



Disability Sport Wales

North Wales: Qualitative insights on barriers to physical activity of our Disabled People

December 2025



Executive Summary

Aim

Disability Sport Wales (DSW) commissioned Press Red to capture a deeper insight into the barriers that face inactive Disabled¹ people in becoming physically active in North Wales.

The drive to understand the barriers to physical activity faced across society, emerged from the Get Out Get Active (GOGA) programme, embedded in Wales by DSW (and in England by the Activity Alliance). With the goal 'to engage the least active communities in fun, inclusive ways.' This research aimed to create an evidence source for DSW to advocate for change to break down systemic barriers to activity.

Despite available data demonstrating that Disabled people are less physically active than non-disabled people, there is limited available qualitative evidence from North Wales to explain why this is the case. DSW have a weakened position to advocate for systemic change without a solid qualitative narrative to supplement quantitative evidence. Capturing both numbers and stories, to describe not just the 'what' but 'why', can lead to action, which should deliver systemic change to address the barriers to physical activity that Disabled people face.

Lessons from the process

Press Red were initially commissioned to undertake qualitative data capture with inactive Disabled people. However, as DSW traditionally only worked with Disabled people already engaged in sport and physical activity, engaging inactive groups proved difficult. As a result of the recruitment challenges, DSW broadened the criteria for engagement to include Disabled people who are physically active and prepared to talk about the barriers they face engaging in physical activity. The recruitment challenge highlights that non-active people require alternatives to in-person sessions and may be resistant to discuss their inactivity, due to fears they may feel judged or shamed, and finally require appropriate compensation for their contribution. Twelve participants were ultimately recruited through existing networks. These included Conwy Connect, a learning Disabilities charity, a school for autistic young people, attending an outward bounds day at Plas Menai and an individual with visual impairments. As a result of the recruitment challenge a

¹ Capitalising the word 'Disabled' before 'people' signifies identification with a collective cultural identity and emphasises the term's political significance. Using the term 'Disabled people' or 'Disabled person' is therefore a political description of the shared, disabling experience that people with impairments face in society. (<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language>)

secondary output was requested, to create a new engagement resource for DSW to use in other contexts. This is included in a separate document.

Approach

Focus groups and semi structured interviews were designed to capture insights from Disabled people on their experiences of being physically active in three places. Participants highlighted barriers in their day-to-day life using the Social Model of Disability. The three contexts discussed were as follows:

1. Around town

This section covered accessing work, socialising, accessing amenities and using public transport.

2. Getting out into nature

Looked at barriers to independently accessing parks, beaches, mountains, rivers and other natural environments.

3. Organised activities

Including attending sessions and classes in sport and recreation facilities and joining groups with the purpose of being physically active together.

Findings

Transport Barriers

Unreliable public transport emerged as the most significant barrier to participation. Infrequent bus services, missing connections and lack of audio announcements severely limit independence. Policy changes removing free bus passes create substantial financial burdens, with participants reporting costs of £22 weekly or £70 monthly. Transport staff have poor awareness, exemplified by drivers instructing visually impaired passengers to 'read electronic screens' or disabling talking bus stops. Whilst trains offer better accessibility through pre-booking assistance, this eliminates spontaneity. For participants working across North Wales supporting other Disabled people through Conwy Connect, transport limitations directly restrict their ability to provide services and access social activities.

Physical Infrastructure Barriers

Poorly maintained pavements, potholes, uneven surfaces, roadworks and missing ramps create dangerous conditions, forcing Disabled people to abandon plans, walk in roads or avoid routes entirely. Participants described terrain as "going over a mountain rather than going down a pavement".

Where smooth, well-maintained paths exist—such as promenades in Llandudno and Holyhead, nature reserves near Llangefni and cycle path networks—participants exercise independently and confidently. However, rocky mountain paths and inaccessible beach routes exclude many Disabled people.

Social and Attitudinal Barriers

Disabled people experience disrespect, verbal abuse, being ignored and facing low expectations from society and service providers. Several participants reported verbal abuse and intimidation whilst moving about town, with some reporting incidents to police. One young autistic man cycles two miles to part-time work where he experiences bullying. A rambling group excluded a visually impaired participant, claiming they lacked facilities to accommodate her, despite her demonstrating capability. Staff lack understanding of disabilities, with gym staff uploading apps to participants' phones without explaining functionality.

