



Small
changes

Big
difference



Making physical activity accessible
for visually impaired women







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Big difference**

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Women in Sport

I can't imagine what it must be like to have a visual impairment, less still to be completely without sight.

Yet women all over the UK live with this challenge every day. It will affect their lives to varying degrees, but ultimately women with a visual impairment are no different to anyone else, they live complex and busy lives. Except for when it comes to playing sport that is - when it comes to playing sport, there is no question that for visually impaired women the challenges are multiplied.

Women are already at a disadvantage in terms of their relationship with sport. 1.6m fewer women than men take part in sport each week in England. Layer on top of this the facts that visually impaired people are less likely to play sport than most other disability groups and that women are more likely to have a visual impairment than men and you start to understand the complexity.

In many cases sports providers still haven't understood what it is that women want and need. Throw in a 'complication' like a visual impairment and some, not all, but some will simply close their doors. The stories in this report are evidence that this happens. "No, you can't come into the gym because we can't let your daughter come in to guide you, she's too young". Do we really think this is an acceptable response?

How about "Yes, of course, how great to have you both with us today, come on in - is there anything else we can do to help you? Oh, and if your daughter finds she can't come with you on another occasion, don't worry, we'll be able to help you..." Would such a response really be that difficult?

For over 30 years, Women in Sport has championed women's participation in sport throughout the UK - and now, in partnership with British Blind Sport and the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) we turn our attention to women with a visual impairment.





Through our Understanding Women's Lives research, we know that by being better aligned with the values in women's lives, sport providers will be better positioned to engage women and girls to take part. This research delves deeper into our understanding by focusing on this specific group of women.

Through this research we have learnt about the important similarities and differences in the barriers and motivators affecting visually impaired women when it comes to playing sport and being physically active. We've made recommendations about how to tackle and harness these respectively.

In many cases, we have learnt, small changes can make a big difference, so we hope that sport providers will now start making some of these small changes to have a big and positive impact for visually impaired women.

Ruth Holdaway,
Chief Executive, Women in Sport



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British Blind Sport

At British Blind Sport we have a passion to get more blind and partially sighted people active. For over 40 years we have worked in partnership with organisations to 'make a visible difference through sport' in our role to empower and support blind and partially sighted people to participate in sport and physical activity.

Our primary goal has always been to get more visually impaired children and adults physically active. Countless research has evidenced how sport enhances the quality of life for everybody; but the benefits to those who live with impairments and the accompanying challenges such as social exclusion, mental health concerns, lower employment and income potential, are even more pronounced. The importance of sport and physical activity to those with sight loss goes further than it just being a way to keep fit and healthy. It is a way to meet new people, make friends, gain confidence, have fun, get outside the house, be surprised by what they achieve, overcome problems or doubts and take pride in themselves.

We are delighted to have worked in conjunction with Women in Sport to deliver this important piece of research that explores how sport and physical activity affects the lives of visually impaired women.

National data shows that there are more visually impaired women than men however when it comes to sport and physical activity,

the number of VI women versus VI men participating in sport demonstrates a stark difference in numbers. Our desire to collaborate on this research was to find out what are the barriers facing VI women and how we, as an organisation along with our partners, can help them overcome them.

We know that among the general population there is a large proportion of women who want to be more physically active and participate in sport but, for whatever reason, do not do so.

This research supports our thinking that women who are blind or partially sighted are no different; they share the same worries and doubts, and face the same obstacles as their fully sighted peers. What they may need however, is some additional encouragement or assistance to overcome them.





This research will help sport providers identify what support and adaptations could be easier made and how they can achieve them. Often it is something quite simple that is required, hence the "Small Changes, Big Difference" philosophy.

As a National Disability Sports Organisation we are in the privileged position of influence with key providers, disabled people organisations and National Governing Bodies of sport. Effective partnership working and education has resulted in us widening the opportunities available to the visually impaired community. The actionable commitments British Blind Sport has made as a result of this piece of work are with the aim of addressing the gender imbalance - fewer women participate in sport despite being more likely to live with sightloss - so that we continue to make a visible difference.

Alaina MacGregor,
Chief Executive, British Blind Sport



A VISIBLE DIFFERENCE THROUGH SPORT

Executive Summary

This report details new research by Women in Sport and British Blind Sport exploring the role of sport and physical activity in the lives of visually impaired women.

1.6 million fewer women than men take part in sport on a regular basis¹. Women in Sport's research, *Understanding Women's Lives*², helps us to understand what is important to women and how we can re-position sport to appeal to them. We wanted to understand to what extent this research applies to a specific group of women.

Women with a visual impairment were chosen as the focus of this exploratory research for two reasons. Firstly, sports participation is low among people with a visual impairment, even compared with other disability groups. Secondly, women are more likely to have a visual impairment.

By understanding the lives of visually impaired women, Women in Sport and British Blind Sport sought to explore the barriers to sport and physical activity that exist for this group, as well as the priorities that underpin their choices about engagement with activity.

