

Research into the workforce gap

Disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce

Activity Alliance

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Better
Decisions
Together

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Thank you

This report is based on the personal stories of the participants who generously shared their journeys and experiences with us over the course of this research project.

We are enormously grateful for their time and energy in sharing their highs and lows with honesty and openness.

Your voices have guided our work and inspired this report.

Thank you.

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Better Decisions Together for Activity Alliance

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Contents

Thank you	1
Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	8
2. Existing evidence	11
3. Findings: Who we spoke to	15
4. Findings: The sector at large	17
5. Findings: Joining the workforce	21
6. Findings: Staying part of the workforce	28
7. Findings: Moving on	33
8. Findings: Workforce journeys	35
9. Taking the research forward	40
10. Conclusion	44
Appendix 1: Interview sample	45

Executive summary

In 2024, Activity Alliance commissioned a research project to explore the barriers and enablers to disabled people becoming part of the sport and physical activity workforce. The aim of this was to better understand why disabled people are often under-represented in the workforce. The research was undertaken by independent researchers from the Better Decisions Together collaborative.

A review of existing research into this area showed that there are limited sources of data into disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce in the UK. Most of the insights were very high level, identifying barriers such as negative attitudes towards disabled people, but there was very little evidence that helped understand these barriers in more detail. There was also little evidence around intersectionality, considering other aspects of identity alongside being disabled.

These were issues that we explored further in our research, through 25 interviews with people in the sport and physical activity workforce, most of whom were disabled employees, volunteers and/or employers.

The sector at large

Interviewees recognised that they bring the **benefit of lived experience to the workforce**, which helps the sector to meet the needs of diverse participants. This was felt to be particularly beneficial in roles such as coaching and leadership.

They shared what they felt were the **wider benefits of work for themselves**, including learning, social networking and friendships, keeping fit and making a difference.

Participants had a **mix of sports-based qualifications**, from sport-specific coaching qualifications to post-graduate qualifications, but they also talked about barriers to obtaining qualifications, including **cost** and a **lack of accessible training**.

Joining the workforce

Many participants had wanted to work in the sport and physical activity sector for a long time and were very keen to pursue work in the sector. However, they were particularly attracted to employers who had a **reputation for inclusion** or **values-based** work, where people felt they could make a difference.

Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of joining the workforce. This highlighted many areas of **good practice** in recruitment, including accessible application processes, upfront information about roles, welcoming messaging, and inclusive approaches to interviews (for example, choice of video or in-person).

However, participants identified **barriers** including a lack of suitable, well-paid, flexible roles, particularly for participants who needed to manage fluctuating conditions or non-work commitments. Participants had also encountered negative attitudes and basic physical accessibility issues.

Employers noted key shortcomings across the sector, including **lack of disability awareness** and **concerns about costs** of employing disabled people, and identified a need for guidance and signposting.

Staying part of the workforce

A passion for working in sport was key to keeping people in the workforce, particularly seeing the impact of their work on others. Fair treatment and inclusion were also key, particularly **practical support** such as accessible working environments and flexible working arrangements. **Emotional support** was also important to disabled people we interviewed, such as from supportive colleagues and managers who foster a welcoming and supportive culture.

There was mixed awareness and experience with **Access to Work**, with some participants benefitting but others facing significant challenges with the application process, timeframes, and lack of employer awareness.

Some thought that **progression opportunities** were limited for disabled people, and **training experiences** in work were varied; some reported accessible programmes, while others faced barriers like inaccessible materials.

Moving on

We found that employers were not always making it easy for disabled people to stay in their roles. **Lack of flexibility, inaccessible workplace environments** and **lack of reasonable adjustments** were key reasons for leaving. With these barriers, work could be complex to manage, especially for those with fluctuating conditions. Lack of training and progression opportunities were also reasons for leaving roles.

Other issues affecting retention included roles being poorly paid and that self-employment felt like the only option. Some participants in receipt of out-of-work benefits felt that they were financially 'punished for working'.

Workforce journeys

We explored participants' journeys through the sport and physical activity workforce, focusing on 'moments of truth' – pivotal moments where their journeys mobilised or changed direction. Early experiences were cited by many as important, often starting with childhood experiences of sport and activity. Others started taking part in sport or physical activity as adults, and then moved into volunteer and paid roles.

There were several common features on interviewees' **pathways** to paid work. **Training** or **qualifications** featured across almost all journeys to employment. Some remained in **volunteer** roles without transitioning to paid employment, either by choice or because paid work was too difficult to manage alongside their impairment.

Pivotal moments often centred on supportive **role models or cheerleaders**, personal connections who encouraged people to take a step into the sector. Participants spoke about the importance of work to their sense of **identity and purpose**; particularly those with acquired disability, for whom working in sport had a profound impact on coming to terms with becoming disabled.

In terms of **intersectional factors**, those that came up included having acquired disabilities, invisible disabilities and caring responsibilities. These could further complicate workplace experiences for disabled people, making it more difficult for people to stay in roles.

Participants' journeys challenged perceptions of **what 'success' means** in the workforce – the traditional model of paid employment as the ultimate goal does not always align with lived experiences. Making a difference to the experience of others can represent a more meaningful 'pinnacle' of a workforce journey.

Taking the research forward

The research suggests the following **three key recommendations**:

1. Adopt a **'flexible by default'** approach to job roles.
2. Provide **advice and guidance for employers**.
3. Proactively **identify and remove barriers** that exist at all stages of the workforce journey.

More detailed recommendations are also suggested for employers, the sports and physical activity sector, and the government or national stakeholders.

Recommendations for employers include suggestions for improving recruitment, including: removing practical barriers to recruitment; normalising adaptations; considering what qualifications are essential; using diverse communication platforms and resourcing individual support. Early applications to Access to Work should be initiated and plans put in place for accessible progression and training opportunities, alongside support for wellbeing.

Recommendations for the sector include developing an 'Employee Passport'; establishing a national disability sport and physical activity workforce network; and developing a national scheme for an 'inclusion rating' for leisure centres and other sport and activity providers.

Recommendations for government include making improvements to the Access to Work process, in particular making it 'portable by default', and making work pay for people who are in receipt of out-of-work benefits.

Suggestions for further research include exploring issues through a wider, quantitative study; sector-wide collaboration to add relevant questions to existing data collection channels; and further exploring employer perspectives. Potential topics for future research include training and qualifications, disclosure of disability, employer attitudes and data collection, and further exploration of enablers and barriers.

Conclusion

This research underscores the urgent need for the sport and physical activity sector to address recruitment and retention strategies. This would help to ensure that they are led by the voices of the sector's diverse disabled talent, who can in turn properly understand, support and nurture the diverse disabled athletes and participants that the sector serves.



1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Activity Alliance's Annual Activity and Disability Survey 2023-24 shows that disabled people are half as likely to see 'people like me' working in sport and physical activity compared to non-disabled peers¹.

Only 9% of disabled people agree they have the opportunity to become a coach or take on a role in delivering sport or physical activity (compared to 24% of non-disabled people)².

This reflects that disabled people are under-represented in this sector. Activity Alliance is committed to effecting change so that more disabled people can have the opportunity to be part of this workforce.

Activity Alliance commissioned this research project to explore the barriers and enablers to disabled people becoming part of the sport and physical activity workforce. It was undertaken by researchers from the Better Decisions Together collaborative. The research included a **rapid evidence assessment** of existing research, and **25 interviews** with disabled people and those supporting disabled people to be part of the sport and physical activity workforce.

This report sets out a summary of the findings of the rapid evidence assessment; the findings from the interviews and recommendations and conclusions. A set of case studies (six individual workforce journeys) is available separately.

1.2. Research aims

The research aimed to understand the challenges faced by disabled people in joining and staying part of the workforce, and how these could be overcome. It also aimed to explore how intersecting factors shape the experience of disabled people, and how employer perceptions and challenges affect recruitment and retention. The overall aim was to provide insights to inform further research, and to help the sector move towards increasing workforce participation by disabled people.

¹ Activity Alliance Annual Disability and Activity Survey report 2023-24.

² Activity Alliance Annual Disability and Activity Survey report 2023-24.

1.3. Method

1.3.1. Rapid evidence assessment method

1.3.1.1. Search scope

We searched for evidence on **challenges and barriers** faced by disabled people to participating in the sport and physical activity workforce; what factors influence disabled people's experiences; and data on disabled people in the workforce. We looked across:

- Disability and impairment types.
- Ages 16 and upward.
- Types of role (e.g. paid, unpaid).
- Employer types (e.g. mainstream sport, disability sport, community organisation).
- The journey from recruitment through to retention.
- Volunteering and transition to paid work.

We looked for evidence around **intersectionality**, i.e. how different characteristics, in addition to disability, can influence experiences.

1.3.1.2. Search method

We identified potentially relevant evidence through signposting by Activity Alliance and searches of sport and disability organisations' websites, Google and Google Scholar. We prioritised items published in the last 5 years, in the UK (except one item with Europe-wide coverage, due to its relevance), and any type of source with a clearly described evidence basis, including academic literature and social research. Search terms included words and phrases around disability, workforce, inclusivity, sport roles and organisations. Search results were sifted, potentially relevant items longlisted, and relevant findings extracted. Findings were summarised in a report.

1.3.2. Primary research method: Interviews

1.3.2.1. Recruitment

We asked organisations in the disability sport and physical activity sector to promote the interview invitation with their networks, and disseminated information via social media channels. 50 people registered interest on an Easy Read online questionnaire.

1.3.2.2. Design

We used a semi-structured discussion guide and tailored it for different types of interviewees, but broadly covered five topics: about you, joining the workforce, staying part of the workforce and moving on.

1.3.2.3. Fieldwork

Interviews took place in summer 2024, online or by phone, and lasted up to an hour. We offered a thank-you payment of £25, and access to a professional counselling session (because difficult experiences may be discussed in the interview).

1.3.2.4. Accessibility

We took a **participant-led** approach to accessibility – asking at registration what could make participation easier, more comfortable or inclusive. Our standard accessibility measures were Easy Read materials, welcome pack, choice of interview type (online or phone), and inclusive facilitation techniques.

1.3.3. The social model of disability

The social model of disability, used in this report, recognises that disabled people face a range of societal barriers, and these, rather than an individual's impairment, create disability. It recognises the barriers that make life harder for disabled people:

- **Buildings, including sport and healthcare facilities:** may not be fully accessible.
- **Job and career opportunities:** disabled people are under-represented in the workforce, and therefore do not always see themselves represented.
- **Environments, including working environments:** employers may not make reasonable adjustments to reduce barriers in services or working environments.
- **Attitudes:** disabled people face negative attitudes, and low expectations of what they can do in terms of an employed role, or physical activity and movement.

1.3.4. Language used in this report

Activity Alliance define the workforce as 'all of the people that are involved in making sport and physical activity happen'. This includes volunteers and employees.

'**Participants**' and '**interviewees**' refer to the people who we interviewed.

'**Employee**' refers to people working in either an employed or a voluntary capacity.

Where there is a difference, we say '**paid employee**'. '**Employer**' refers to organisations paying people to do roles and hosting voluntary roles.

We generally use terms consistent with a social model approach; but some literature or research sources use different language, and we also reflect participants' own terminology (for example 'hidden disabilities').

1.3.5. Interpreting and extrapolating findings

A **qualitative** approach allowed people to share their experiences in their own words and allow in-depth conversations. We recruited people with different backgrounds and demographics, to capture diverse views, but did not aim to be **representative** of the population. Findings are not **generalisable** (because most participants held a certain view, it does not mean that most disabled people hold that view).

2. Existing evidence

We explored the available evidence about barriers and enablers to disabled people's participation in the sport workforce, to inform the subsequent research interviews. This section presents a summary; the full report is in a separate document.

2.1. About the existing evidence base

We found little evidence around **specific impairments** in the sport and physical activity workforce (except a few sources on visual impairment). National disability employment statistics delve into specific impairments, but were not broken down to reflect the sport and physical activity sector. Some research considered other marginalised groups in the sport and physical activity workforce, but did not take an intersectional perspective (rather, it treated each identity in isolation).

There was little coverage of **workforce roles** outside of 'activity delivery'. There was more about coaches, assistants, managers and players; less about other roles. There was good coverage of volunteers, although this does not tend to be role specific.

We found limited evidence on **training** for disabled people to enter the workforce (except for guidance produced by Aspire). There were some explorations of **recruitment**, but generally, insights were broad and did not focus on any particular **phase of the journey**. There was little in the way of **project specific insights or case studies**, with sources tending to be more about the wider landscape.

Coverage of **enablers and barriers** to disabled people's participation in the sport workforce was limited, tending to offer a wider commentary reflecting statistics, rather than the perspectives of disabled people. We did not identify any evidence on **employer perceptions** around recruitment and retention of disabled employees.

Much of the research and guidance in this area is **published by** Activity Alliance, Sport England (largely from Active Lives survey data), Aspire (guidance), and CIMSPA (workforce insights reports). UK Coaching runs a regular Coaching in the UK survey. We found some academic research from varied sources and authors, but this was disparate in terms of focus and relevance to this topic.

2.2. Representation of disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce

Looking at the **workforce as a whole** (not only sport and physical activity), data collected by DWP³ shows that the gap in employment rates between disabled and non-disabled people varies by age (the gap increases with age) and ethnic group (those of white ethnicity have the highest gap). In relation to gender, disabled women are as likely as disabled men to be in employment. Regional variations show the largest disability employment gaps in the North East and North West. Disabled workers are more likely to be self-employed (although showing similar trends to non-disabled people since the UK Covid-19 lockdown); and slightly less likely to be in full-time employment than non-disabled people. We don't know if these patterns are also reflected by disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce.