Economic and Provision Barriers

Limited employment opportunities for Disabled people, age restrictions on schemes (16-24), difficulties balancing work with benefits and lack of support create economic disadvantage. Activity provision is inadequate, with inappropriate timing (very early or late sessions), age-inappropriate activities and insufficient dedicated provision across North Wales. Public facilities lack functioning specialist equipment and trained staff. Inconsistent pricing policies and expensive gym memberships further restrict access.

Resilience and Enablers

Despite systemic barriers, participants demonstrate remarkable resilience through self-teaching independence, creating familiar routes and using technology adaptively. Successful enablers include, Touch Wood bowls for visually impaired people, organised walking groups and Conwy Connects peer support. Participants identified therapeutic benefits of nature, particularly outdoor swimming and wildlife watching, contributing to improved mental health and confidence.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that barriers to physical activity are systemic rather than individual. Addressing these requires coordinated action across transport providers, planners, sport and recreation facilities and charities. The Social Model of Disability framework, demonstrates that practical adjustments can break down barriers, creating a more inclusive society, whilst improving health, wellbeing and employment opportunities for Disabled people in Wales.

Summary

The approach and stories developed and reported here can be used as a template for broader engagement with Disabled People in Wales. Using the Social Model of Disability, practical recommendations and adjustments can be advocated for to break down the social, economic, environmental and psychological barriers which prevent physical activity, resulting in a more inclusive society. Addressing the barriers not only improves health and wellbeing for Disabled people, but gives greater opportunities to access employment, in turn addressing the economic disadvantage faced by many people living with physical and mental impairments.



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Introduction

Disability Sport Wales (DSW) received updated data on adult physical activity levels in 2024. The data revealed a significant proportion of Disabled people are not physically active. To add depth to the quantitative data, DSW commissioned Press Red to gather qualitative evidence from Disabled people to identify the barriers they faced to being physically active.

Press Red were initially commissioned to undertake qualitative data capture with inactive Disabled people. However, as DSW have traditionally worked with Disabled people that are already engaged in sport and physical activity, engaging inactive groups proved difficult. As a result of the recruitment challenges, DSW broadened the criteria for engagement to include Disabled people who are physically active and prepared to talk about the barriers they faced engaging in physical activity. The recruitment challenge highlights that non-active people require alternatives to in-person sessions and may be resistant to discuss their inactivity, due to fears they may feel judged or shamed, and finally require appropriate compensation for their contribution. Twelve participants were ultimately recruited through existing networks. These included Conwy Connect, a learning Disabilities charity; a school attending an outward bounds day at Plas Menai and an individual with visual impairments.

As a result of the recruitment challenge a secondary output, to create a new engagement resource for DSW to use in other contexts was requested. This is included in a separate document.

Definitions

Defining disability is an important part of framing this research. This report uses the term 'Disabled people' or 'Disabled person' which is a political description of the shared, disabling experience that people with longstanding illnesses or health