A range of research methods were employed:

1. An extensive review of existing literature
2. Visits to a range of sports, leisure and social clubs where researchers observed women with a visual impairment participating in sport
3. Interviews with over 50 visually impaired women and 10 visually impaired men participating in sport and physical activity
4. Interviews with 20 sports providers and frontline staff
5. Five in-depth interviews with inactive women with a visual impairment

We found that visually impaired women share the same core values as other women, but these are underpinned by a desire for independence. To engage women with a visual impairment, sports providers need to recognise these and align their offer with them.

Through this research Women in Sport and British Blind Sport have identified barriers which prevent or reduce participation by visually impaired women in sport. We have developed five recommendations to support sports providers to make their activities and facilities more accessible to visually impaired women.

1. **Signpost in innovative ways:** use a range of methods to engage with visually impaired women such as through social media or email posters in large font.
2. **Small changes make a big difference:** enable visually impaired women to participate by making small changes to provision. This could include for example, allowing a sighted friend to accompany the woman with visual impairment for free.
3. **Don't hide behind the rules:** have conversations with visually impaired women about what they can do and what they need help with.
4. **Empower women to come back:** a good induction can empower visually impaired women to make sport and physical activity part of their routine.
5. **Take a personalised approach:** position activities to appeal to visually impaired women's core values, and their desire for independence.

Why this research is important

In 2015, Women in Sport published ground breaking research exploring the values driving women's behaviour and their perceptions of sport.

The research looked at how we can tap into women's values systems in order to move them along the behaviour change journey towards increased levels of physical activity. Since publishing the research, Understanding Women's Lives, Women in Sport has worked across the sector to apply the insights to reduce the 1.6 million gap between the number of men playing sport at least once a week and the number of women. We now want to understand how this research applies to specific groups of women.

Not only are women less likely to participate in sport, they are also more likely to have a visual impairment. Research by RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind people) highlights that up to two-thirds of people living with sight loss are women³.

Visual impairment in the UK is a significant and growing condition. In 2013, there were 1.86 million people with sight loss⁴ and this is expected to double to nearly four million by 2050, in part due to the ageing population. The level of sports participation amongst visually impaired people has remained consistently low in comparison to non-disabled people and even other disability groups, with only 13% of people with visual impairment taking part in sport once a week¹.

Previous research by British Blind Sport indicated that there are a number of barriers for blind or partially sighted people who wish to participate in sport⁵. In view of these pronounced low levels of participation amongst visually impaired women, we were keen to further understand the role of sport and physical activity in their lives.

Our approach

We commissioned the agency, Revealing Reality, to undertake this research from January to June 2016.

The objectives of the research were to bring together and build upon existing insight relating to participation of women and visually impaired people in sport. We sought to develop actionable recommendations that can be applied across the sport and disability sectors to enable more visually impaired women to participate.

During the research we spoke to women with a visual impairment across England. This included individuals with a range of sight conditions (both congenital and acquired), from different backgrounds and lifestyles.

The women had varying experiences and engagement in sport and physical activity, from regular participation through to complete disengagement. Understanding the perspectives of many women demonstrates the different motivations and routes to get in to sport and physical activity.

The research consisted of five key stages:

1. An extensive review of the existing research available on women and people with a visual impairment. This included research from a wide range of organisations in the sports and disability sectors. Primary reports referenced included Women in Sport's Understanding Women's Lives (2015) and EFDS's Motivate Me (2014).





2. Ten visits to sports activities and clubs aimed at visually impaired people as well as 'mainstream' venues attended by visually impaired women where we observed and joined in with activities.
3. Interviews with over 50 visually impaired women and ten visually impaired men participating in sport and physical activity. These helped us to gain insights into the journeys of the participants to being active, any barriers they have overcome, the support they need to enable participation as well as what they value about sport and physical activity.
4. Interviews with 20 frontline practitioners such as coaches, personal trainers and club organisers. We explored the support these individuals and their clubs/organisations provide to ensure an accessible service.
5. Five in-depth interviews with inactive women with a visual impairment. These helped us to understand the barriers preventing these women from participating in sport and physical activity as well as their motivations and values.

For more detail on research methodology see Appendix 1.

Case studies are included throughout the report. The names of the women have been changed.

What did we find out?

1. The value of independence

The core values of visually impaired women - their priorities and the things that shape day to day decision making - are just as complex as those of other women.

They are not a homogenous group and their values differ significantly depending on their lifestyle, their visual impairment, life stage and other personal characteristics.

Through this research we have found that the six values identified by Women in Sport are also shared by women with a visual impairment. Within our sample, the women displayed a range of dominant values including having fun, achieving goals, developing skills and feeling good.

These are further explored in the case studies.

The English Federation of Disability Sport's study exploring the motivations of disabled people⁶ to take part in sport and physical activity identified that independence is hugely important to disabled people.