We do know that disabled people are less represented in the **sport and physical activity workforce** (13%) than in the total employed workforce (16%)⁴ – one of the drivers for this research study. Disabled people are half as likely as non-disabled people to see 'people like me' working in sport and physical activity, and are less likely to want to coach or deliver activities⁵.

In the sport **volunteer workforce**, disabled people and those with a long-term health condition account for 16% of regular volunteers: higher than the employment rate of disabled people in the sport workforce, and similar to the employment rate of disabled people in the total workforce⁶.

Almost a quarter of active **coaches** have a disability or long-term health condition - greater than the proportion of the sport and physical activity workforce as a whole or the volunteer workforce. Both disabled and non-disabled coaches are weighted toward younger, white men. However, non-disabled coaches are more likely to be from higher socio-economic groups, whilst disabled coaches are as likely to be from higher or lower socio-economic groups⁷.

³ Department for Work and Pensions. (2023). *Employment of disabled people 2022*: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2022/employment-of-disabled-people-2022>. [Accessed 17 April 2024].

⁴ CIMSPA. (2023). *CIMSPA 2023 Workforce Insights Report*: <https://www.cimspa.co.uk/globalassets/document-downloads-library-all/insight/cimspa-workforce-insight-report-2023.pdf>. [Accessed 17 April 2024].

⁵ Activity Alliance. (2023). *Annual Disability and Activity Survey 2022-23*: https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/004/569/Activity_Alliance_Annual_Survey_2022-23_Full_Report_original.pdf?1686310868. [Accessed 17 April 2024].

⁶ Sport England. (2023). *Active Lives Adult Survey November 2021-22 Report*: <https://sportengland-production-files.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/Active%20Lives%20Adult%20Survey%20November%202021-22%20Report.pdf?VersionId=ln4PN2X02DZ1LF18btgaj5KFHx0Mio9o>. [Accessed 17 April 2024].

⁷ UK Coaching. (2023). *Coaching in the UK 2022: Disability and Long-Term Health Condition Spotlight Report*: <https://www.ukcoaching.org/UKCoaching/media/coaching-images/Entity%20base/Downloadables/2022-Disability-Long-term-health-condition-spotlight-report.pdf>. [Accessed 17 April 2024].

2.3. Barriers and enablers to disabled people in the workforce

2.3.1. Key sources and themes

We reviewed over 50 sources, but most contained very limited evidence of relevance – confirming the need for primary research into the barriers driving the employment gap and the enablers that can help to address it. That said, a handful of sources do provide some helpful insights, which helped us to structure the primary research design, interview questions and thinking about analytical approaches.

One of these sources is the **Aspire: EmployAbility Guides**. Aspire championed inclusion in sport and leisure sector employment from the 1990s, and in 2011 launched the InstructAbility programme to help disabled people qualify as fitness professionals. In 2022 they launched EmployAbility Leisure⁸, to create accessible training and workplaces for disabled people, and published three Guides, aimed at disabled people; training providers and awarding bodies; and employers. The guides do not explore barriers to disabled people's participation, but they are useful in setting out good practice, and the employers' guide makes recommendations for:

- Preparing the workforce – e.g. communications, culture,
- Implementing actions – e.g. recruitment, resources, and
- Policies and plans – e.g. adjustments, access.

A second source which informed our research design is the **Ukactive: Everyone Can programme**. ukactive is the trade body for the sport and leisure sector. Everyone Can supports inclusion and accessibility, and offers a potential framework for understanding barriers and enablers to workforce participation, as follows:

- Information and communication.
- Facilities and the environment.
- Customer service and the workforce.

A further two sources delve into more detail around barriers and enablers. A Europe-wide **Review of research in Europe: Better Sport Through Inclusion**, (produced through a 3-year initiative (2022-25) promoting inclusivity in the European sport workforce), looks at the profile of disabled people in the sport workforce and at facilitators of this at organisational, individual and institutional levels. A survey of employers, as part of the review, revealed **inclusive attitudes** towards hiring disabled people, but limited implementation of **inclusive practices and policies**. The high-level findings of the review indicate that inclusive **organisational cultures, top level management support, and qualifications** are essential factors that influence the employment of disabled people in sport organisations.

⁸ Aspire. (2023). *Leisure Sector unites to launch EmployAbility leisure guidance*: <https://www.aspire.org.uk/News/leisure-sector-unites-to-launch-employability-leisure-guidance>. [Accessed 28 August 2024].

The **Developing Inclusive Leaders in Haringey**⁹ research report was published by Activity Alliance in 2023, looking at ways to support more disabled people in the physical activity workforce. It found strong support for a more diverse workforce that includes disabled people taking on leadership roles. Many of the barriers identified are the same as those that inhibit disabled people from participating in sport and physical activity, including **physical access barriers, transport and a lack of people to support activity**. The lack of support personnel, as well as a lack of **money/finance** are the primary barriers, for both paid and volunteer roles, followed by **communication barriers**.

We drew on the frameworks and insights in the sources discussed to inform our interview design for use during the primary research.

2.4. Summary and implications for fieldwork

At the time of writing this report, there were **limited sources of data and insight** into disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce in the UK. As such, the review of evidence did not provide a detailed understanding of the barriers and enablers to disabled people entering, staying and progressing in the sector.

Most of the insights were **high level**, identifying factors such as attitudes, culture and support – these lacked the detail and specific examples that could help employers and stakeholders to understand and address barriers.

In addition, there was a scarcity of evidence around **intersectionality**, i.e. how disabled people's experiences are also affected by other aspects of identity (e.g. gender and ethnicity).

However, the review identified potential frameworks for structuring the interview discussion guide and the analysis of the findings, and some insights into barriers and enablers that were used to design questions and prompts.

⁹ Activity Alliance. (2023). *Developing inclusive leaders in Haringey*: <https://www.activityalliance.org.uk/how-we-help/research/7906-developing-inclusive-leaders-in-haringey-feb-2023>. [Accessed 28 August 2024]

3. Findings: Who we spoke to

3.1. Demographic categories

Our sample of 25 interviewees included **men and women, aged 18 and upwards** (with the biggest group aged 35-44 -10 participants in this age bracket), with over a quarter of interviewees being from **Black, Asian or Mixed ethnic backgrounds**.

We spoke mainly to **disabled** people; a small number of those in employer or stakeholder roles were not disabled. A third of participants had one impairment, and more than half had multiple impairments. The sample spanned **impairment types**, with the most common being mobility; followed by dexterity, learning or understanding or concentrating, long-term pain, and vision.

3.2. Employment and types of roles

Most participants had a complex journey in the sport and physical activity workforce, with a combination of current and past voluntary and paid work spanning a variety of roles.

Most of the interviewees in employer or stakeholder roles were disabled people. So it is important to be aware that this research does not capture the views of non-disabled employers on any scale.

Approximately half of the interview participants were in a **paid** role at the time of the interview, and almost half were in a **volunteer** role in the sport and physical activity sector. Participants included those delivering sport and physical activity, employers, other stakeholders (like national governing bodies), or other roles supporting disabled people to participate in the sport and physical activity workforce.

The categories were not mutually exclusive, and some **participants were working across several roles or categories**. For example, there were participants who held a paid role, in the capacity as an employer, in a stakeholder organisation, and volunteering in a sport group in their leisure time.

Interview participants worked across different parts of the sector. About two-thirds were working in **disability sport**, and a third in **mainstream sport**. Some participants worked across both, in one or multiple roles, such as volunteering in mainstream sport while working in disability sport.

The most common **types of roles** were 'coaching, teaching or leading activities', and 'administrative or office based', with many participants having played more than one type of role in the workforce. Focusing on their main current role, the

majority of participants were in administrative or officer roles, including in sport development, marketing, management or sport inclusion. Around a third were involved in coaching or delivering sport and physical activities, including youth coaching. Participants also included board members, people in apprenticeships, and self-employed or freelance workers.

Participants were not all clear about how many **hours a week** they worked. However, of those that were the majority worked fewer than full-time hours. Many talked about working part-time to manage fluctuating conditions or fatigue, or to accommodate other sport interests.

Not all participants needed **qualifications** for their roles, but many had sport-specific qualifications (such as coaching certificates). Around a quarter of the participants had undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in the sport sector, such as sports science or sports development.

For a detailed breakdown of the sample, refer to [Appendix 1: Interview sample](#)

3.3. Note on intersectionality

It was our aim to uncover insights into the influence of intersectional factors on disabled people's experiences of the workforce, however it should be noted that this was a small scale, qualitative study. Within a small sample, it is not possible to draw conclusions about which characteristics are driving experiences, and the focus of conversations was understandably the barriers facing disabled people.

There is a further challenge in asking questions of participants about which aspects of their identity (e.g. being disabled, or their gender, or age etc) they believe most impact on their experiences – people do not tend to find it easy or straightforward to attribute their experiences to their combination of characteristics.

Nonetheless, we found that there were key intersectional issues that did impact people's experiences. However, these did not always align to protected characteristics, but often reflected people's wider lived experience, including their own changing health journey and personal identity, and caring responsibilities. This shows the importance of using a wider intersectional lens to explore experience of barriers, beyond characteristics that are protected in law.

Intersectionality may be further explored on a wider scale where larger quantitative data sets allow us to identify and cross-reference links between characteristics and experiences.

4. Findings: The sector at large

4.1. Overall reflections on the workforce

Participants identified clear **benefits** to having disabled people in the sport and physical activity workforce. In an environment where sport is becoming more inclusive, the need for a workforce with understanding that comes from **lived experience** was felt to be important. Having disabled people as **consultants**, for example in designing training materials, was also seen as positive. Some participants saw themselves as **role-modelling inclusivity**, particularly in children's activities.

The most commonly mentioned concern for interviewees was around **prejudice, stigma and lack of awareness and knowledge about disability**. Some noted that these affect disabled people getting into work across all sectors, but are heightened in the sport and physical activity sector, where there is an idea of what a sport person 'looks like'. They felt that they might not be perceived to fit into the sport sector - particularly those working in the mainstream sport sector.

"I didn't know if I belonged in the mainstream world. Did they think I was credible? Will the parents feel that their kids are getting what they should be getting? But at the same time, I thought: what's the worst that can happen?"

Some interviewees felt employers were becoming aware of the importance of lived experience in the workplace. But that did not always come with pay or recognition; employers may expect knowledge and **expertise to be given voluntarily**.

Participants felt there was a **lack of disabled role models** in the sector; with little visibility of disabled people and few opportunities.

Participants who had a hands-on role were concerned about what people would think about how they **demonstrate moves or exercises**, for example, needing to describe exercises, or use equipment such as magnifying lenses to use exercise machines. While they felt capable of instructing in this way, they were conscious that other people might look unfavourably on this, and that gyms would not be set up with the necessary equipment to enable them to work.

Fluctuating conditions impacted on ability to do day-to-day work in a consistent way (for example, pain or fatigue may make long or consecutive days of in-person working unmanageable). Lack of flexibility to accommodate this led some participants into self-employment, part-time work, or voluntary instead of paid work.

Concerns around **managing medical appointments** was also mentioned, as these often take place during the working day. An example specific to visual impairment was needing to take a significant chunk of time off work for guide dog training.

Managing changes to one's abilities at work was a challenge for people with **acquired disability**. Those who had become disabled while working in the sector said this led to loss of confidence and feelings of, "I could do this before, but now I can't."

4.2. The wider benefits of work

When asked about the wider benefits of work (in addition to being paid), participants cited:

- **learning** and keeping on top of latest knowledge;
- **social interaction** and friendships with colleagues;
- **making a difference**;
- **connections** and **networks**; and
- keeping fit for their overall **wellbeing**.

"Being involved in [the sport sector] has given me a purpose, something to look forward to, a whole new circle of friends – because I lost a lot of my friends when I became disabled."

Access to **networks** was seen as important in providing support and connections for disabled people working in sport and physical activity, helping build supportive relationships and share information. It was noted that employee networks should be properly supported by employers, and not rely on the 'goodwill of employees'.

"[Employee networks provide] opportunities for individuals from shared backgrounds or communities to share challenges and seek support from each other."

Connecting with other disabled people working in the sector was important to participants, but lack of accessibility at conferences and events could act as a barrier. Additionally, disabled people who are self-employed might not be able to afford to pay for support to attend an external event.

4.3. Qualifications and training

Participants had a **mix of qualifications** and training, including further and higher education and sport-specific qualifications. Some had a **degree** (undergraduate or postgraduate) leading to a **relevant job** – such as a sport development degree, followed by a sport development officer role.

Over half the participants in **coaching roles** had sport-specific qualifications such as level 1 or 2 qualifications. Several had personal training qualifications, and others had

qualifications in specific activity types. Some of these were supplemented by courses in supporting disabled people or people with neurodiversities. Other related fields included nutrition and occupational therapy, and some had taken courses to support specific elements of working in sport, such as safeguarding, first aid, mental health first aid.

Some participants did not have qualifications, but had extensive **experience** which had enabled them to work in the sector.

Although some participants had received personal or practical support for gaining qualifications (particularly in higher education, for example, paid note-takers), others reported **barriers to accessing training**, in terms of costs and accessibility. In-person training could be prohibitive due to lack of **physical access** (disabled parking, accessible venues), **inaccessible materials** (for example, unsuitable for a screen reader) or not manageable with impairments such as **fatigue** (not being able to participate in week-long, full-day courses).