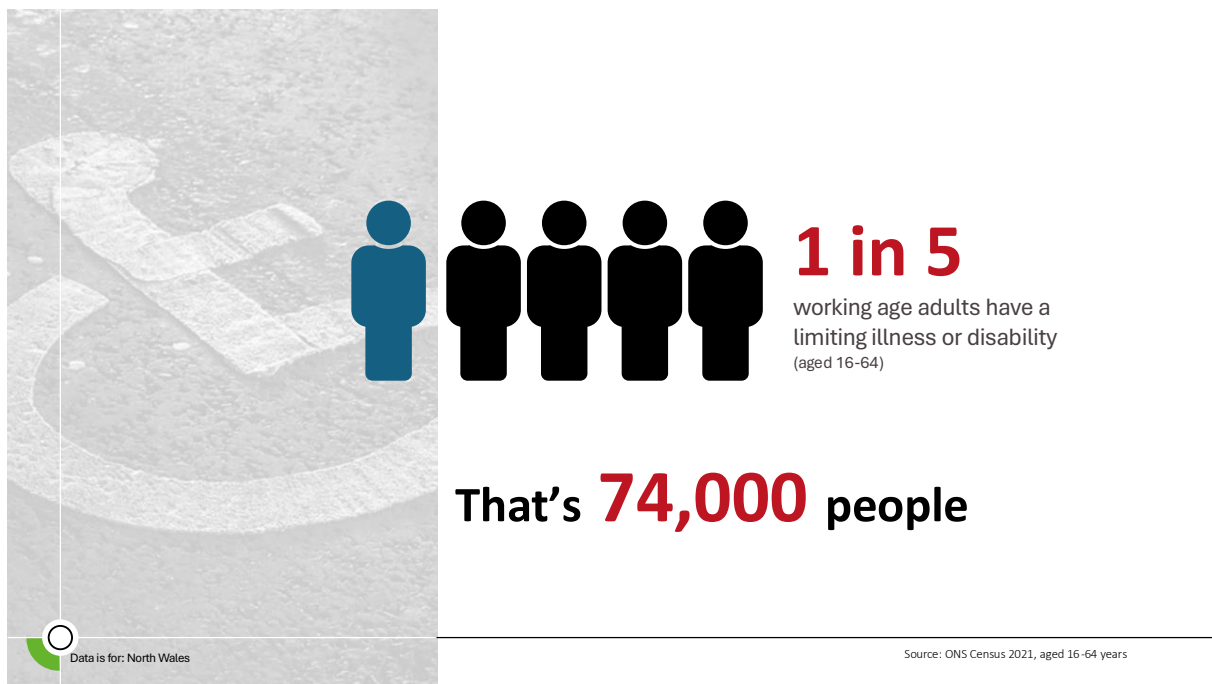


conditions, including mental and physical impairments, face in society². For the purposes of this work, the data is presented for adults aged 16-64.

Drivers of research

Currently 1 in 5 working age adults report physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more. This is based on their own understanding of their condition and not on a medical diagnosis.

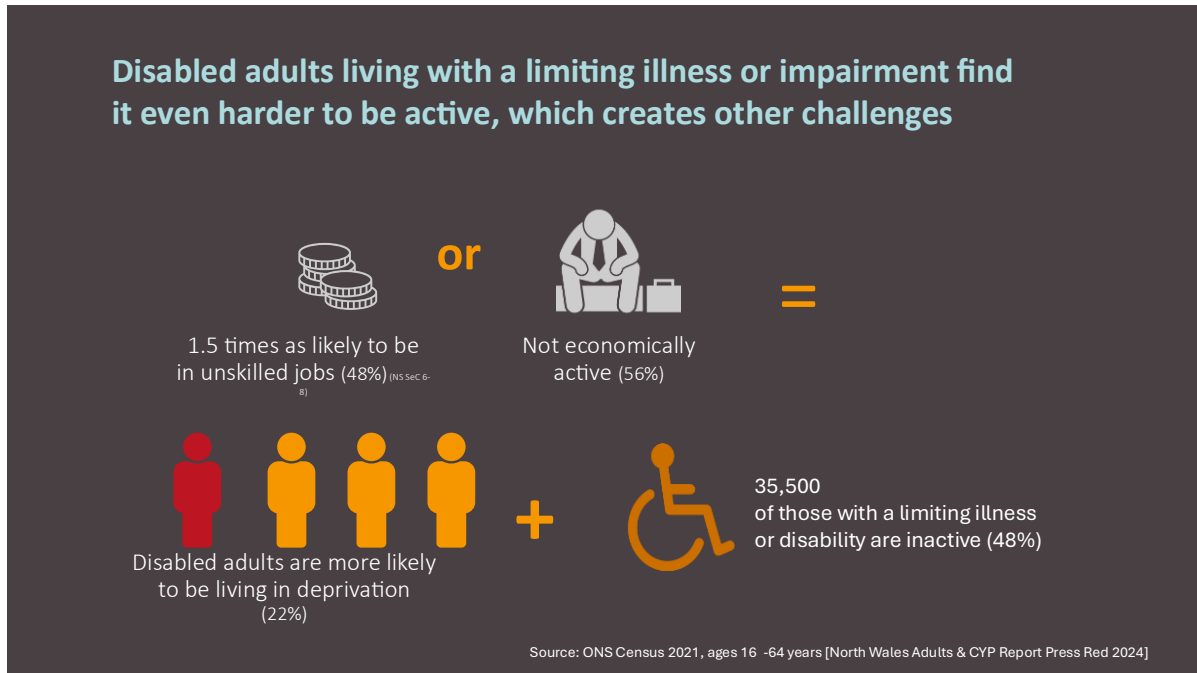
Currently the proportion of Disabled people who report that they are inactive in North Wales is 48%. By inactive we mean: Adults that are doing less than 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a week.