This research also found that independence is an overarching goal for the majority of the visually impaired women we interviewed.

This desire for independence was often involved in decisions such as moving out of the family home, finding a job or volunteering position and joining a social or sports club.



Just like many other women, visually impaired women can feel that sport is not a priority and that life gets in the way of doing sport and physical activity. There is an opportunity for providers to frame sport in a way that appeals to the values of visually impaired women, through emphasising the activity as a way to have fun, or to learn new skills, as well as highlighting it as a way to support their independence.



Amended values model from Women in Sport's UNDERSTANDING WOMEN'S LIVES

2. Barriers to participation: The usual suspects

It is well documented that women face a wide range of physical and psychological barriers which can prevent them from participating in sport and physical activity⁷.

Unsurprisingly, such psychological and physical barriers were also reported by the visually impaired respondents in the sample.

The impact of the barriers varies between individuals depending on their past relationship with physical activity, their outlook and wellbeing, their knowledge on where and how to exercise and whether they perceive physical activity to be normal and enjoyable. Such “general barriers” include:

- Lack of transport to venues/activities
- Care responsibilities
- Cost
- Lack of company and sport buddies
- Concerns about level of ability
- Low self-confidence to take part
- Safety concerns

Whilst it is important to consider the barriers that people face, it is also important to recognise that the more an individual participates in exercise, the more likely they are to be motivated to continue and view “barriers” to exercise as less limiting. The value an individual places on participation in sports and physical activity can vary through life, and a person may move through different stages towards (or away from) being active.

Sport England’s ‘journey into sport’ model (page 15) outlines the changing behaviours towards sport which can happen at any stage of a woman’s life.

The barriers a person may experience, the support that they may need and their personal investment in exercise may vary at different stages.

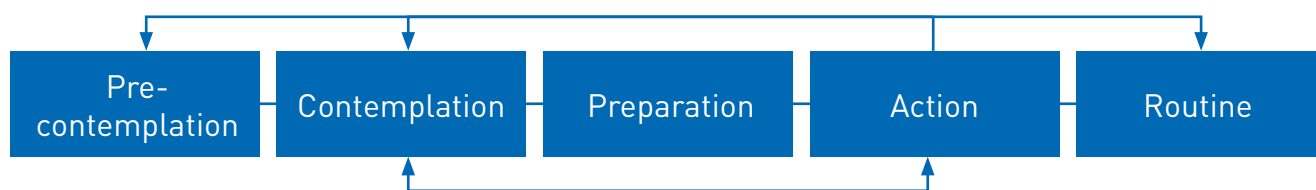




Women with a visual impairment also experience a number of other barriers related to their visual impairment. Barriers highlighted by our participants included:

- Lack of access to adequate and convenient facilities
- Lack of awareness about appropriate available activities
- Discouragement from frontline staff during initial encounters
- Worry about needing additional attention from the instructor or coach
- Lack of sighted guides to provide support
- Perception of risk associated with navigating sports venues
- Fear of slowing others down

At various points in their lives many women in our sample had tried to overcome these barriers and had attempted to engage in sport and physical activity. The majority had accessed, or tried to access, 'mainstream' provision. However, many respondents found that such mainstream facilities and activities had not made simple adaptations to meet their needs. Particular examples include not being offered a tour of the venue on their first visit (useful for the purpose of learning the space), and failure by staff to ask about where and when they would need additional help.



Sport England Journey Into Sport Model

3. Visual impairment does not mean you can't participate in sport

Visually impaired women live with a range of different eye conditions that impact on their lives in different ways.

The women interviewed during this research had varying degrees of sight with some visually impaired since birth, others having acquired their impairment later in life, and many experiencing deteriorating sight.

Interestingly, while a woman's visual impairment does impact her experiences of sport and level of ability, it is not necessarily the determining factor as to whether someone participates in sport.

In our sample, those with the most sight were not necessarily the most active. We saw examples of extremely active women with no sight, and women with some sight struggling with what felt like insurmountable barriers to participation. This suggests that women with any level of visual impairment can successfully engage in sport and physical activity on a regular basis as long as the right support and structures are available.





4. Negative interactions with providers are discouraging

Current offers of sports and physical activity may inadvertently discourage visually impaired women from participating.



Instances where visually impaired women attempt to access mainstream provision, only to be discouraged, or even prohibited by staff creates a 'negative feedback loop'. The unwillingness of some frontline staff to discuss and accommodate the needs of a visually impaired customer has the effect of discouraging these women from seeking alternative opportunities for participation.

It is important that every contact counts if women with visual impairments are to feel enabled to participate in sport.

This research has highlighted numerous examples of staff showing a lack of understanding of disability and being unable to offer a flexible service, such as accommodating guide dogs.



As a result, for some visually impaired women these negative experiences have shaped the foundation of their relationship with physical activity and sport, feeling it's not quite for them, and has deterred them from seeking out other opportunities to participate.