"The qualifications that I need are not really justified. They are just random expensive courses – I know I can do that course if someone gives me the money to do it, but I don't have the money myself."

4.4. Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid pandemic was raised by some interviewees as having impacted on workforce journeys, both positively and negatively, as follows:

- work and volunteering in the sector stopped completely for some people;
- journeys into the sector were interrupted or came to a halt;
- paid job opportunities began to decline;
- personal fitness declined due to the closure of facilities; and
- some elements of work and networking became more virtual.

Some reported an improvement since Covid in flexible options for working, networking and recruitment. For example, it was a driver for meetings to become virtual rather than in-person (good in terms of accessibility, less in terms of reduced in-person interactions), and for more options at interview stage (virtual interviews).

4.5. The sector: Key take-aways

The sector cannot thrive without people with lived experience.

Participants recognised the **benefit of lived experience**, which enables the sector to provide a diverse workforce to meet the needs of diverse participants. This is particularly beneficial in roles such as coaching, leadership, and consulting, where understanding the needs of disabled participants is crucial.

Employers need to understand and address barriers, including to training.

Disabled people face significant barriers in the sport and physical activity workforce, including **prejudice, stigma, and a lack of awareness** about disabilities. These are often exacerbated by societal perceptions of what a "sports person" should look like.

Employers will benefit from understanding the importance of **supportive networks**. Both internal (employee disability networks) and external (wider sector networks) support systems are vital for disabled workers. They provide essential support, foster connections, and facilitate the sharing of information and experiences.

Barriers to obtaining relevant **qualifications and training**, including costs and accessibility, are limiting opportunities for professional development.

Fluctuating conditions, such as pain and fatigue, create additional challenges. Lack of flexible working arrangements and inadequate accessibility in workplaces further complicate the ability to work: a 'flexible-by-default' approach is needed. The flexibility in work arrangements and interview processes that arose during the Covid pandemic should be maintained.

5. Findings: Joining the workforce

5.1. Motivations to work for a specific employer

Most participants were highly motivated **to work in the sport and physical activity sector** specifically, and looked for roles and employers that aligned with their interests, skills and, where relevant, qualifications.

Accessibility and flexibility were key motivators, and organisations who were seen to be **committed to inclusion** appealed to participants. Disability sport organisations were unsurprisingly perceived to be more disabled-friendly, particularly important to those who had experienced barriers with previous employers.

Participants often expressed a strong desire for their work to make a difference, so they were drawn to organisations undertaking **value-based work**, or supporting inclusive sport. Some were drawn to larger, national organisations where they could have an impact on a **wider scale**. Feeling that they could personally bring something valuable to the organisation (such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion - EDI - knowledge) was cited by some participants.

Some participants had **personal connections** at their current organisation, which had encouraged them through the door. This included a friend working for the organisation; and people who they had networked with in order to improve their chances of finding work.

Practical considerations such as location, accessibility and flexibility of the role influenced decisions about who to work for. For example, being able to choose the place of work, or how many hours are worked from home.

A **positive experience of the recruitment process** encouraged people to work for an organisation, for example, an accessible process with choices in how to apply.

“In my previous role, reasonable adjustments have been a big battle, and the reason I left really. I was treated poorly as a disabled person and I didn’t want to go to another employer where that might happen again, so I sought out companies where I hoped they would be more inclusive.”

5.2. The recruitment journey

Participants reflected on their experiences of recruitment in the sport and physical activity sector, considering barriers and enablers at each stage.

5.2.1. Advertising and messaging

Participants felt that key practical information about a role should be provided at the advertising stage, to help them decide whether the role would work for them. Practicalities included: whether the role is full or part-time; home working, office or hybrid; and whether the hours and pay would make it worth moving off benefits.

Participants wanted to see **disabled-positive messaging** and advertisements that make it clear that disabled applicants are welcomed; both through positive statements of this and by referring to adjustments and adaptations being available. However, this messaging must be genuine and followed up by action.

“Their advertising sent pro-age and pro-disability messaging, but it was a load of rubbish. They never got back to me, despite me chasing them again and again.”

The **Disability Confident** Scheme was seen as positive by some. Others considered it a token gesture, not backed up by genuine intention to hire disabled people.

“I had noticed that [organisation] had received the Disability Confident scheme status. That visible statement, understand that they have been through a process, that is a visible sign for me of their commitment.”

Some interviewees considered **language and tone** important, appreciating a friendly and welcoming tone in recruitment communications. For example, where a recruiter had used informal language and a smiley face emoji.

5.2.2. Application

The **ease of application processes**, such as screen reader accessibility, was a key factor for some participants. Forms that are accessible or in **different formats** was important for some participants, particularly with **visual impairments**. One noted that advertisements often said, ‘contact us for different versions’ - but it was easier to get their spouse to help with the form, rather than ask for the different version.

This illustrates a wider point about making processes **accessible by default**, rather than by request (‘you can ask for another format’), removing that extra layer of effort for disabled applicants. For example, ‘Click here to access the form in another format’, would take a potentially time-consuming step out of the process.

Long application forms with space for lots of text were an enabler for some participants, who felt it gave them time to explain the relevance of their experience. However this was a barrier for others, who did not feel that they could best showcase their experience through writing. This included neurodivergent participants (including dyslexic), who struggled to write responses to open questions or questions without a clear structure (for example, when writing a personal statement).

One employer noted that an application form can be harder to complete for some applicants, compared with just sending a CV. However, they noted that other applicants might prefer being able to explain how their skills meet the person specification through an application form. They reflected that their usual practice was therefore to give applicants the **choice** of which approach to take.

“I’m also dyslexic which might be why I’m not getting past application stage: that’s already a challenge.”

Employers talked about providing tailored, **one-to-one support**. This involved reaching out to applicants to ensure they had completed their application to best showcase their strengths; answer any questions or concerns; offer support around the next stage if appropriate; or provide constructive feedback if not. This is resource-intensive, for the hiring person, but was considered worthwhile to create a more inclusive process and increase the likelihood of finding the right person for the role.

5.2.3. Inclusive interviews

Many ways to help people during interviews, were suggested, as follows:

- Being able **to take breaks** during the interview.
- Delivering interviews **virtually** (particularly if it is a home-based/virtual role).
- Receiving interview **questions in advance**.
- Including an **independent panel member** who had not seen the application.
- Including a **disabled person** on the interview panel.
- Asking clear, **direct questions**, rather than questions that are open or ambiguous.
- Having a **supporter** present (particularly for those with a learning difference).
- Connecting with **organisations** that can support the interview process (for example, Access to Sport).
- Giving a **tour** of the working environment.
- Designing an interview process that has a **mix of practical tasks and interview**.

One emerging practice seemed to be providing the **interview questions in advance**, with several employers offering this or considering it. This can be particularly helpful for neurodivergent participants, or people who may need time to process questions.

“Being clear on what to expect from the interview means that people can present their best selves. We have had feedback from candidates that having the chance to review questions beforehand reduces anxiety, and it means that the interview can actually be about their experience, knowledge and skills – rather it being a memory test which tests what they can remember on the spot.”

The overriding message was that candidates should be invited to share their needs in advance of the interview so that adjustments could be put in place.

“One of the best interviews I’ve done was a mix of practical assessment and formal interview. They gave access to the questions ahead, and an opportunity to talk about physical environment in advance – and any other areas where I would need adaptations. That was very positive. The interviewees were together for the first part and I was the only person I saw with a (visible) disability – I saw it as a great opportunity for me then: I felt passionately that a disabled person should get the job.”

Some employers reported that their organisation has adopted or is working towards more flexibility in terms of **interview formats**, such as online interviews instead of in person (note the employers interviewed were in disability organisations).

There were examples where an interview did not take into account the candidate's **physical needs**: such as where a wheelchair user was placed in a position that meant they had their back to the panel while delivering their presentation.

The employers we spoke to shared some positive practice around **representation** of disabled people on interview panels. One (a college) reported that a disabled employee sits on interview panels, with the aim of demonstrating commitment to positive practice around disability. Another said that all interviewees attend **two interviews**, one with a panel of people with lived experience of disability and the other with the hiring managers. (Author's note: equity of points weighting should be considered, to ensure that the practice is meaningful and not tokenistic.)

5.2.4. Feedback

Many interviewees reported shortcomings in the feedback process during recruitment. It was common to receive **no feedback**, or feedback that felt like an excuse – a cover for the real reason being that the employer did not want to hire a disabled person. Several felt they had been ‘fobbed off’ by being told they were second, or they would be re-contacted when another appropriate role came up.

5.3. Disability disclosure

Interviewees had differing feelings towards disclosing disability during application. Some were happy to do so, noting the guarantee of an interview with Disability-Confident employers, while others were ambivalent or preferred not to disclose.

Some felt that disclosing their disability was important, particularly with visible disability, so the recruiter was not taken by surprise by seeing a disabled person at interview. They felt it was also useful to enable open conversations about adjustments and communication needs. One noted that if an employer responded negatively to a disclosure, then they would not want to work for them anyway.

One participant felt they had not been taken forward to the interview stage because of disclosing their disability, and had therefore stopped disclosing at this

stage. Others were worried about asking questions about the role in advance, in case it affected how they were perceived.

“How do I have a conversation with someone that I have never met to help them understand what I need? Is that going to go against me applying for the job?”

One interviewee who had disclosed during the application process, realised that the panel had not been made aware and therefore adjustments were not made.

There were mixed views about automatically giving an interview to applicants who meet the minimum requirements and declare a disability. For some it made them feel less confident at interview, in case they had ‘only’ been invited because of this. Others said this practice was not consistently implemented by employers anyway.

5.4. Barriers and enablers to joining the workforce

A key barrier was a **lack of suitable opportunities**. Many roles in sport and physical activity are poorly paid and there is a lack of flexibility by default: for example, roles may be full-time, which may not work with other commitments or the need to manage fatigue. While freelancing worked for some, others felt the unpredictable nature made it difficult to manage, particularly if specific equipment was needed. Freelancing was also said to create barriers for applying to Access to Work.

Another key barrier was **negative attitudes** towards disabled people: general lack of awareness, prejudice, stereotyping and stigma. Some preferred not to disclose their disability at the recruitment stage for this reason, feeling that from a wide range of applicants, the employer was unlikely to choose a disabled person. Some people felt that because of negative views about what a disabled person could or couldn't do, they had to prove themselves more than non-disabled candidates.

Some identified a barrier around organisations' tendency to **value qualifications over experience**. This was particularly the case when specific qualifications are deemed ‘essential’ for roles, even though a person might have the ‘equivalent experience’. This is an added hurdle for disabled people, as ‘essential’ qualifications and training may be expensive for self-funding individuals or inaccessible for disabled people.

Physical access issues (such as ramps) came up as a barrier to attending interviews. The prospect of a **lack of workplace accommodations** (reasonable adjustments) was a barrier to applying for roles, because this was seen to reflect employers' attitudes to disabled employees, making disabled people feel unwelcome.

Managing pain and fatigue was another a barrier to applying for work, particularly when it impacts on ability to work consistently, for example full-time, in-person, set hours, or needing to travel. This contributed to reluctance to commit to a role; they might feel they are letting other people down by not being consistently available.

5.5. Employers' perspectives on recruitment

Most of the employers we interviewed were working in disability organisations, and therefore could share positive recruitment practices, but they identified challenges to inclusive recruitment in the wider sector, including:

- **Systemic bias** against employing disabled people.
- **Lack of awareness** of how to make recruitment accessible, from not even thinking about it, to fear of 'getting it wrong'.
- Concerns around potential **cost of making recruitment accessible**.
- Concerns about potential **cost of employing a disabled person**.
- **Lack of willingness and ability to adapt roles**.

Employers identified a need for **guidance and toolkits**, and access to expert advice, particularly for employers that do not have this expertise in-house. There was a general consensus around the need for **collaboration and sharing of resources**. Suggestions included Sport England funding an **ongoing central function**, which could be accessed by employers seeking advice around recruitment (and employment) of disabled people (like the function previously undertaken by Aspire).

One interviewee suggested a **signposting directory or guide** to organisations that could provide advice around recruiting or employing people with specific **impairment types**. For example, for someone with a visual impairment, it might be RNIB, or British Blind Sport, depending on the role and whether those organisations had the capacity available to run such a function.

“Employers often don't know how to make it accessible, and if you are using a recruitment agency, they are not necessarily thinking about the whole environment for someone. We are stereotypical about how we approach interviews and still tend to use very traditional methods, and I am not always convinced they are right for disabled people, particularly where someone may already be going to be lacking in confidence and experience. But if you have the right commitment and mindset - that will underpin it. How to build this? Awareness, training, support and advice.”

5.6. Joining the workforce: Key take-aways

Employers should appeal to people's internal drivers for making a difference.

The motivation or internal driver to enter the sport workforce is often a passion for sport, and a desire to **make a difference**. To encourage more disabled people into the workplace, **employers could appeal to these internal drivers**, for example, by emphasising how roles will make a difference (such as, increasing opportunities for disabled people to access sport. or contributing to improving company culture).

Employers should demonstrate their values through inclusive recruitment.

People were attracted to companies demonstrating **values-based** work, and a **reputation for inclusion**. Companies could highlight this during recruitment, through wording of materials and an approach that demonstrates an understanding of inclusivity and diverse access needs.

An **inclusive recruitment strategy** should start with **accessible application processes** which are essential to ensure that people can 'get in the door.' Employers should design application forms and processes to accommodate assistive technologies, providing alternative formats without requiring special requests.