Disabled adults living with a limiting illness or impairment find it harder to be active. Disabled people are 1.5 times more likely to be in unskilled jobs or not economically

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active (58% of the total Disabled population). One in four disabled adults are more likely to be living in deprivation.



Due to challenges accessing employment and training, working age Disabled people are more likely to be on low incomes. This is compounded by costs associated with living with an impairment, e.g. reliance on private hire transport, adaptations to properties and additional support equipment and resources.

Challenges of engaging inactive Disabled People



The challenge

- Disability Sport Wales understand that Disabled People face barriers to physical activity
- We need stories as well as numbers to shift perspectives and create systemic change to address barriers
- A lack of qualitative evidence limits possible impact
- Engaging physically inactive people is difficult
 - Stigma of inactivity- embarrassment and blame
 - The same challenges stopping physical activity prevent engagement in focus groups

Despite the barriers being created by society, the experience of many Disabled people is that of internalised blame for their lack of engagement and activity. To allay fears of judgment and to engage people in research to unpack the barriers requires careful framing of the issue, as well as accessible and appropriate design of the engagement.

Approach

Focus groups and semi structured interviews were designed to capture insights from Disabled people on their experiences of being physically active in three places. For more details of the approach, method and participants [see Appendix 1- Details of research methodology and participants.](#)

During the engagement participants highlighted barriers in their day-to-day life using the Social Model of Disability (discussed below). Three places where physical activity may be challenging were discussed, including:

1. Around town

This section covered accessing work, socialising, accessing amenities and using public transport.

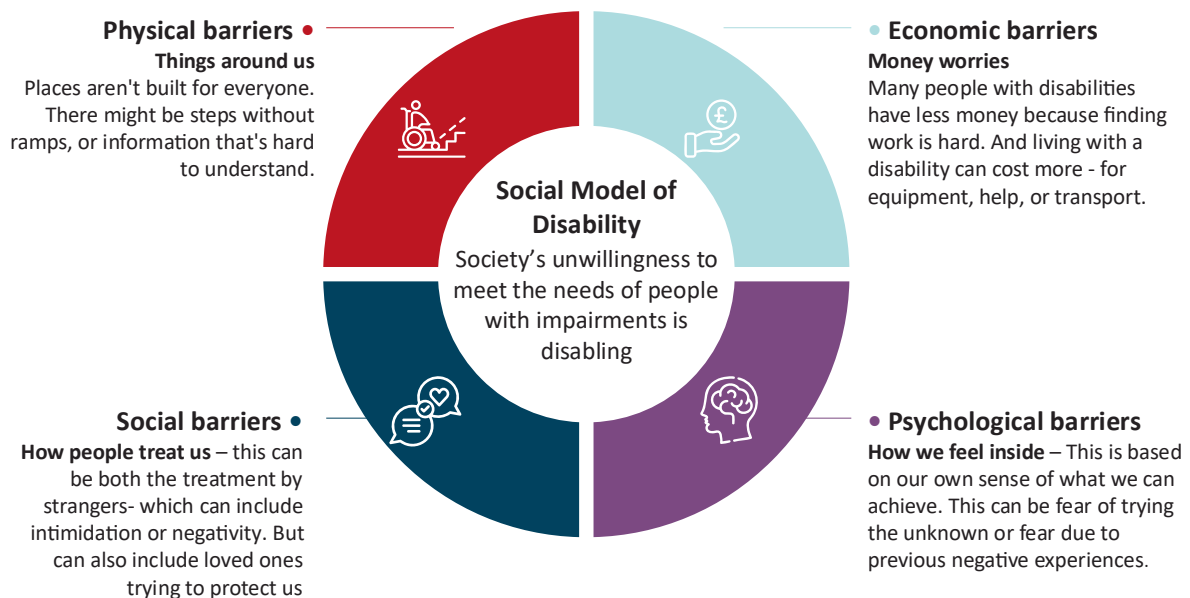
2. Getting out into nature

Looked at barriers to independently accessing parks, beaches, mountains, rivers and other natural environments.

