen to the needs and concerns of potential volunteers and provide clear information on what support, adaptations, and flexibility they can expect in response.

Organisations need to be prepared to provide additional encouragement and words of affirmation to support young Disabled people who are worried that they will not be able to do a role, make a difference or compete with non-disabled people for a role, as well as those who fear stigma and judgement from participants or their parents because of their disability.

- Emphasise the unique value of lived experience and the benefits of this to participants, other volunteers, and organisations.
- Offer or support training (e.g. communication training), onboarding (e.g. becoming familiar with the environment) and practice sessions for volunteers roles to increase confidence before starting roles.

The continued involvement and contribution of young Disabled people is most likely to be affected by changes in health or life circumstances. Changes in health can be

temporary (e.g. fluctuating health) or more permanent (e.g. progressive conditions) and may necessitate a change in how or how often volunteers can volunteer.

- Plan for and ensure there is cover available for volunteer roles in case young Disabled volunteers are unable to attend at short notice.
- Be aware for the likelihood of young Disabled people needing to adapt or change roles over time, maintain regular contact about how volunteers are doing and feeling and continue to adapt volunteering roles, activities, and hours in response.

Seeing the positive impact of their efforts on other people is one of the main factors that influence whether young Disabled people continue to volunteer or not. This was especially the case for young people whose main motivation was to make a difference in others' lives, for young people who were concerned about whether they could make a difference and for those who had to overcome additional challenges to do roles. Volunteers should also be recognised for their hard work, especially where they have overcome specific challenges or gone above and beyond because of their impairment.

- Find ways to keep young people 'close' to the impact of their work through supporting conversations with the people they support, sharing stories of success etc.
- Recognise and reward contributions – through acknowledgement of effort, progression, and incentives/rewards, in addition to more standard expenses (e.g. transportation).

Young Disabled people wanted to feel 'part of a family' when volunteering. The opportunity to meet, work alongside and form friendships with different types of people, as well as see and speak with friends, were strong motivations to regularly volunteer amid other commitments.

- Incorporate social elements into volunteering experiences.

Implications for disability and sports volunteering policy

Sports organisations need further support to recruit, engage and welcome young Disabled people as volunteers. A key part of removing barriers is ensuring that sports organisations have the policies, training, and tools to ensure that staff are fully aware of the cultural and attitudinal barriers young Disabled people experience, how these can be overcome, and are confident in their role in this.

- Launch a coproduction advisory group – made up of young Disabled volunteers and sports organisations to develop a toolkit and templates informed by lived experience for organisations.
- Utilise existing programmes such as SMV to engage and support more sports organisations with young Disabled volunteers.
- Develop, promote, or fund disability inclusive training for staff and volunteers at sports organisations.

The contribution of young Disabled people and Disabled adults as volunteers needs to be made more visible and celebrated. Representation of Disabled sportspeople and sports volunteers remains low, with few role models and 'stories to inspire success' for young Disabled people. More coverage and more Disabled volunteers at major sports events would help normalise Disabled people in sports volunteering roles.

- Create a national campaign to celebrate the contribution and lived experience of Disabled sports volunteers (potentially during Volunteers Week).
- Advocate for more Disabled volunteer roles at major sports events in the UK.

Further research in this area would strengthen these initial findings. The final sample of participants for this research included limited representation of young people with hearing impairments and young people with any form of cognitive impairment, which means the findings do not present a complete picture across all the main types of impairment.

- Run a national survey to 'test' findings with a larger sample size and include perspectives from a broader range of impairment types.

Appendix A

Methodology

Participant engagement

Target participants were aged 13-19, with one or more physical, sensory, and cognitive impairments or learning disabilities and difficulties (including people who are neuro-diverse), and either have experience of volunteering in sport or have an interest to volunteer in sport.

The seven NDSOs led engagement in respect of their trusted links to their respective communities and substantial networks. NDSOs directly engaged participants through a range of communication channels (e.g. newsletters, emails), indirectly via partner organisations, or proactively approached young people they thought might be interested.

All participants that expressed an interest in the research were then selected via a screener and the above set of eligibility criteria.

Research methods

The original methodology was to run 6-8 groups with 6-8 participants in each, including a dedicated group for sensory impairments including British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation and a dedicated group for girls. However, this proved too difficult due to limited uptake and challenges organising dates and times that worked for all participants.

The research methodology subsequently switched to individual interviews. 14 interviews of up to 45 minutes in length were completed online. Four additional interviews were completed face-to-face at an NDSO's National Junior Games Day, including one paired interview with two participants. Online interviews were recorded and transcribed, face-to-face interviews were recorded via handwritten notes. All participants received a £30 thank you payment.

Interview notes were subject to a thematic analysis that drew on both deductive (top-down analysis against pre-conceived themes) and inductive (bottom-up analysis for other themes).

Limitations

The research findings are limited by the methods used and the context in which the research was conducted.

Sample size. The sample size of 19 participants is small relative to the age range (13-19), types of impairment and volunteering type (direct and indirect, formal, and informal) included within the scope of the study. This means it is unlikely the research findings provide a complete picture of motivators and barriers across these different groups.

Representation. The final sample of participants includes limited representation of young people with hearing impairments and young people with any form of cognitive impairment. This means the research findings do not present a complete picture of motivators and barriers across all the main types of impairment.

Self-selection bias. It is likely that young people who expressed an interest in the research differed from those who chose not to respond. This might be in terms of their socio-economic background (time, resource to take part in sport, volunteering, and the research), or their level of confidence in terms of talking about themselves and volunteering. The research findings do not present a complete picture of motivators and barriers across all young Disabled people.

Lack of previous research on the topic. A lack of evidence around the research questions meant that the research findings could not be interpreted in terms of other directly relevant research on this topic. Where possible, links were made instead to similar fields of study (e.g. Disabled adults volunteering, non-Disabled children and young people volunteering). This means that the findings, especially considering the other research limitations, should be treated with reservation until further research is undertaken on this subject.

Tim Bidey and Lucy Smith are part of the **Better Decisions Together Collective**.

Tim and Lucy are non-disabled and endeavour to act as allies to Disabled people. They worked in close collaboration with staff at British Blind Sport and other NDSOs to design and deliver this research.



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