People often lack confidence in opening up dialogue with visually impaired people, about what they are able to do and what things they need help with. This includes service providers, sports leaders and instructors. This often means that contact is wrought with difficulties and miscommunications.

Rather than being an affirming conversation about a woman's decision to participate in exercise, such conversations can instead make her feel alienated from the environment.

There is a vital need for better training of staff to improve awareness and set out procedures for assisting visually impaired women. There also needs to be improved organisational understanding of different types of support available to visually impaired people, to assist staff to provide an enabling rather than disabling environment.

Negative feedback loop between providers and visually impaired women



5. Disability specific activity isn't always best

Frequently, sport organisers assumed that visually impaired women should be directed to 'specialist' activities, which are deemed to be more 'appropriate' and better equipped to cater to their specific needs.

However, some visually impaired women found disability specific activities unappealing, reducing their identity and physical capacity to their visual impairment. A significant proportion of visually impaired women in the sample did not want to be defined by their disability, and often did not see themselves in the same situation as other visually impaired people, nor those with other impairments.

Of those who were open to specialist activities, many struggled with accessing the services because of the limited offer of specific activities and connected issues such as distance, costs and inconvenient timings. Others were either not interested in the type of sport offered, or disliked the 'closed' social environment of the groups.

Furthermore, whilst some visually impaired specific environments did offer taster sessions aimed at encouraging participation in sports and physical activities, these were often a one off event or linked to membership and participation in other groups and societies. More often than not visually impaired women wanted local and accessible activities to choose from – and were happy to use 'mainstream' facilities and be with sighted participants.



Recommendations for sports providers

The findings indicate that there is a great opportunity for providers to make small changes that improve provision for visually impaired women. They do not require providers of sport and physical activity to completely transform their offer. On the contrary, engaging and enabling visually impaired women to participate in sport and physical activity can be achieved by making small changes to service offers, training staff on issues of equality and access, and ensuring this knowledge is put into practice.

The following recommendations set out key opportunities for sports providers to better engage with visually impaired women. From the moment interest is sparked in an activity, through to ensuring that all experiences with sport and physical activity are positive and habits can be formed. These recommendations are rooted in the needs of visually impaired women.

Recommendations

1. Signpost in innovative ways
2. Small changes make a big difference
3. Don't hide behind the rules
4. Empower women to come back
5. Take a personalised approach



1. Signpost in innovative ways

- Providers need to use a range of methods and platforms that are already being accessed by the visually impaired community
- These include mobile technology, online communications and social media as well as word of mouth
- Sources of information must be kept up to date

While many visually impaired women are interested in participating in sport, research revealed that information about appropriate opportunities is failing to reach them. The research found that many visually impaired women are pro actively looking for opportunities to engage with sport but have struggled to find up to date information about what is available, in particular about relevant local opportunities from mainstream sport providers and facilities. Letting visually impaired women know about opportunities relevant to them requires thinking beyond the usual methods of communication, to include platforms already used by the visually impaired community, and in appropriate formats.



For example, newsletters sent by email in large font that are compatible with accessibility software are far more accessible than a single poster on a leisure centre notice board.

Sport organisers and providers have a crucial role to play in promoting and encouraging visually impaired women into physical activity. Some have adapted their provision to be more accessible but have low attendance levels - in part due to poor information provision. We found a number of initiatives specifically targeting visually impaired women were advertised inadequately, solely through posters or printed media. Much of the information posted on noticeboards is out of date and can be misleading for potential participants.

We recommend a more creative approach to information provision to help visually impaired women find out about the current offer and feel comfortable accessing both specialist and mainstream sport and physical activities. Highlighting opportunities available for visually impaired women requires a multi-channel approach; embracing mobile technology, online communications and social media.

Using a range of engagement methods is a great way to get visually impaired women on board. Staff and volunteers can make a particular difference through adopting proactive and creative approaches to informing blind and partially sighted women of available opportunities.

One woman we met during the research was told about a local accessible gym by the dial a ride bus driver who picks her up from shopping once a week. Before this encounter the woman was unaware this offer was available to her, but has since been attending weekly and enjoys improving her fitness and strength.

The dial a ride driver is one example of people in the community who have regular contact with visually impaired women and good knowledge of the local area, who can help to share information and opportunities available.