3. Organised activities

Including attending sessions and classes in sport and recreation facilities and joining groups with the purpose of being physically active together.

The Social Model of Disability



The Social Model of Disability is developed by Disabled people, and states that it is society, which creates social, economic, physical and psychological barriers preventing people living with impairments from fully engaging in society and therefore disabling them³.

Examples of barriers through the frame of the Social Model of Disability include physical barriers, such as lack of accessible provision, non-step entry, uneven surfaces and poorly lit areas which can prevent Disabled people from accessing the same

³³ <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language>

opportunities as non-disabled people. Economic barriers arise due to rising costs to meet basic needs, compounded by low income and additional costs associated with living with physical or mental impairment. Social barriers present both through social stigma and non-inclusive policies and attitudes, as well as exposure to abuse. Finally, psychological barriers can limit the opportunities for Disabled people to participate in physical activity. Such as fear of injury or fear of inability to participate which can prevent people from having the courage to try.

Method of data capture

Using Post-it-notes, participants recorded barriers represented in the Social Model of Disability. Participants annotated the visual aids in three separate contexts. Being physically active in 1) day to day life, 2) the natural environment; 3) accessing organised activities.

Barriers to physical activity in day-to-day life



Physical activity is not just about engaging in sport. Having accessible towns allows people to build physical activity into their day-to-day life, as well as accessing social and economic activities.

Barriers to physical activity in the natural environment



Wales has a beautiful natural environment, with beaches, hills, forests, rivers, parks and lakes. Being physically active in natural environments is good for both physical and mental wellbeing.

Barriers to accessing organised physical activities



Organised physical activities can improve wellbeing and help people learn new skills and connect socially. The GOGA strategy supports disabled and non-disabled people in activities together.

Social Model of Disability

Environmental/physical barriers
Things around us that get in our way - e.g. uneven footpaths, no parking

Psychological barriers
How we feel inside - worried, scared, anxious

Economic/ policy barriers
Money worries or rules that stop us from going where we like

Social/ Attitudinal barriers
How others treat us and what others think we can't do

Participants added stickers to indicate barrier they face. Their experiences are captured using the social model of disability

Being physically active does not only mean organised sport in dedicated settings. With well designed urban environments people can build physical activity into their daily lives. To broaden the exploration of barriers to physical activity the first part of the focus group explored barriers in day-to-day life in the context of getting around town.

This covered access to local amenities such as medical facilities, shops, public transport, cafes and restaurants, entertainment, education and economic opportunities. This section also covered travelling between towns, reflecting the semi-rural setting of many settlements in North Wales.

The participants were able to describe the barriers they faced using the Social Model of Disability, as well as the impacts the barriers caused them, including exclusion from economic and social opportunities, as well as psychological impacts. They also described good practise and positive experiences, and finally the adaptations they make to their own life to counter barriers.

The second focus area was independently getting into nature. Being physically active in nature is good for both physical and mental wellbeing. Although Wales has a beautiful natural environment, with beaches, hills, forests, rivers, parks and lakes, accessing these areas with physical and mental impairments can be challenging. The participants discussed places that they already visit, and places they would like to visit but feel unable to, due to various barriers.

The final session covered access to organised activities and settings. This included sport and activity clubs and specific sport and physical activity facilities such as swimming pools, gyms and sports centres.

The evidence is presented below with representative quotes to demonstrate how life is impacted by barriers in the words of the participants.

Evidence

AROUND TOWN: TRANSPORT CHALLENGES

Transport challenges reported included cancelled buses, inadequate connections, and difficulties navigating unfamiliar routes without support. The impact of unreliable public transport, infrequent bus services, lack of audio announcements, and challenges with pre-booking assistance, severely limit independence and access to activities.

“The buses are not on time... and there’s only one bus an hour”

Access to social activities provided for Disabled people, for example a monthly disco for people with learning disabilities, are limited by restrictive bus services.

“The last bus I have is 10:00 at night...I have to pay for a taxi so the transport is a big issue”

Participants who work for the disability’s charity Conwy Connect, described how they travel across North Wales to support other Disabled people to access health checks, as well as to attend social activities. All members of this group are dependent on public transport.