Having a **'flexible by default'** approach to job roles will also demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity. For example, giving people the option of their place and hours of work. Job descriptions should use clear, inclusive language and explicitly encourage disabled individuals to apply, highlighting the availability of reasonable adjustments and support during the recruitment process.

Offering a **choice of application methods**, such as via CV, application forms, and video applications, allows candidates to choose what best suits their needs.

Proactive and honest communication is essential: reaching out to applicants to discuss their specific needs and how the organisation can support them throughout the recruitment process, while providing clear information about the role, including flexibility in hours, remote work options, and any physical requirements.

Employers need a welcoming, inclusive workplace culture.

Conveying a **welcoming and inclusive culture** through job advertisements, recruitment materials and organisational communication, is important, alongside disability awareness and inclusive hiring practices – as well as role-modelling a diverse recruitment workforce, for example, on panels.

Employers should seek to learn from people with lived experience.

These approaches are inclusive and practical but may present challenges to employers who have good intentions but are held back by lack of experience or training. Seeking advice from people with lived experience and expert organisations may help employers starting out on this journey.

6. Findings: Staying part of the workforce

6.1. What keeps disabled people in their roles?

As discussed above in relation to motivations for joining the workforce, a **passion for work** and the **desire to make an impact** was a primary motivator for employees. Witnessing the positive impact of their work on others' lives, such as improving confidence and providing inclusive sessions, was highly motivating.

"Passion for the job. For me, it's also trying to improve the world for other people in a similar situation."

Participants value **autonomy** in their roles and the **flexibility** to manage their work in a way that suits their needs. Having input on one's own targets or being trusted to 'do the work' rather than 'do the hours' was important for some.

A supportive and **inclusive work environment**, along with strong relationships with colleagues, contributes significantly to job satisfaction.

Fair treatment and inclusion, ensuring that employees do not feel singled out for being disabled, was important. People felt enabled by having support from their organisation, to deliver their work to the same level as non-disabled colleagues.

"There are days when I think: my speech isn't always clear, but I have helped people have a voice."

6.2. What makes it difficult to stay in a role?

Getting to venues is a key issue, particularly around **transport and travel**. For example, participants reported that the help provided by Passenger Assistance when travelling by train was very inconsistent.

Lack of **accessible parking**, particularly for employees who don't have disabled parking entitlement, could prevent a disabled person from carrying out their role. An autistic participant did not meet the threshold for a Blue Badge, but they would struggle if they had a 'meltdown' and were unable to cross a road.

Challenges were noted around **workplace processes** and events that were not accessible, such as induction processes or consideration of quiet spaces at work

events for neurodivergent employees. **A lack of flexibility** was a key challenge, for example not allowing employees to work from home.

For some participants, a more significant issue than practical barriers was the **prejudice** of employers or colleagues. Some had encountered colleagues who did not believe that disabled employees could do the job properly, or who thought that if someone can't do particular aspects of the work, they should not be in the role. Some interviewees had been stared at, had negative comments from colleagues, or been talked about behind their back.

Potential insurance issues around employing disabled employees (with learning disability) was raised by one interviewee.

6.3. Practical support in the workplace

Managing conditions is a key issue for disabled employees, for example managing capacity and fatigue, and juggling medical appointments with working time. This is most likely why the type of practical support that was most often cited by participants was **flexible working arrangements**. This included part-time work, flexible hours across the week, working from home and choosing their own hours.

Lack of flexibility came up consistently as a barrier that prevents disabled people from working in the sport and physical activity sector (and in other sectors), and shows a tension between employers' statements around committing to inclusion and an apparent reluctance to move away from the traditional '9-5' model of working.

"The flexibility to choose whether I wanted an in-person contract or a home-working contract. That was no strings or conditions attached."

Assistive technology was a key practical support that employers could put in place. For example, specific software and assisted technology, such as technology to allow a partially-sighted trainer to independently run online classes, which was difficult with the standard virtual meeting platforms. Some interviewees had obtained assistive software through Access to Work.

Another form of practical support from employers was making the work environment **physically accessible**. This included lifts in offices, walking aids, and accessible or priority parking spaces. It was important to participants that the whole office was accessible – "not just one meeting room!". One participant gave the example of turning up to deliver a coaching session to find that the access ramp was locked, so participants in the session had to carry their wheelchair up steps. Another recalled a meeting about disability inclusion, that was not accessible to wheelchairs.

A **supportive, listening and welcoming culture** was also important so that people could have safe conversations about their requirements. Colleagues being honest about their own understanding, and being willing to ask, listen and learn is key.

Having a work culture that feels like a 'safe space', where impairments or access needs can be honestly discussed, is valued.

6.4. Emotional support in the workplace

Participants said that emotional support in the workplace was usually informal, through **supportive managers and colleagues**. People describe supportive managers as always 'having their back', being someone they can 'rant' to when needed, and who will always make time for them, at any point in the day.

More **formal routes for emotional support**, such as wellbeing teams, were also mentioned. Formal emotional support included support through Access to Work or through teams who provided this role in the workplace.

A general positive workplace attitude to mental health is also important. One participant said that their workplace **'takes mental health seriously'**, which reassured them that if they needed support, it would be available.

Some participants did not receive emotional support, but felt that it would be helpful, particularly in navigating difficult meetings or situations in the workplace. Independent support, in addition to a line manager, was suggested to be useful if a disabled employee was seeking impartial advice.

6.5. Access to Work

Many participants were aware of Access to Work and had made use of (or attempted to apply to) the scheme at some point. The main feedback on it was around the **slow and cumbersome application process**, which was described as 'a nightmare,' with 'barrier after barrier.' Some had given up on the application process or had not heard back several months after their application. One participant described how they had asked for everything in writing to meet their communication needs, however, they were telephoned about the scheme several times instead. In the end, they felt the process was too stressful and gave up.

Some participants had a more **positive experience** and felt that Access to Work had enabled their employer (or themselves, if self-employed) to access equipment such as a laptop, software, one-to-one support or British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters.

Some participants were not aware of the scheme or felt that they would not be entitled to apply, for example feeling that their disability might not be recognised.

One participant felt that new employees should be encouraged to apply as soon as they are offered a job, to minimise delay in receiving support.

Another challenge is that the application is for the role, not the individual, so when someone changes jobs, they have to go through another assessment.

"Another barrier is around Access to Work and awareness around it. We have a colleague who has Access to Work needs, but they are on a six-hour contract and it took 18 months to get it in place."

6.6. In-work training

The **availability and inclusivity of in-work training** were mixed, with some participants reporting accessible programmes and others experiencing barriers, such as training materials that cannot be read by a screen reader.

Many participants had undertaken **self-driven training**, which often started as a result of following their passion for sport and physical activity. Some received training as part of **voluntary roles**, enabling them to progress in roles such as coaching.

One employer hired a **disabled person as a consultant** when developing training, to ensure it was accessible. They noted that designing truly inclusive training – rather than waiting for people to ask for adjustments – can be resource and cost-intensive.

"Inclusivity of training can be an issue. It takes more consideration to develop a course or training event which is accessible – you need to think about, what formats do I need, how can we build them in – videos, booklets etc need to be accessible and it is costly and time consuming."

Some participants valued **mentoring**: both as a mentor and as a mentee. But this was not something that all employers offered.

6.7. Staying in: Key take-aways

Employers need to meet disabled employees' practical needs.

Meeting the practical needs of disabled employees is essential to enable people to stay and thrive in their roles. Like all employees, consideration of physical and mental wellbeing needs is key, but for disabled employees, this may entail specific practicalities. This may include flexible working arrangements and physical equipment. Physical access is obviously essential, including transport and travel. Practical considerations can empower disabled people to balance their health needs and work responsibilities.

Employers should foster a supportive workplace culture.

A supportive workplace with understanding colleagues is also important, and ensuring a positive and inclusive work culture is key. This helps provide a safe place for honest, open conversations around fair treatment for all employees.

Intersectional factors, such as acquired disabilities, mental health conditions, neurodiversities, and caring responsibilities, further complicate workplace

experiences. An inclusive employer will consider these issues and have policies that address different needs and circumstances to help create a level playing field.

Work needs to present opportunities to make a difference – and progress.

A workplace where people can see how their work makes a difference is important to disabled people, while trusting individuals to work with a degree of autonomy in a workplace where their passion for the work can flourish. Another key area is progression, and inclusive training and other opportunities for development that give everyone fair access.

7. Findings: Moving on

7.1. Reasons for leaving roles

A key driver for leaving a role was **lack of necessary adjustments** or managers not responding positively when asked for adjustments. Inaccessible work environments were also an issue, including having to **travel** into an office rather than work from home. **Lack of support** from managers and colleagues was another reason.

Participants had also left work or taken time off to **manage health needs**, or when faced with declining health. This included managing pain or other symptoms, and the physical demands of the job.

Redundancy had been both a positive and a negative experience for people in terms of their journey in the sport and physical activity workforce. Some were spurred on to retrain or take on a different role in the sector.

Some participants had left due to **lack of progression** or being 'stuck in a rut' – which encouraged them to seek a new challenge, in pursuit of **personal growth**.

One participant described the breakdown of a work placement in a mainstream gym. The placement was undertaken as part of **specialist disability sport training**, funded and run by national disability organisations. The participant felt the breakdown of the placement was due to **lack of support for the employer to make adjustments and to understand disability**. This illustrates the importance of support and training for the receiving organisation.

An employer felt that **organisational cultures** are not always positive towards disabled people which may lead to people leaving. They also cited cost of adaptations or technologies which employers may not feel they can afford and therefore the disabled employee cannot do their job.

"If you only have a few disabled employees it can be quite expensive to put things in place for just a few people."

7.2. Moving up: progression

Participants noted **limited career progression** and leadership opportunities for disabled people, sometimes due to working in small teams or organisations.

One participant pointed out that **statistically, disabled people are at a disadvantage** when applying for jobs, and this means that they are more likely to stay in the same role for a longer time, even when they would like to leave or progress.

Some participants had successfully progressed in their roles, often highlighting the importance of **inclusive practices** and the presence of **role models** to encourage disabled people to apply for more senior roles ('If I can see it, I can be it').

Some participants also felt that some employers might focus on recruiting disabled people into roles, but not think any further ahead about how they could be supported to progress in the organisation.

Others said that while they felt they could potentially progress, the effort of managing their condition took up most of their day-to-day energy, and so progression had to take a backseat.

7.3. Returning to work

Returning to work after a break - for whatever reason - can be difficult. An open dialogue between the employee and organisation is important, alongside a culture of being able to adapt and change. This is particularly important if there are reasons in the work environment that caused people to leave in the first place. All of the factors identified above that can help disabled people stay in the workforce were discussed in relation to supporting a successful return to work: **supportive work environment, reasonable adjustments, adequate resources, support networks.**

Contacts through **friends or acquaintances** was a mechanism through which some participants had returned to the workplace: being given 'the nod' for a job, for example, following a period of being out of the workplace. This gave them the confidence to apply for a role, knowing that they had a 'cheerleader on the inside'.

7.4. Moving on: Key take-aways

To improve retention, make it easy and enjoyable to work.

Disabled people are still leaving roles because it is hard to physically access the workplace and opportunities that are available for non-disabled employees, such as training and progression. Disabled people are also leaving roles because roles are not sufficiently flexible to manage their impairments or health conditions.

Make work pay.

Low pay is not limited to the sports and physical activity sector, but it was a key consideration for some participants. This needs to be addressed both in terms of ensuring fair representation in the workforce, and that the sector retains highly-trained staff to meet the needs of everyone who wants to take part in sport or physical activity. Where the benefits system acts as a disincentive to work, this needs to be addressed at a wider level than just the sport and physical activity sector.

8. Findings: Workforce journeys

8.1. Pathways through the workforce

8.1.1. Motivations to join the sport and physical activity sector

The initial 'spark' for wanting to work in sport and physical activity often came in **childhood**, where positive experiences of taking part drove a desire to work in the sector. Many described an early consciousness of the lack of a level playing field for disabled athletes, and wanting to **make a difference** for other disabled people who were experiencing barriers to sport participation.

For some it was negative childhood experiences, like being excluded from physical activity by teachers or parents, that had inspired them to want to help change things for others. Negative comments about their lack of ability, or a lack of faith in what they could achieve as a disabled person, motivated them to **prove people wrong**. Participants described negative comments as "a red rag to a bull" or their motivation to join the workforce as "out of spite!"

"That is a huge driver for a lot of disabled athletes, whether born with their disability or acquired later in life – they want to do it because they weren't allowed to, or no-one thought they could."

A career in sport did not always stem from childhood experiences. Participants with acquired disability said it was an opportunity to connect with 'the old me' or **to reclaim a sense self**, of 'who I was' before an acquired disability.

Across all interviewees, sport and physical activity was the place where people felt they most thrived and could make a difference.

"I have found my calling in life."