Meet Claudine

Age: 45

Family: Married

Work: Volunteer

Visual impairment:

Registered blind

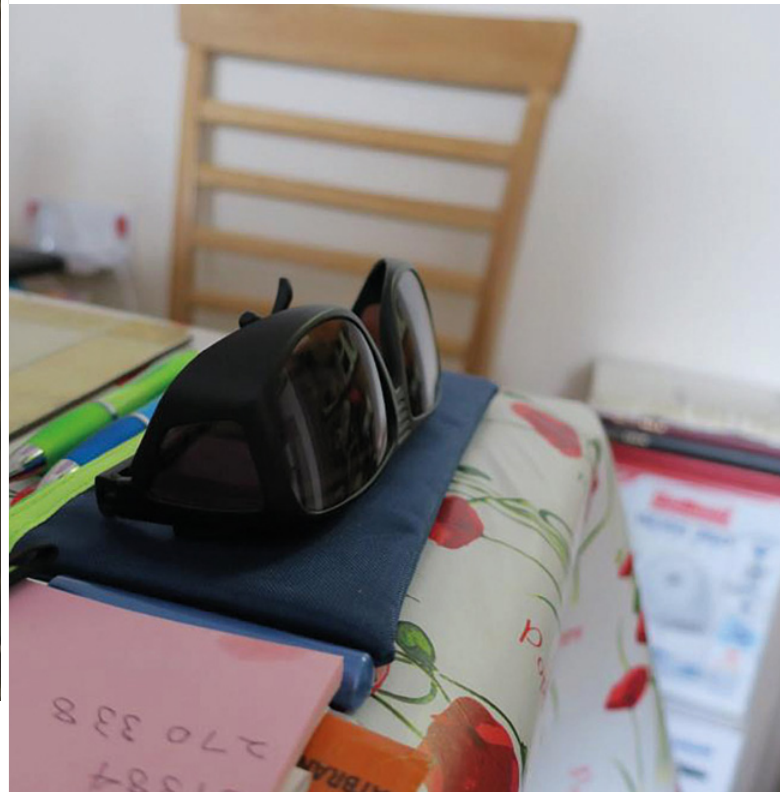
Dominant core value:

Nurturing family and friends

Current activity: Golf

Claudine lives with her visually impaired husband Max in sheltered accommodation in the Midlands. She has had sight issues since she was born, which have gradually deteriorated. She has optic atrophy, astigmatism, colour blindness and detached retinas in both eyes. Having been educated in mainstream schools, she feels that she was made to adapt to a sighted person's world, something which she sees as a good experience. At school, she tried a number of sports but felt she was 'laughed at rather than helped.' For a long time, she struggled to re-engage with sport and physical activity, feeling that information about what is available is limited.

Claudine perceives herself as a driven individual and takes part in a range of different initiatives and volunteering opportunities. In the past, she has had part-time jobs and volunteered helping other visually impaired people. Despite perceiving herself as a moderately disinterested in sport, she regularly walks and tries out gym classes. Last year, she also started playing golf and fell in love with the sport. With a multi-disability group of over sixteen people, she is building up to a competition with another team from the USA.



“I know activities happen somewhere, but I always find them by surprise.”

“Ask what people want instead of simply providing something and expecting them to go!”

**Example of best practice:
Greater Manchester VI Bees**

VI Bees is a social group for visually impaired people based in Greater Manchester utilising social media and online communications to successfully publicise their events programme. They have an active Facebook group with numerous members, and regularly share links to other events and organisations. They also regularly contact their participants via text messaging. Through creative and multi-channel communications, they ensure that those interested in the activities are well informed about what is happening so they can plan ahead.

2. Small changes make a big difference

- Enable visually impaired women to access mainstream provision by making small changes to offers of sports and physical activity
- Specific activities designed for visually impaired people, and other disabled people, are not always appealing, or even necessary for visually impaired women to participate
- There is no ideal offer for visually impaired women because every woman is different

Considering the broad range of needs, abilities and sight conditions of different visually impaired women, perfect provision for everyone does not exist. The visually impaired women we spoke to do not expect perfect provision, but many providers assume that they only want to attend activities specifically designed for them, or other disabled people. Many of the women we interviewed did not see themselves as disabled, or at least felt they needed much less help and attention than other disabled people might. The majority of women in the sample wanted to access mainstream provision, as opposed to needing intensive support, requiring, for example, specialised equipment and coaching.

Even providers of visually impaired-specific activities may not provide 'ideal' provision for all visually impaired women. In fact, visually impaired-specific activities often posed challenges to potential participants including being too far away, offering very specific kinds of sporting activity, being 'cliquey' and being too expensive.

Rather than relying on costly physical adaptations, small changes can make previously inaccessible activities available to visually impaired women.

In particular, an increased focus on staff training to ensure that existing activities are flexible enough to accommodate for additional needs.

One small change which can be adopted is allowing for, and encouraging, visually impaired participants to bring along a sighted friend - enabling the friend to attend for free, where possible. In many cases, mainstream activities could easily be adapted by recruiting additional volunteers, or by making allowances for guide dogs to accompany blind participants.