“I have to normally get an earlier bus to make appointments because I have appointments like in Bangor...it’s really annoying because I’m late for things”

The cost and availability of public transport also prevent Disabled people from accessing opportunities easily.

Bus and Transport costs were reported as prohibitively high.

“That costs £22.00 for a weekly bus pass”

Policy changes for Disabled people removed access to free bus passes, incurring significant transport costs as a result. Which in turn limits opportunities for Disabled people to fully engage in society.

“They took my bus pass off me It’s gonna happen to a load of people”

“Transport for Wales took over the bus passes...they changed the criteria... they linked it to PIP”.

Other restrictions described included misuse of accessible features, such as not using the talking bus stops.

“Not all buses, or particularly the one I use, going to Chester...will put the talking stop on for you”

Transport barriers limited independence of a participant with visual impairment (V.I). With an example given where driver preference appears to override the need for accessible features as ‘some passengers don’t like the talking stops’, as a result those with V.I, must rely on the driver remembering where they want to get off.

“When you ask the driver, can you put the talking stops on for me? Not everybody likes it”

Another example, demonstrating a lack of awareness by transport staff, included when a passenger with V.I., was instructed by a driver to read the electronic information screen, this type of incident negatively impacts the ability to travel independently and safely.

“[Driver says] "it comes up on the board, on the screen, and I'm like, well, I can't see the screen”

Travel by train provided better accessibility and assistance. In particular, when assistance is booked in advance.

“The trains are getting better. You have to pre-book any”.

For Disabled people dependent on assistance, opportunities to travel spontaneously are limited.

“So say today for example, I'll just go to Chester. It would be very difficult to find somebody on the train station to help me get on that train...I can't be spontaneous. You have to plan it”.

Economic barriers are also caused by the limited opportunities to access employment. Participants with learning disabilities, reported age restrictions on schemes (16-24), challenges with DWP/job centres, difficulties balancing work with benefits, and lack of support to access them.



“But it's hard to get opportunities if you've got...Not just learning disability but neurodivergent and you've got mental health...Because some of us can't work full time because it's like my body gets so tired, like, especially because I have to travel and stuff, I get really tired and it's really draining, travelling to different things”.

AROUND TOWN: PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

The physical environment creates many obstructions for Disabled people to access opportunities for physical activity.

Poorly maintained pavements, potholes, uneven surfaces, road works, missing ramps, inadequate street lighting, and lack of accessible pedestrian crossings, create dangerous conditions and limit safe movement.

Disabled people must avoid routes, take risks like walking in the road and even abandon plans, returning home due to physical barriers.

“It's all potholes on the paths, more than the roads. So, from my street, I walk on the road to go down [into town] because people have got their bins out, rubbish on the path”

The daily challenge of planning every move and having no spontaneity is waring for Disabled people, reducing their opportunities to interact, have fun and make autonomous decisions.

“Every day I set out on my front door and go down my street to come to town or if I'm catching the bus to go and play bowls...Every step I make is a challenge”

AROUND TOWN: SOCIAL ATTITUDES & PREJUDICE

Disabled people experience disrespect, being ignored, verbal abuse, feeling invisible, and facing low expectations from society and service providers. This includes staff who lack understanding, groups unwilling to accommodate needs, and a general lack of awareness about disabilities.

Several participants reported experiencing verbal abuse and intimidation whilst moving about town. Some had reported the abuse to the police, but its occurrence had resulted in restricting where they felt they could be safe to get out and be physically active.

“I have been verbally abused and stuff. I've been name called”

Changing societal attitudes and challenging ignorance is a keyway to address barriers preventing inclusion and safety of Disabled people.

“It happened to me when I was walking down Llanfairfechan and one teenager went up to me and said oh, why are you wearing this and stuff like this? [lanyard] ...And I just say because I have a learning disability”.

The following quote is from a young man with autism who cycles two miles to his part time job where he is then bullied.

“People laugh at me at work. I don't know why they laugh. I don't understand.”

It is not always overt abuse that excludes Disabled people, lack of engagement and ignoring a person can also act as a barrier.

“They think of you as a hindrance rather than a person. That you're just an object that shouldn't really be moving the cane along the path”.

“They bring more attention to my disability by ignoring me”.