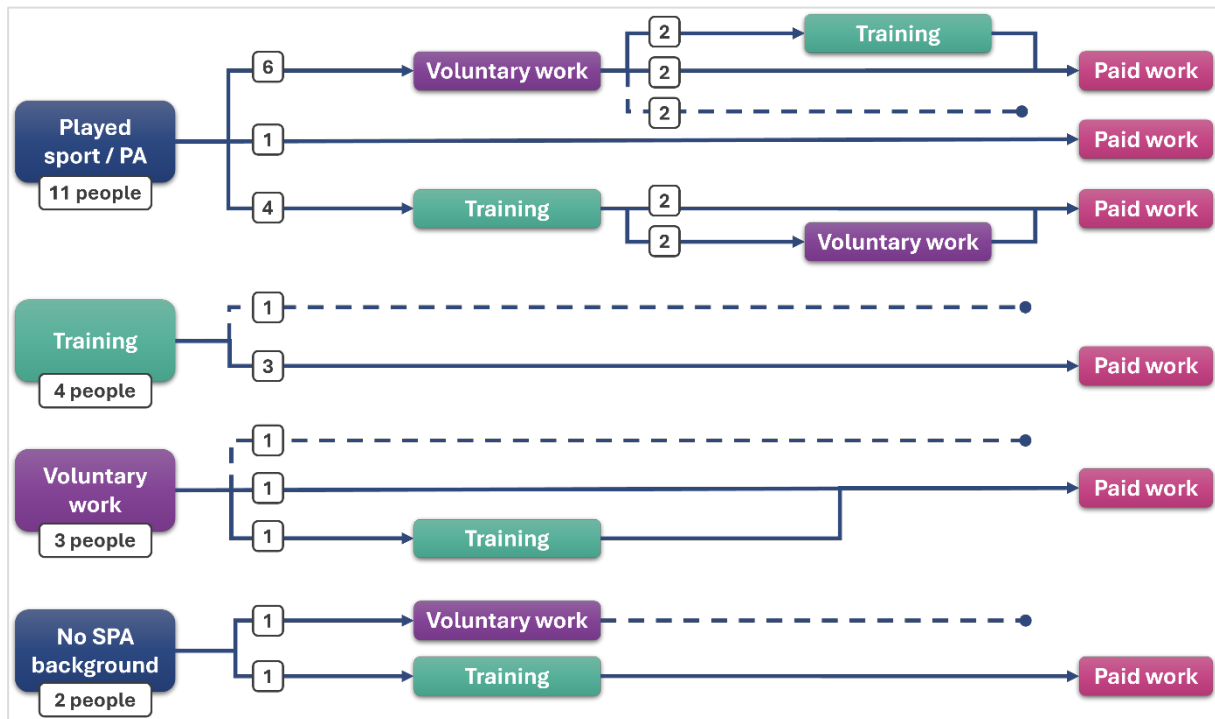
8.1.2. Common pathways to paid work

Of the 25 people interviewed in this project, 20 shared their own workforce journey in the sport and physical activity sector. These journeys were unsurprisingly very different for each person, reflecting their own life journey and experiences. However, whilst each pathway was unique, and often complex, a few typical routes emerged.

Trends were more visible when **childhood experience** of sport was considered as a motivation rather than a feature of one's pathway. However, interviewees whose

journeys had not reached paid employment (by choice or circumstance) were also those who did not have a childhood experience of sport and physical activity.

Figure 1: Key pathways among participants (n=20). The number of participants following each path is indicated. Dashed lines indicate participants that have not moved into paid work (either by choice or by circumstance).



Four key starting points were identified – playing sport, training, unpaid work (or volunteering), or having no sport and physical activity background.

Half the interviewees described **taking part** in sport or physical activity early in their journeys. There was a common trend in pathways from participation, into volunteering, and then into paid roles.

While **volunteering** and **training** were the starting points for some participants, almost all journeys included training or volunteering, before entering paid work.

More participants had entered paid work if their journey included **training**. Moving from training into employment (without volunteering), was more common than moving from volunteering into employment (without training).

Most participants had done unpaid work or **volunteering** at some point. For some, it was important to build skills and experience and connect to employers and opportunities. Others were not seeking paid work and wanted to continue volunteering. There were three main reasons why interviewees chose to remain volunteers, rather than pursue employment in sport and physical activity:

- they were concerned about managing and found volunteering to be lower stress;
- they wanted to be involved and support others; or

- they were concerned about potential impacts on benefits.

Several participants had previously worked in **other sectors** and entered the sport and physical activity workforce later. Whilst some had played sport, a couple had no clear background in sport before deciding to volunteer or work in the sector. Some interviewees had acquired impairments, which presented new challenges, exclusion, or discrimination, prompting the move from other sectors into the sport workforce.

8.2. Critical turning points in disabled people's journeys

Interviewees spoke about different people and experiences that had a catalytic impact on the direction of their workforce journey. In addition to childhood experiences or a passion for physical activity, some participants highlighted the support of **personal cheerleaders**. These included family, teachers, coaches, occupational therapists, support workers, or healthcare professionals who encouraged them to strive and thrive in the sporting environment. For example, someone seeing transferable skills in a person with an acquired disability, to move from supporting young people to become a children's coach. A few participants also spoke of inspirational **role-models** – disabled people inspiring them or challenging their own self-perceptions of ability.

Such personal cheerleaders and **connections** also played a critical role in entering the workforce, which may be part of why volunteering is so prevalent among disabled people's workforce journeys. These connections helped to tell disabled people about roles, recommend them, or in some cases directly employ them. Some interviewees found such connections organically (such as through people they knew from taking part), while others were proactive in seeking them out.

“I pushed and pushed and contacted anyone – do you need a mascot, do you need someone on reception. It was getting in and meeting people. Who you know is everything.”

Some participants shared critical experiences of taking part in **mainstream sport and physical activity** or trying to enter the workforce of mainstream sport (as compared to disabled or inclusive sport and physical activity). This included being turned away from long-standing membership of groups or activities following an acquired impairment, and how in time that inspired the development of inclusive approaches in those sports. A few interviewees were suitably qualified and experienced (as coaches, lifesavers, or gym instructors), but rejection from roles in mainstream facilities prompted them to redirect their careers toward disability sport.

“I’m a qualified level 2 swim coach, but never got to be one – every role I went for looked at me and laughed because I was a disabled person, and didn’t give me the job. I interviewed for a role, which involved lifeguarding. Part of that was a lifeguard test. It was me and a non-disabled guy. I smashed him on all the tasks, he even failed some, and they still didn’t give me the job.”

A few interviewees described the impacts of **new or worsening health conditions and impairments**, including burn-out or mental health crisis. These led to retirement, moving from full-time employment to part-time self-employment, breaks in career, or temporary/permanent closure of their businesses.

8.3. Intersectional factors

While disabled employees face barriers in the workplace, those with additional factors to manage or juggle at work, are further disadvantaged. This intersectional lens is an important one to consider in this work¹⁰. Participants were asked about intersectional factors that affect them in the workplace, alongside disability. As noted earlier in this report, people did not always find it easy to identify or articulate their experiences in this respect, but nonetheless some insights did emerge.

Acquired disability can add additional complexity: the path of becoming disabled, or developing an impairment, is one that was significant for some participants. The journey of integrating ‘my old self’ and ‘my new self’ led some to question where they now fitted into the sport and physical activity workforce, particularly if they worked in the sector or in similar roles prior to acquiring their impairment.

The issue of **identifying as disabled** was raised: employers might ask people if they are disabled, but a person may not identify as disabled but nonetheless require adjustments to recruitment or employment processes.

Participants also raised the issue of **invisible disabilities**, including neurological disabilities, and the need for adjustments for those. Some participants had **mental health conditions or neurodivergence** that were an additional barrier for them in the working environment, for example, needing quiet spaces at work events.

One participant had a **criminal record** - a potential additional barrier to joining the workforce, as it was flagged on their DBS check. However, in this case, their employer felt it was an advantage to have someone with this lived experience working there.

¹⁰ We considered identities and experiences both covered by and in addition to the Equality Act 2010

"I made mistakes as a child, leading to DBS issues. But [my employer] was really supportive and understanding of that background: they were impressed by all my volunteering and lived experience and said how much people like me are needed in the sport sector."

One participant spoke about barriers in their **organisation**, around enabling diverse participants to take part in activities, such as people from **lower income groups** or **visually impaired** people. They felt that the organisational culture was not open to athletes from these particular backgrounds.

Another factor was having **caring responsibilities**, either for young children or others with care needs. One employer felt that job centres in particular were not understanding of the difficulties of balancing caring and work, or returning to work after a break for caring. One participant asked for flexible working both to manage their disability and to care for a parent, but their employer was not open to this.

8.4. Journeys: Key take-aways

Key learning from exploring people's journeys shines a light on our perspectives and models through which we consider a workforce journey.

Challenging what 'success' means in the workplace.

We may think about paid work as being the 'pinnacle' of a career experience, but sometimes volunteering is the end goal. Paid work may be too difficult to manage alongside impairments, or alongside disability or out-of-work benefits.

The value of contributing to something 'bigger'.

The traditional career ladder - where paid employment is the ultimate achievement - clearly does not align with the everyone's lived realities and aspirations. The intrinsic rewards of contributing to a community, supporting others, and making a difference can represent a more meaningful 'pinnacle' of their journey.

Navigating the journey of my own story.

For some, the journey through the workforce is about a sense of identity and purpose, particularly in the context of acquired disabilities. Working in sport or physical activity can come out of a desire to reconnect with a past identity or to redefine oneself in light of new or changed realities. This process of navigating between 'who I was' and 'who I am now' underscores the profound impact that work - or lack of work - can have on our sense of identity and purpose.

9. Taking the research forward

This section offers recommendations for the sector (in addition to the key take-aways proposed throughout the report, for each stage of the workforce journey). Firstly, three key recommendations which, based on the research, we feel have the potential to make most positive impact for disabled people in the sector. Secondly, we have compiled a broader set of suggestions for employers, the sport and physical activity sector and government.

Finally, there are recommendations for potential future research.

9.1. Key recommendations

The following are suggested as key recommendations from the research.

- **Adopt a 'flexible by default' approach to job roles:** Full-time, office-based work is a key barrier for people with diverse requirements, including disabled people, parents, carers, and people living in different parts of the country. Part-time roles where employees can choose their hours, their place of work, and the mix of in-person, work-from-home or hybrid working will spread the workforce net to attract a wider diversity of talented people from different backgrounds. Government has recently announced the intention to bring in 'flexible by default' employment legislation, so this could be a key opportunity for progress in terms of opening up employment opportunities for disabled people.
- **Ensure that advice and guidance is available for employers:** It is clear that many employers lack knowledge and expertise in how to recruit and support disabled people in work, and do not even know where to access advice. There is a clear need for an effective source of advice and guidance for employers so that they can turn good intentions into action.
- **Proactively identify and remove barriers:** in this research we tried to break down the 'journey' into different stages in order to explore barriers and enablers at each point. But what becomes clear is that many barriers and challenges recur and are ongoing, from recruitment to employment to retention. Employers need to ensure that they are continually learning, listening to disabled staff and employing disabled consultants to identify barriers and remove them. This includes physical barriers such as lack of accessible parking and inaccessible office spaces, and communication barriers such as training that is not suitable for all employees' communication needs. Taking an ongoing, proactive approach will help ensure an inclusive, listening culture.

9.2. Recommendations for employers

9.2.1. Recommendations around recruitment

- **Remove practical barriers to recruitment:** Ensure any practical obstacles for specific impairment types are addressed (physical accessibility of workspaces; screen-reader accessible materials; accessible parking).
- **Normalise adaptations:** Show through words and actions that the organisation is a place where people are welcomed and supported; and that adjustments and adaptations are a part of working life. For example, someone may not identify as disabled but still need adaptations in an interview, so use positive messaging, such as: "We want our application process to be accessible for everyone. If we can do anything else to meet your needs or make the process easier for you, please contact x."
- **Consider what qualifications are essential:** When advertising roles, consider whether qualifications are essential or desirable, and is "or equivalent experience" appropriate for the role. If a candidate does not have the qualifications, consider whether they could be supported in the role, to complete these.
- **Use diverse routes, channels and platforms:** As well as using mainstream recruitment websites, promote opportunities via disability organisations (sport and non sport specific); make use of jobs boards such as Activity Alliance's, or social media channels of disability organisations; think creatively about how to reach specific audiences, for example, by engaging with high profile disabled people in sport to get them to promote opportunities via social media.
- **Resource individual support:** Invest time in understanding what individuals need to enable them to show their potential during the recruitment process.

9.2.2. Recommendations around retention

- **Start the Access to Work application process on acceptance of the role:** Once a disabled person accepts a job offer, begin the Access to Work application process. There is a clear need for improving the efficiency and accessibility of the Access to Work process and increasing awareness and knowledge about the scheme among both employers and employees.
- **Adapt a 'Flexible by default' approach to both job roles and team tasks:** Consider not only adaptation to the role such as whether the employee could choose their hours and method of working, but also how adaptations could be made across the wider team, for example, could the disabled employee do certain tasks while a non-disabled colleague picks up others?
- **Identify and remove barriers to training:** Ensure all training is fully accessible for all employees, and consider offering one to one support or employing people with lived experience to review training materials.

- **Plan for progression:** Formal, structured processes around planning for progression should be in place, for example, via annual appraisals, so that disabled employees don't become 'stuck' in a role.
- **Provide emotional support and mentoring:** Support for wellbeing should be available in all organisation for everyone, but specific support can help make this more accessible, such as disability employee networks, or mentoring schemes.

9.3. Recommendations for the sector

- **Develop an Employee Passport for the sports and physical activity sector:** A live and portable employment passport would reduce the need for disabled employees to repeat their requirements to managers and employers. Similar passports are used in healthcare environments, including for people with Learning Disabilities.
- **Develop a national disability sport and physical activity workforce network:** A support national network for people working in the sector, with access to specialist advice around workplace adjustments and rights.
- **Develop a scheme for an 'inclusion rating':** Developing a star-based inclusion rating for leisure centres and other sport and activity providers, similar to a hygiene rating in catering venues, to encourage organisations to be more inclusive.