Meet Aliyah

Age: 21

Family: Single, living in family home

Work: Student

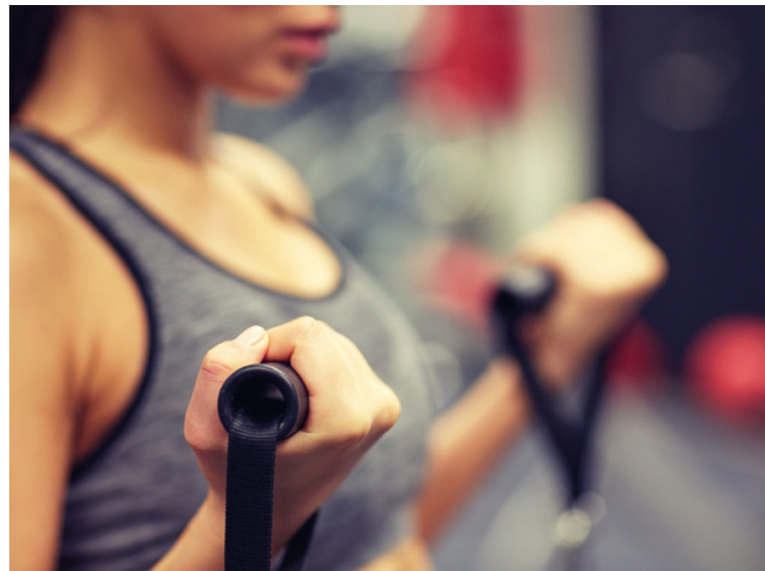
Visual impairment: some sight, affected by exposure to sunlight

Current activity: Infrequent home-based exercise

Dominant core value: Achieving goals

Aliyah sees her undergraduate degree as a pathway to a teaching career, and the key to future self-sufficiency. Passionate about teaching, she dreams about working in a primary school. Aliyah's undergraduate course in allows her to make new friends and develop her confidence in navigating the city.

She feels that she has recently slipped in her exercise routine and blames her new focus on university studies. In the last few years, she has tried various visually impaired-specific sports including goalball, as well as mainstream sports and activities including swimming, climbing and the gym. Despite having very poor sight, she has never felt that she needs any form of special adaptation to engage in activities and is happy to 'have a go' at activities designed for all.



With a heavy coursework load and with no exercise buddies to help her to access facilities, she now tries to fit in time for some home exercise, usually using YouTube exercise videos, although she doesn't do this every week.

“If my sisters carried on going to the gym, I might have continued. Having someone with me is way more motivating, but things have changed and I feel so busy.”



Example of best practice:
**Activity sessions
at Merton Vision**

Merton Vision is a social club for local visually impaired people with a 'can do' approach. The club meets every week and regularly organises different activities including dance classes.

The dance classes are facilitated by a mainstream dance instructor, introduced to the group by one of the regular members.

Local volunteers and friends of club members accompany participants, everyone learning the choreography together.

Sighted participants partner with blind participants and help them navigate the space as they dance, while also looking after the guide dogs.



3. Don't hide behind the rules

- Sports providers need to have conversations with visually impaired women about their capabilities and the potential risks involved
- Provide resources to enable staff to make accurate assessments of an individual's abilities and the reasonable adjustments that can be made

Over the last couple of decades, the introduction of equality laws and increased access to public spaces means visually impaired people have a greater opportunity to achieve their personal goals than ever before.

Although great progress has been made in changing attitudes to disability, awkwardness and discomfort remains within some organisations about how to 'correctly' deal with visual impairment. Whilst visually impaired people have been empowered, training of frontline staff and organisers of sports and activities has not kept pace. From the research sample there was plenty of evidence to suggest that women had been prevented, or at least put off, from getting active by staff or volunteers who were unwilling, or unable, to have a conversation about how they might be accommodated. Instead they were faced with staff who were unable to see beyond rigid health and safety rules.

To overcome this, sport providers and in particular frontline staff, need to be empowered to have conversations with visually impaired women about their capabilities and the potential risks involved. Staff will benefit from training to overcome awkwardness and dispel myths about what is and isn't possible.

At the same time, providing resources to enable staff to make accurate assessments of an individual's abilities and the reasonable adjustments that can be made, can enable many visually impaired women to participate in physical activities that were previously closed to them. Having an open and honest discussion about what help might be needed, and what is not required, should be the basis of any judgement about whether an activity is appropriate or safe for someone with a visual impairment.



Meet Helen

Age: 37

Family: Divorced, living with her two children

Work: Self-employed therapist

Visual impairment: Registered blind, small percentage of sight remaining

Current activity: Walking, and some yoga at home

Dominant core values: Achieving goals

Helen is devoted to her two children providing home education for them. She was very engaged in physical activity before her sight loss - horse riding every day and competing at a high level in regional competitions. Increasingly, Helen is desperate to become more active, conscious that she is putting on weight. As a driven and active woman, running her own therapy business, she is willing to challenge herself and try most activities. Recently, she has been very proactive in seeking out opportunities, despite being restricted by limited public transport in her local area and looking after her children.

However, she has faced reluctance from the many providers she has approached. Recently, her local gym did not allow her to bring her teenage daughter to help with equipment as it was against their policy to accommodate under 16s, so she was not able to use their facilities.