GETTING OUT INTO NATURE: RECOGNISING THE BENEFITS

Enjoyment and desire to be physically active in nature was common. Activities the participants enjoyed included, walking, swimming, stand up paddle boarding and cycling.

There is a good understanding of the physical and mental health benefits of physical activity, as well as a desire to do more if barriers could be addressed.

The participants noted the therapeutic effects of being in nature and enjoying the calming sensory experiences of wildlife watching and nature connection.

“Outdoor swimming is the nicest thing you can think ... your mind feels so much fresher...It's the best.”-

Physical activity in nature for most people is a low cost and enjoyable activity.

“I walk every day, because if I didn't, what else was there for me?”.

“I tried to go swimming in July but I thought I can't do it, it's too difficult. ... I just like walking. Basically, it's free. It's easy”

GETTING OUT INTO NATURE: PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE CHALLENGES

Access to nature is limited by physical barriers.

Slippery, muddy and poorly maintained paths create uneven surfaces and cause balance issues, especially for people with dyspraxia, cerebral palsy and visual impairments.

"I struggle when it's uneven and there are holes...with me having dyspraxia and cerebral palsy, balance is very uneven"

"it's like going over a mountain rather than going down a pavement".

Where surfaces were smooth and safe, participants felt confident to exercise independently. With reports of people walking and cycling alone for several miles. Good examples included: The flat promenade paths suitable for wheelchair users and walking groups in Llandudno, Holyhead and Treadaur Bay. Nature reserves with maintained walking paths near Llangefni and the extensive cycle path networks connecting towns (e.g., Llangefni to Malltraeth)

"If I go down the Dingle now we've got a walk path. It's recently been redone by the Council. They've done a more easy path and it's recycled material...So we've got that and we've got a normal path which is maintained well. It's pretty wheelchair accessible"

Despite the abundance of natural environments in Wales very few of the participants reported venturing into the mountains. Noting the rocky and uneven mountain paths unsuitable for people with physical disabilities.

"I don't go up the mountains walking because it's very rocky and it's very uneven...I try to avoid paths that are not maintained very well because there's holes and different things"

Due to many of the participants relying on public transport, the lack of accessible public transport routes to beaches, countryside and park locations also restricts opportunities.

"I'm quite restricted on what beaches I can get to by bus. A lot of the beaches on the island... You have to get two or three buses. You just can't really get there unless you've got a car. "

“To be honest with you, in Wrexham, unless you have a car, there is not really anywhere you could get to on a bus route to go and enjoy a park ”

GETTING OUT INTO NATURE: SOCIAL ATTITUDES & PREJUDICE

Assumptions and bias, as well as prejudicial attitudes to Disabled people is a significant barrier to enjoying the natural environment.

It was noted that there is a common rhetoric about Disabled people needing to be physically active, without a concerted effort to break down the barriers that prevent them.

“The Government are on about the health, the health of people with learning disability, but they're not doing things to support us, to help us with our health, to get help”.

Negative social attitudes can restrict Disabled people from enjoying spaces that could make physical activity possible, for example the smooth surface of a cycle paths.

Attitudes from other users can make the user experience unsettling. Providing clearer guidance and signage on shared pathways could help address lack of understanding between different users.

“And then you get told when a bike comes behind you or a scooter and they're saying, well, you shouldn't be in that lane anyway”.

Living with family, allowed greater opportunities to enjoy activities outdoors. Both due to being able to use private cars, as well as to accompany them and make them feel safe.

“Whereas they've got families, they've got partners, they've got parents...So their parents and partners can do all this with them...But I shouldn't feel excluded just because I'm on my own”.

Outdoor group activities were either specifically for Disabled people or required acceptance into a group for non-disabled.

Successful examples appear to be when groups are run by Disabled people for Disabled people.

"I made a lot of friends, and I get a lot of support" (on the walking group guided by Disabled people)"

Outdoor activity groups enable opportunities for physical activity, social connection and skill development. However, some of the dedicated opportunities were difficult to afford.

"oh, we've got rock climbing in Llandudno, we've got it in Shotton.' How do I get to these places? In a taxi ... It would be £25-30 one way, so £ 60 for an hour's climb"

A negative account of joining a rambling group indicated the social/ attitudinal barriers faced when trying to connect with non-disabled groups.