9.4. Recommendations for government

The following suggestions would apply at a national level.

- **Make Access to work more efficient:** Speed up and simplify the Access to Work process, so that it is 'portable by default' and can move with the employee as they move between different organisations. This could incorporate an 'Employee passport' type model, mentioned above.
- **Make work pay:** Some participants felt that they were 'punished for working' with the withdrawal of benefits and the complexity of navigating the system. Ensuring that work always pays would make the journey into paid employment easier or even attainable for more people.

9.5. Recommendations for further research

The following recommendations apply to potential areas for further research on the topics that have been explored in this research project.

- **Explore issues in a wider, quantitative study:** A potential next step could be to undertake a wider scale quantitative study to explore the prevalence of the enablers and barriers to working in sport, and to increase understanding of how different impairment types and other factors interact with these.
- **Sector-wide exploration of disability workforce inclusion:** These issues could be explored through a collaborative approach across the sector, adding workforce

and disability questions to existing data collection channels, such as the Annual Activity Survey (Activity Alliance), Active Lives (Sport England) and CIMSPA's Workforce Insights.

- **Explore employer perspectives further:** this study did not engage with the very large proportion of employers who are not currently doing enough to increase the representation of disabled people in the sector, to explore the barriers and challenges they face, and what would help them to improve. Reaching this segment of employers could shed valuable light on how best to tackle the workforce gap; more thinking is needed about how to do this.

9.5.1. Potential topics for future research

- **Training and qualifications:** How easy or difficult is it to access training and qualifications, outside work and in work? How important or useful are training and qualifications in securing paid work?
- **Disclosure of disability:** Are people disclosing disability, why and at what points? Has disclosure had positive or negative impacts?
- **Employer attitudes:** What are the attitudes of employers towards employing disabled people: is this a priority? How has a diverse workforce impacted their customer offer or services?
- **Employer data collection mechanisms:** Are employers collecting data on their disabled workforce? Do these see this as a priority and how is the data used for improvement? Where are the key areas where employers are missing information?
- **Workforce journey or transitions:** Which entry points to working in the sector are most common? Which 'pivotal moments' are key to enabling people to enter – and stay – in the workforce? Where should the sector be focusing efforts to improve? How can people be supported through transitions on the journey towards paid work (e.g. participating to volunteering to paid).
- **Differences between mainstream and disability sport:** What is the appetite amongst disabled people for working in mainstream sport, compared with working in disability sport? What are the barriers to working in the mainstream sport and physical activity sector?
- **Enablers and barriers:** To what extent are different enablers and barriers being experienced by disabled people? What is the relative impact of different enablers and barriers? For example, attitudes, adjustments, technology, flexibility – which of these are most common and which have the biggest effect on recruitment and retention? What are the key barriers to Access to Work meeting people's needs?
- **Impairment type and intersectionality:** How do experiences differ for people with different types of impairment and conditions (e.g. multiple, fluctuating, invisible, neurodivergence)? How do other characteristics and circumstances influence experience (e.g. protected characteristics, additional responsibilities, support networks).

10. Conclusion

This research has provided insights into the experiences of disabled people within the sport and physical activity workforce. It addresses two key questions: how intersecting factors shape experiences and how employer perceptions influence recruitment and retention.

The findings reveal that while a **passion for sport** and a desire to **make a difference** drive many disabled people to enter and remain in the sport and physical activity sector, **significant barriers remain.**

These barriers are most prominent at the "getting in" stage, where traditional recruitment practices often fall short of being inclusive and accessible. Employers need to adopt more **flexible and values-based recruitment strategies** that appeal to individuals' internal motivations and demonstrate a genuine commitment to inclusion.

Once in the workforce, disabled employees face ongoing challenges related to accessibility, workplace culture, and progression opportunities – but also express a commitment to wanting to remain in the workforce. Meeting practical needs through **flexible working arrangements** must be a priority for employers wanting a more diverse workforce.

In order to retain disabled talent, employers need to create a **supportive culture** where **visibility and advocacy** are valued within the workplace: disabled role models and support networks are good examples of this. Employers also need to recognise the importance of progression, ensuring that all employees have equitable access to development opportunities.

The research also highlights the importance how we define **success in the workplace.** For some, success may not align with traditional career milestones, but instead may lie in contributing to a larger purpose, reclaiming a sense of self, and finding fulfilment in work that resonates with personal values.

The sport and physical activity sector has undoubtedly come a long way in opening up opportunities for a more diverse workforce that supports more diverse athletes. To foster a truly inclusive workforce, employers must continue to inform themselves about how they can consciously dismantle the barriers that the disabled workforce is facing.

Inclusive employers will be those who rethink their recruitment and retention strategies with an emphasis on accessibility, flexibility, and a culture that values - and is informed by - diverse voices and experiences. In doing so, we will be able to recruit and retain disabled talent that will understand, support and nurture the diverse talents of athletes both now and in the future.

Appendix 1: Interview sample

The final sample of 25 interviewees included:

- **men and women;**
- a range of **ages;**
- a range of **ethnic groups;**
- a range of **impairment types;**
- a range of **geographical locations;**
- a range of sport and physical activity **workforce roles;** and
- varied roles in terms of **employment status.**

Demographics

Figure 2: Interview sample according to gender (n=25).

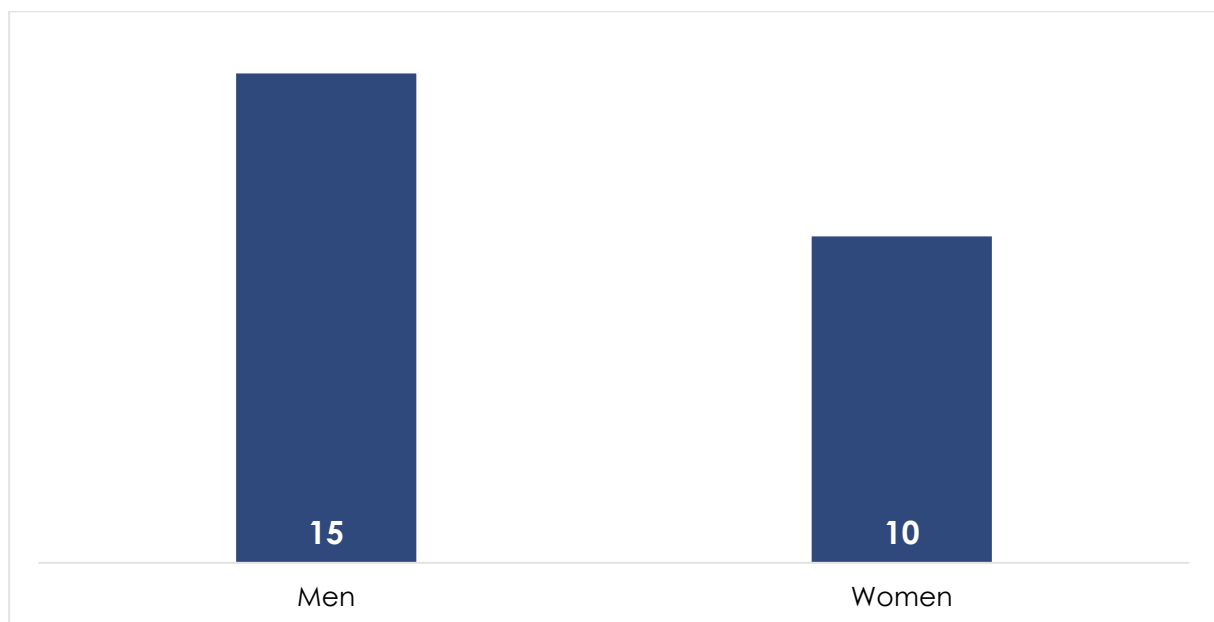


Figure 3: Interview sample according to age (n=25).

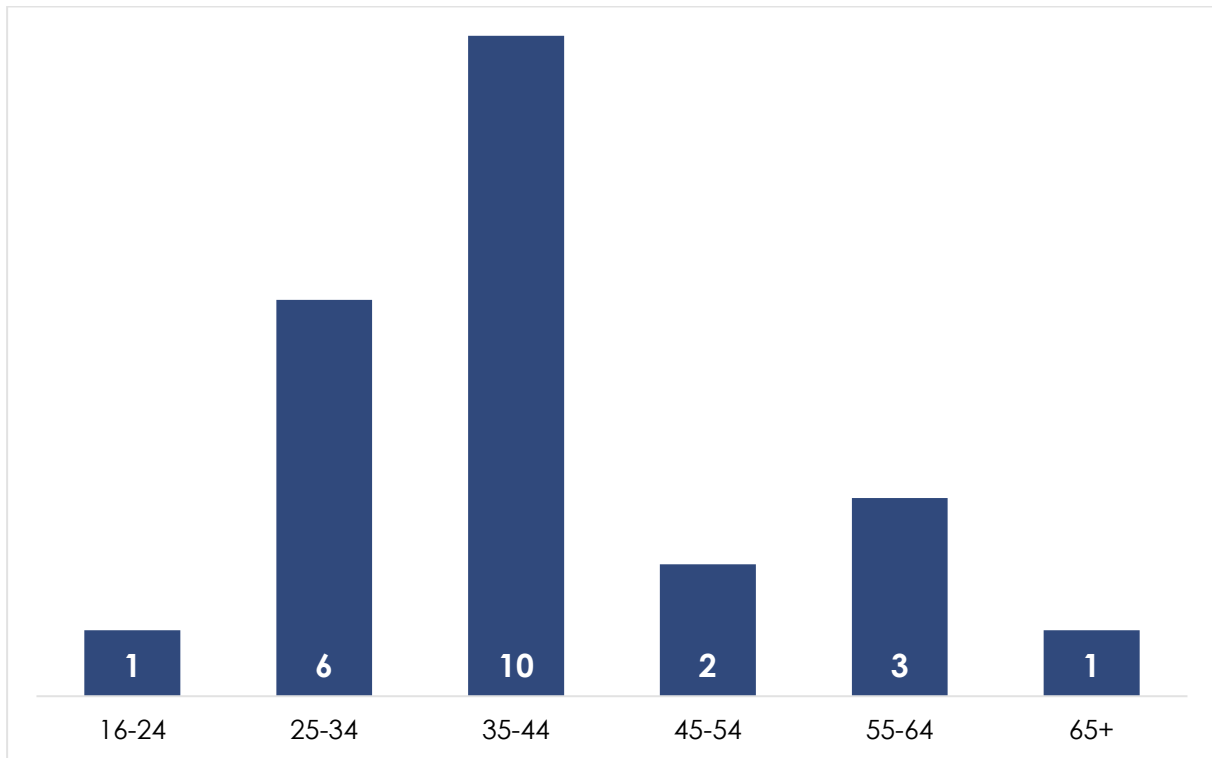


Figure 4: Interview sample according to ethnic group (n=25).

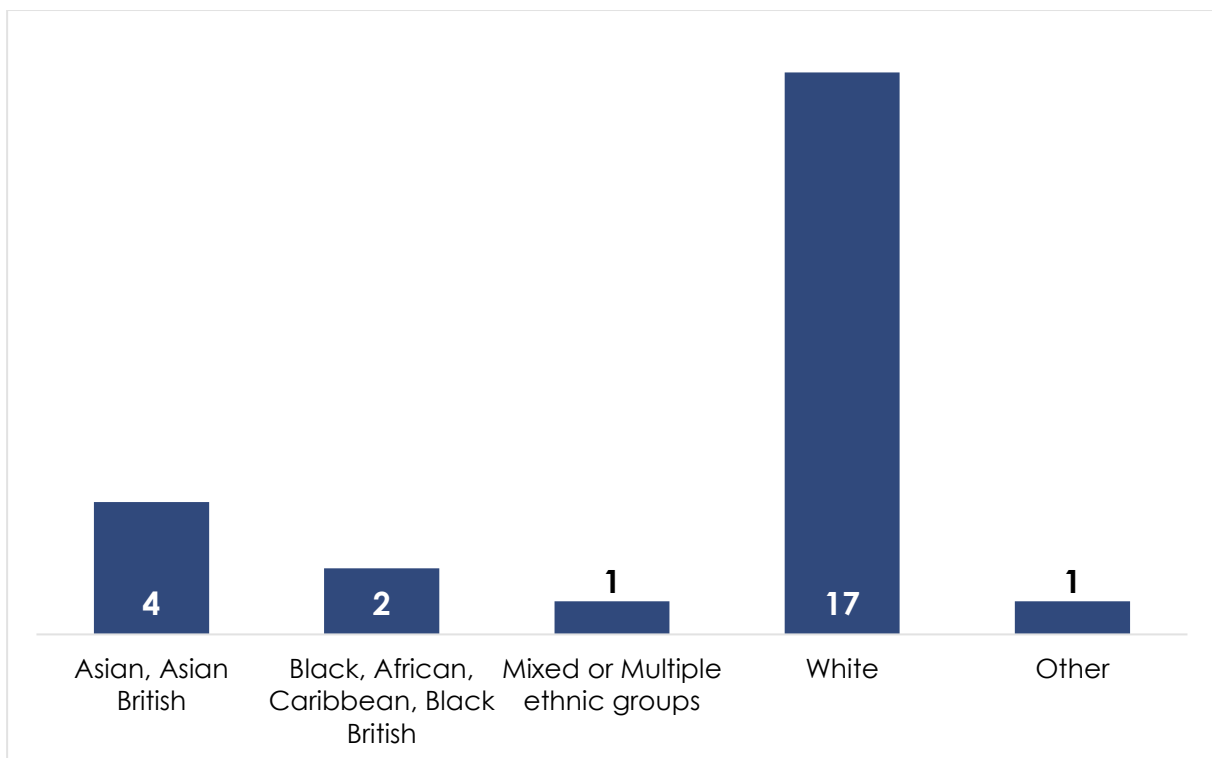


Figure 5: Interview sample according to geographic location (n=25).