“I’m amazed, really, that so many people have ‘blamed’ health and safety. It’s the default response.”

Example of best practice:
Mark Butler Golf Academy

The Mark Butler Golf Academy offers sessions for disabled golfers - accommodating a range of needs and skill levels.

The coaching style is built on creating long-term relationships, from encouraging dialogue with new starters and making them feel included, to designing plans for progression which embed personal targets.

All coaches have been trained to be excellent communicators and are adept at finding ways to make adjustments to activities to ensure needs are met. They engage with the visually impaired players to ensure they are learning and improving their technique.

4. Empower women to come back

- Providing a good induction and tour of facilities can help visually impaired women overcome confidence issues and safety concerns
- Positive first experiences can make up for previous 'knock backs' and encourage visually impaired women to return and make attendance a habit

Visually impaired women starting a new activity might have made considerable effort and overcome significant barriers, including 'knock backs' by other providers, to come through the door of a gym, leisure centre or sports club. Therefore, their first impressions at a new venue or activity can influence whether a woman returns and begins to form a new habit. Many visually impaired women felt they faced barriers related to negative staff attitudes and overemphasis on what they were not able to do. Their first visits to sport facilities and activities were often demotivating.

Providing a good introduction and warm welcome is key to their retention and continued motivation. Taking the time to give a thorough induction and tour of the facilities will help overcome concerns about safety and difficulty in navigating new environments and activities.

Record the participant's requirements and share with other staff members (where appropriate and permission has been given) for future reference so that each visually impaired woman does not need to continually re-state their requirements.

Meet Sarah

Age: 33

Family: Married with a daughter

Work: Volunteering and also searching for paid work

Visual impairment:
Blind since birth

Current activity: Walking

Dominant core value:
Nurturing family and friends





Sarah has been blind since childhood and is married to Tim who is also blind. She has enjoyed sports previously, particularly when she attended a specialist blind school for sixth form, and was an active player in the goalball team at that time.

Unfortunately, this dropped off when she moved away from the area - and training sessions became a bit too far to travel each week. After suffering with post-natal depression with her first daughter, she put on weight.

Recently, she has become aware she needs to lose weight and has been encouraged by a group of local mums she met at her daughter's school to go walking with them.

Beyond this, however, she is scared of getting back into exercise. She worries her lack of fitness would mean she would really struggle and slow others down.

“I’ve been enjoying walking but I have to do it for a while before I can think about sport.”

“Inductions can be a bit hit and miss. If you tell a blind person to jump, that can be pretty scary if they don’t have good balance. I’m not sure I could do that.”



Example of best practice: parkrun

A local parkrun has been a very welcoming space for Deborah, who is blind.

After offering encouragement to Deborah when she made initial contact, the local volunteers who organise the run have been very supportive. Deborah has now been running with them for 12 months.

A roster of local runners takes it in turns to guide her round the course, and help with taking care of her guide dog whilst she's on the course. From day one, she felt part of this local parkrun community, rather than a burden, and has made many good friends through taking part.

5. Take a personalised approach

- Understand visually impaired women as individuals with different personal circumstances and lifestyles, rather than someone who is simply blind or partially sighted
- Position activities to appeal to the core values of women, and the desire of women with a visual impairment for gaining and maintaining independence

Sports providers tend to offer personalised experience for their users based on skill levels and individual goals. However, this research has shown that when it comes to women with a visual impairment, many providers make assumptions about what they want and need. Just like sighted participants, visually impaired women want to be treated in a way that accommodates their personal circumstances and their needs as individuals, rather than being treated as visually impaired first and foremost.

As with other women, sport needs to appeal to a visually impaired woman's core values and priorities. The dominant values of the women we spoke with varied, with some wanting to have fun, others wanting to develop their skills.

Alongside these values is a desire to be independent which underpins their decision making. Key to engagement and ongoing retention of these women is ensuring that activities appeal and align with their core values.

Meet Hannah

Age: 23

Family: Single, living with parents

Work: Student and volunteer

Visual impairment: Blind since birth

Current activity: Inactive

Dominant core value: Developing skills

Hannah is currently training to become a counsellor and volunteers in customer services.

She prides herself on requiring little assistance in her daily life and tries to live autonomously without her family's help.





However, she is unable to use public transport on her own and relies on costly taxis.

As a very sociable person, she spends most of her time with friends and other family members. She currently doesn't do any form of physical activity despite having tried various disability specific sports activities including tennis, football, goalball, bowling, golf, pool, kayaking, climbing and badminton.

She lacks affordable transport options and motivating sport buddies, and does not see herself as the least bit 'sporty'.

“Even though I’m still living at home, I live as independently as I can. It’s super important to me, to continue to learn to do things by myself and to try new things, and to not have to ask my parents.”

Example of best practice: Ability Bow, gym in east London

Ability Bow offers subsidised gym memberships in an accessible gym environment.