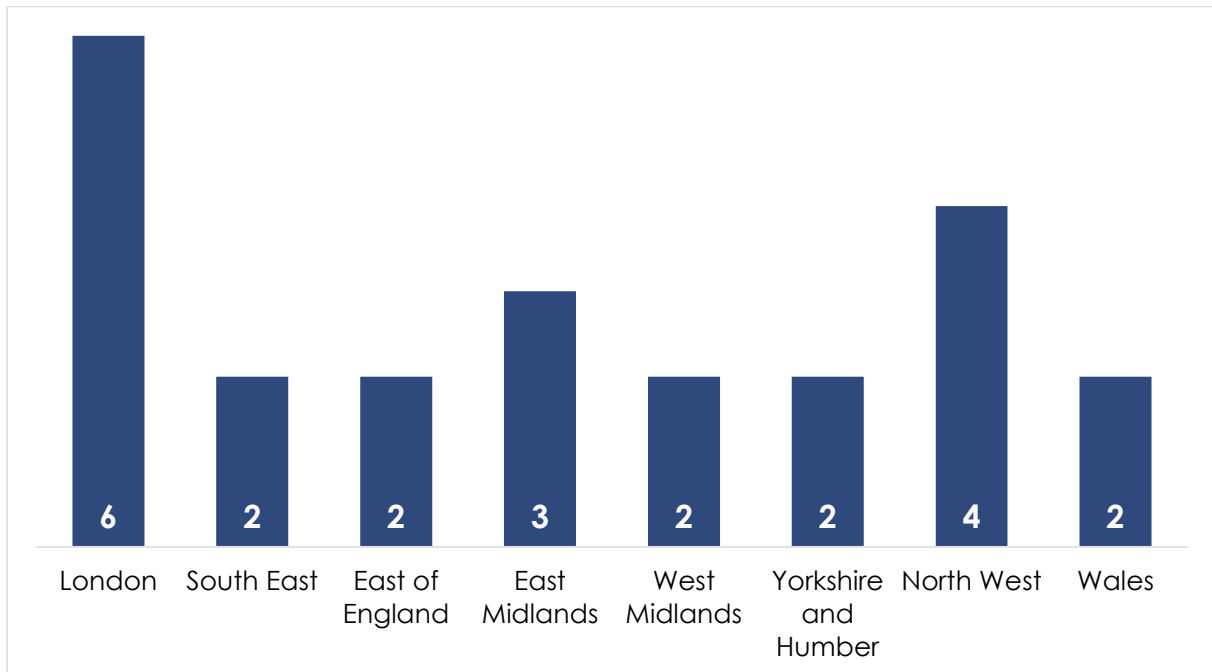


Figure 6: Interview sample according to the number of impairments of the individual (n=25).

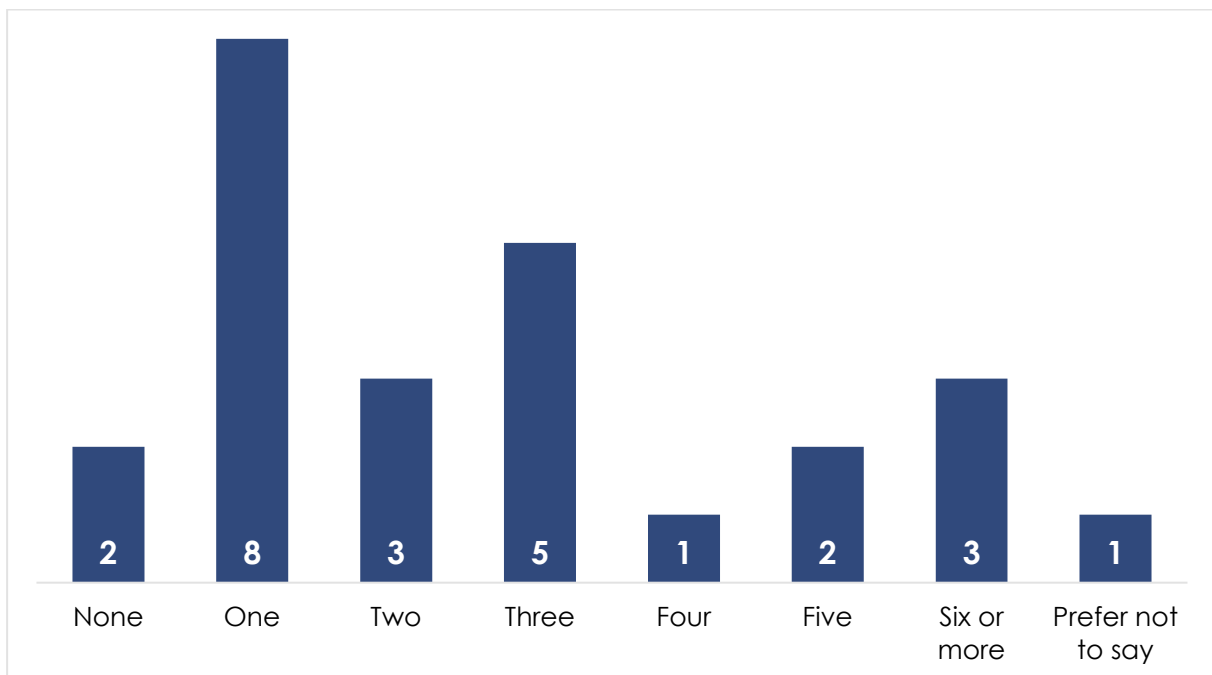
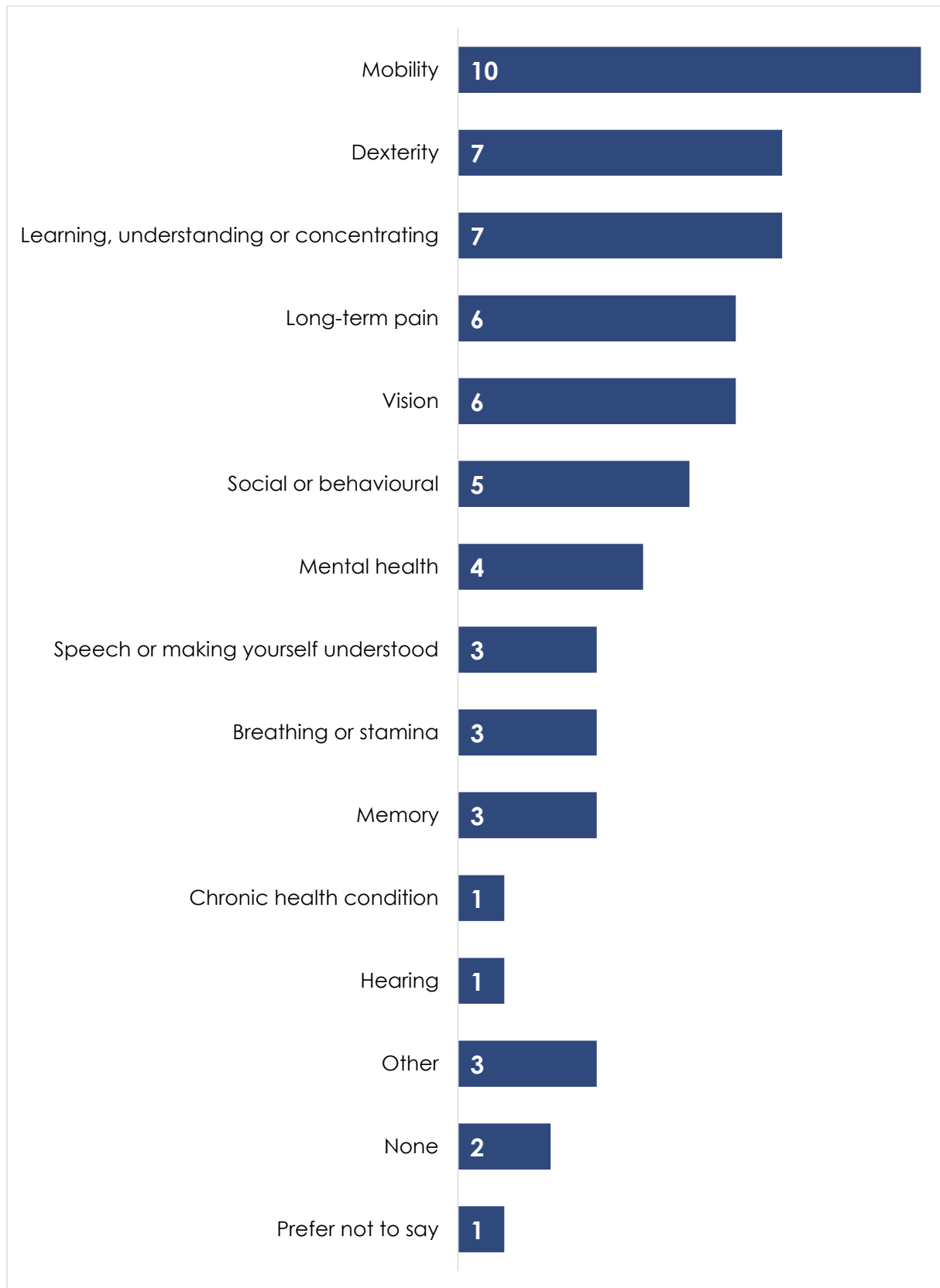
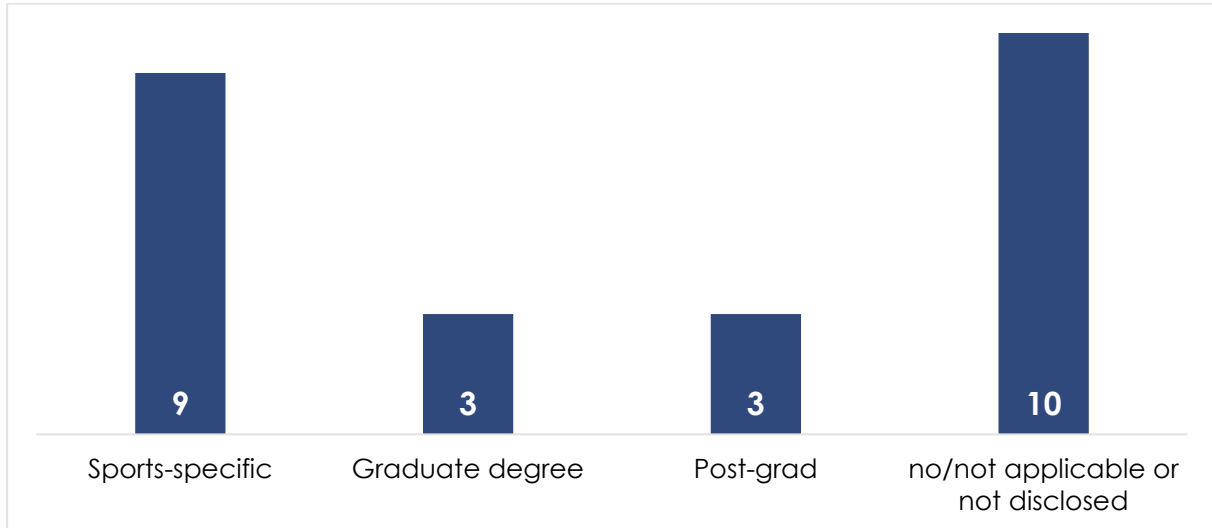


Figure 7: Impairment types identified by participants, where more than one could be selected (n=25).



Qualifications

Figure 8: Categories of qualification held by interview participants (n=25).



Employment

Figure 9: Status of sport and physical activity employment of interview participants, where more than one option could be selected (n=25).

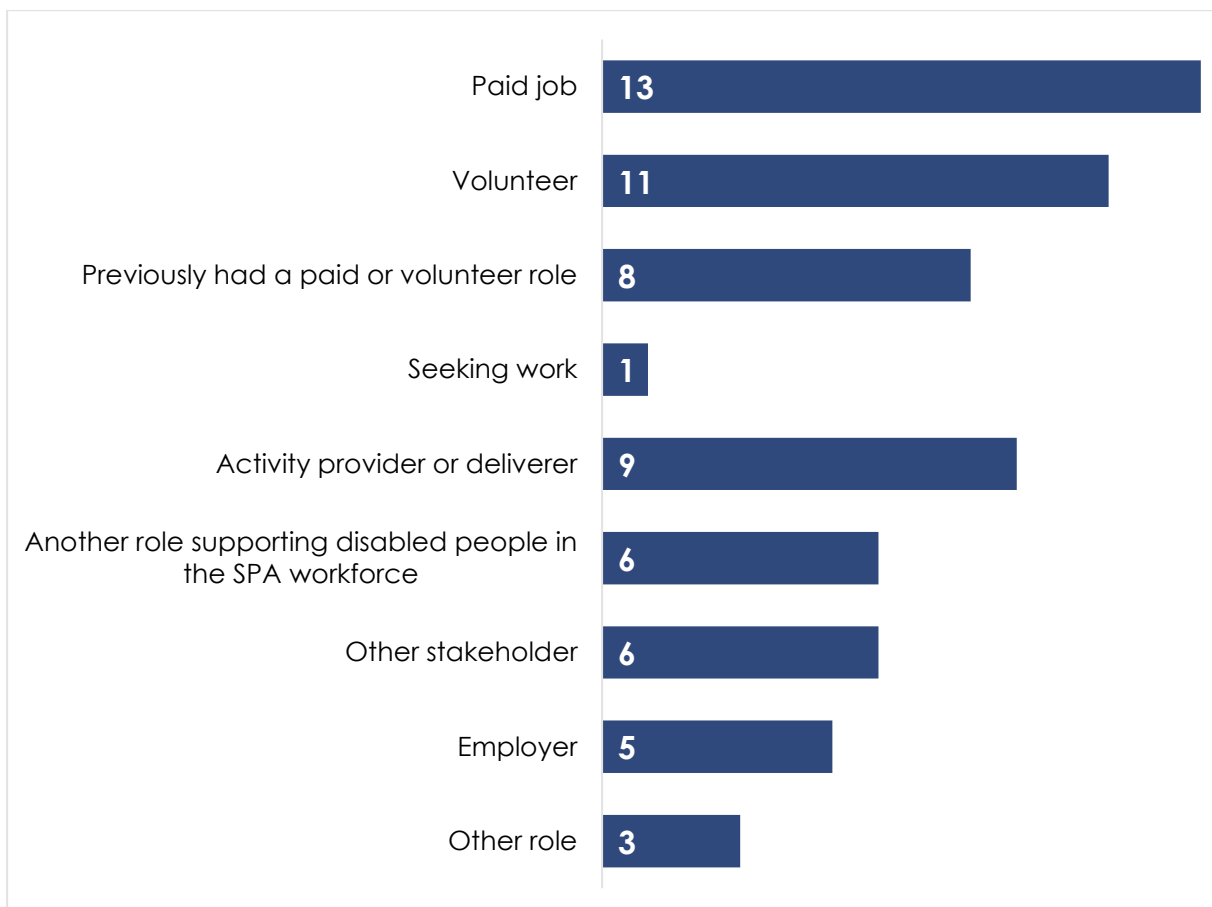


Figure 10: Types of roles held by interview participants, where more than one could be selected (n=25).



Figure 11: Sector that interview participants were working or volunteering in at the time of the interview.

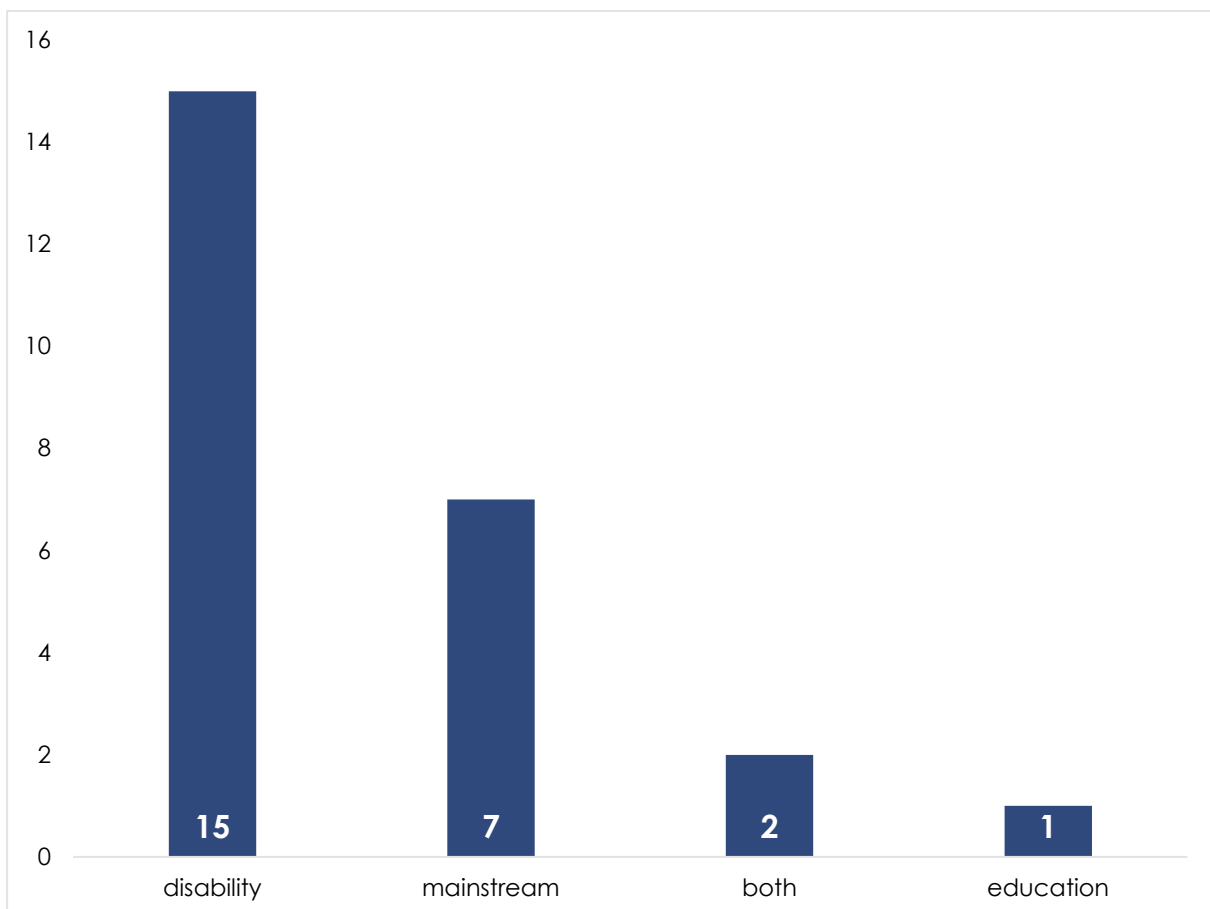


Figure 12: Roles held by interview participants (n=25).

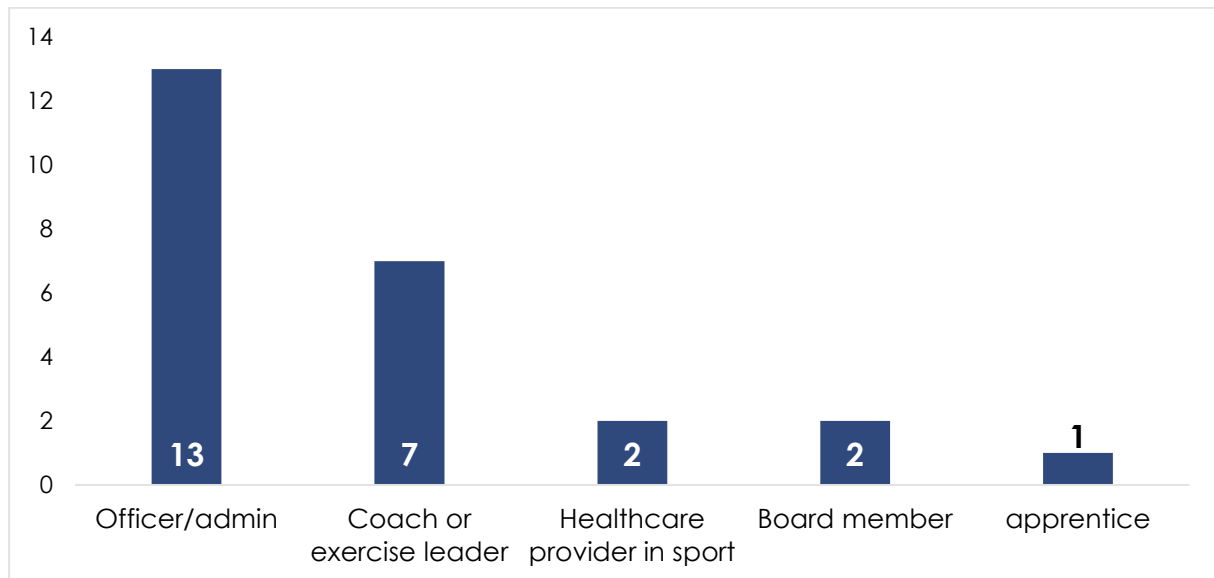


Figure 13: Number of days a week working or volunteering in the sport and physical activity sector (n=25).

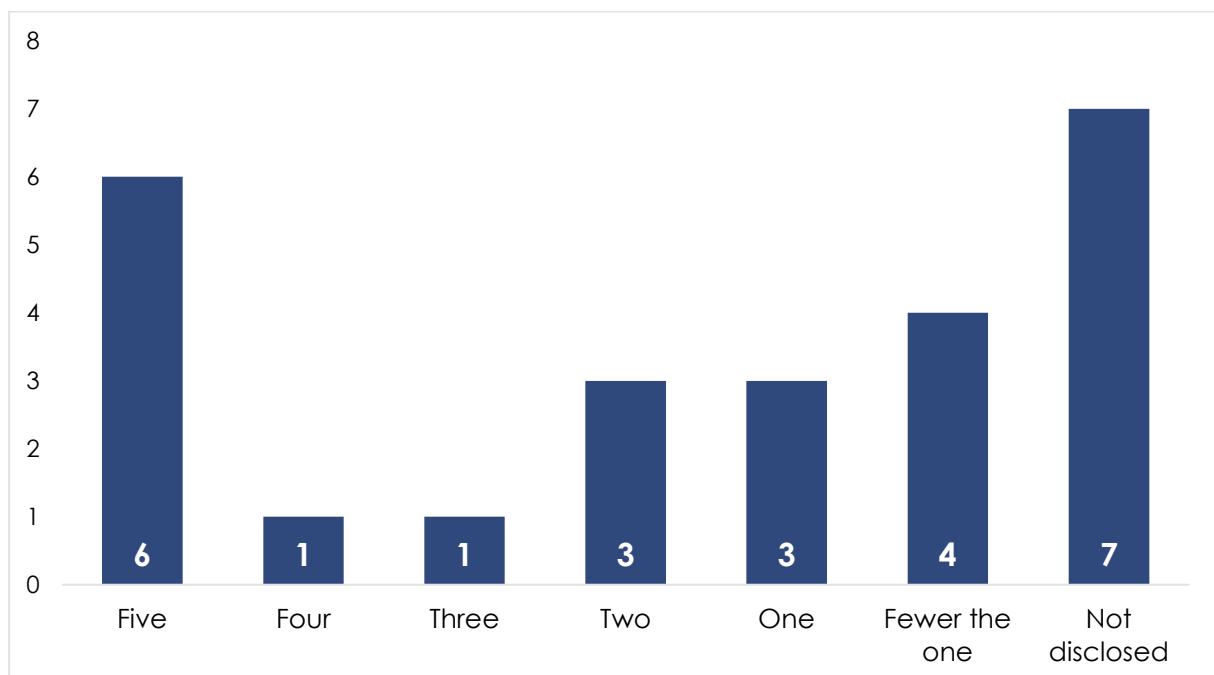
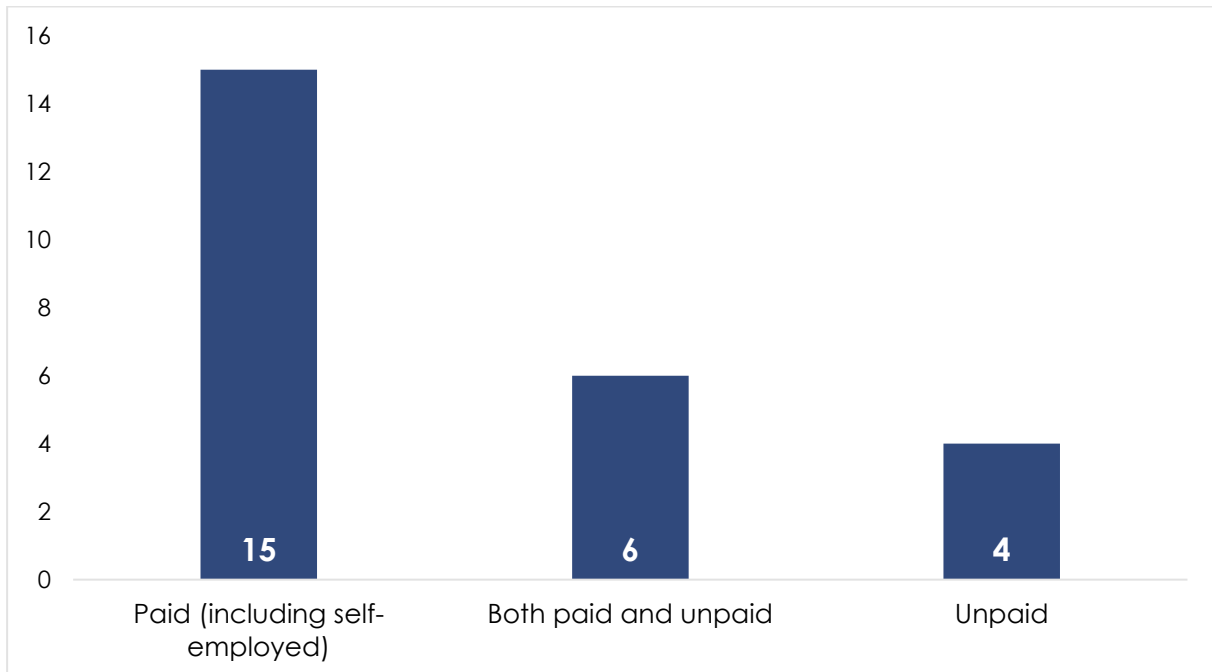


Figure 14: Types of roles held (n=25).





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