Instructors and volunteers at the gym work with members to develop a personalised fitness plan which tracks their progress, marks milestones and ensures gym goers are seeing improvements in their fitness and skills.

They also try to ensure the gym is a welcoming and fun environment, where disability is not the central focus. They encourage gym members to think about the things they can do, and what they can improve on.

Conclusion



Women with a visual impairment share the same values as other women, underpinned by a desire for independence.

The research identified that there are plenty of low cost and simple options for providers of sport and physical activity to better promote and adapt their offers to engage with visually impaired women and encourage ongoing participation.

Making sport and physical activity more accessible to visually impaired women does not require costly equipment or plentiful resources, and 'ideal' provision is not always necessary. Many visually impaired women just want convenient, local options.

Participation in sport and physical activity is low amongst women with a visual impairment and therefore this report provides an opportunity for sports to really engage with this group to increase participation.

Women in Sport, British Blind Sport and English Federation of Disability Sport call on sports providers to take forward the five recommendations outlined in this report to make a big difference to women with a visual impairment.

Our commitment

Women in Sport, British Blind Sport and the English Federation of Disability Sport have a shared objective to increase the participation of women with a visual impairment in sport and physical activity.

We will work together to ensure that the evidence from this research is shared within the wider sports industry and that the recommendations are implemented to ensure a good experience for women with a visual impairment. To achieve this, Women in Sport and British Blind Sport, working with the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS) commit to:

1. Use our channels to share the findings and recommendations from this research
2. Encourage partners to apply relevant parts of the research to their services and programming
3. Champion visually impaired women and girls to share their stories about their experiences of sport and physical activity

Women in Sport commit to:

4. Work with our partners to activate the recommendations through their programmes to benefit visually impaired women and girls across the UK

5. Support sports organisations to align their offers to engage with the values of visually impaired women
6. Work with British Blind Sport to support the development of their resources

British Blind Sport commit to:

7. Expand our educational work with key partners and organisations, especially those which are women specific, to demonstrate how sport empowers and delivers women's core values
8. Develop innovative communication that appeals to visually impaired women, is timely, and accessible through the right channels'
9. Build upon our knowledge, and this research, to provide simple "Hints and Tips" for sports providers, healthcare professionals, and visually impaired women interested in becoming more physically active
10. Continue to listen to the wants and needs of visually impaired women who wish to participate in sport in order to recognise and meet their needs

Details of research methodology

Literature review

Published research from a range of sources was reviewed, including materials produced by Women in Sport and British Blind Sport as well as other reports, academic articles and books. Key areas of focus included relationships and trends between women and sport, visual impairment and sport, disability and sport, and the barriers to participation. The literature review identified some of the key models which framed ongoing analysis of the data, particularly Women in Sport's core values model outlined in their Understanding Women's Lives report¹¹ and the principles outlined in Talk To Me¹², a report produced by English Federation of Disability Sport.

In-depth interviews with inactive visually impaired women

Interviews were conducted with five visually impaired women. These were from diverse backgrounds with a range of sight conditions (both congenital and acquired). The aim of this stage of research was to gather deeper insight in to the lives of inactive visually impaired women and the changes in their relationship with sport over their lifetime. These five women were therefore not currently participating in sport or physical activity. The 'journey into sport' model (see page 11) offered a framework to think about their changing relationships with sport. The stages of the model- pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action – reflect changing behaviours which can happen at any stage of a woman's life. We spoke with at least one woman in each of the first four stages to identify barriers, narratives and to understand their experiences.

Ethnographic visits to sports activities and social clubs

Over the course of ten ethnographic visits, we visited sports clubs, sports activities, social groups and clubs specifically set up for visually impaired people, as well as attending events within the visually impaired community where physical activities were included. Using 'participant observation' (a technique where the researcher studies the group by sharing in its activities) and interviews we were able to gain key insights into the types of activities available to visually impaired people and the support required to enable participation.

We spoke with approximately 50 visually impaired women during the activities, conducted ad hoc interviews with 10 visually impaired men and interviewed over 20 experts and frontline practitioners including sports coaches, exercise class leaders, personal trainers, club organisers and representatives of disability groups, sport organisations and charities. By using such immersive research techniques, we were able to rapidly gain insights into the lives of visually impaired women including understanding their personal journeys with sport and physical activity, identifying what visually impaired women value about exercise, relationships formed through engagement with sport and ways of overcoming barriers.

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1. Sport England Active People Survey 10 (April 2015-March 2016)
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5. British Blind Sport (2014) Overcoming barriers to participation. Report available at britishblindsport.org.uk/education
6. EFDS (2014) Motivate Me: Understanding what motivates and appeals to disabled people to take part in sport and physical activity. Report available at efds.co.uk/how-we-help/research/1874-motivate-me-may-2014
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Notes


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Women in Sport

www.womeninsport.org

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A VISIBLE DIFFERENCE THROUGH SPORT

British Blind Sport

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