"They never asked me back again because they didn't have the facilities to guide a non-sighted person on their rambles...their excuse was, it's a bit rough by you...it was their way of saying that they couldn't accommodate me...I might not be able to see, but I'm not stupid" (on a non-disabled rambling group)

Being unable to join groups causes loneliness and isolation for people with Disabilities.

"It's friendship. Just talking and less loneliness cause a lot of us live on our own and people forget about that. It's not just the elderly that are lonely ... middle-aged people are lonely"

ORGANISED ACTIVITIES: ACCESS AND APPROPRIATE PROVISION

Physical activity in organised settings is the final context. This included, accessing gyms, swimming pools and other sports and social clubs.

Where activities are provided and adapted specifically for Disabled people. They are only inclusive if times, locations and costs are manageable.

“There is a place in Bangor...the only session they have on that suits her would be 8:30 on a Saturday morning but she gets very tired”

Having sessions for Disabled people very early in the morning or late in the evening excludes people, as they often require extra time to get ready, have support in the home and need to access public transport.

“I sometimes take ages getting ready or like getting dressed after swimming”.

Many places do not provide single gender sessions, and where they do, there appears to be a lack of consideration of safe travel to and from the session without private vehicle access.

“They don't do any ladies, only sessions, not even in the gym ”

The following account of a women only session in the late evening is likely to impact the non-disabled community, as well as Disabled people. Travelling by public transport and walking from bus stops to home creates a heightened safety risk.

“I would go to the ladies only at Llandudno swimming pool. It was from eight till nine. Guess what the 9pm bus. I was there on time. It didn't even turn up. So we have to wait for the last one”.

Where activities are later in the day, the kindness and dedication of charity support staff often enable participants to attend. Such as the offer of a lift so that a member of the learning disabilities charity group could attend a disco in the evening.

“I have to say that cause she's one of the amazing persons ever. This is why we have Sammy who always rescues me if I wanted to do an activity. She always takes me back because she lives on my way”

Lack of dedicated provision of sports clubs for Disabled people in North Wales is noted as a barrier

“There's not the money there for funding for clubs and stuff there used to be more evening activities or sports activities”

The other limitation to enjoyment is lack of provision of age-appropriate activities. One participant expressed frustration at the lack of access to challenging activities.

“I am not a coffee and biscuits person, not just yet... for like 2 hours, that's all they do... there are only so many canal trips you can go on, especially when you can't see. Or so many afternoon teas you can have”

ORGANISED ACTIVITIES: ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Most participants had attempted to undertake physical activities in public settings. As with all other contexts, lack of ability or desire to participate was not a barrier.

Adapting environments to accommodate both physical and mental needs require the following considerations: addressing a lack of functioning specialist equipment, as well as a lack of trained staff to assist Disabled people to use equipment.

“There's not the equipment there...there's not the equipment like the hoist or support staff to help people go to do sports and activities”

Participants also noted that for neurodivergent groups providing quiet times, sensitive lighting and smaller group opportunities would be more inclusive.

“There's a lot of people that are neurodivergent now, but the gyms and lessons are not thinking that neurodivergent people are going to the gym with the sensory issues”

Several participants stated that having sessions available with small or 1:1 activity was preferable to open sessions.

“1:1 activities are better than groups. I don't like groups”

Cost is also a major barrier, with participants reporting inconsistent price policies across North Wales to access swimming facilities, and expensive membership fees for gyms.

“In Bangor. If you have a learning disability, you still have to pay a fee to go in the pool, but in Conwy you don't have to do that”

“I had to cancel mine because it cost too much” (Participant on gym)

ORGANISED ACTIVITIES: SOCIAL ATTITUDES & PREJUDICE

To prevent barriers to engagement, staff and volunteers within organised activity settings must be well trained on supporting Disabled people, including people with learning disabilities.

Several participants had experienced intimidation by other users of facilities. Which stopped them from feeling comfortable to exercise.

“Some men can be a bit pervy. Yeah...How they talk, their attitudes and the way they look at you and stuff, I find it intimidating and not very nice”

This type of self-consciousness was not reserved for women, with men also reporting intimidation and vulnerability due to their physical appearance.

“I'm a bit conscious because I feel. Some people are staring, and stuff, so I really don't go to the gym”

An example of a social barrier experienced by several participants is a digital app used to access a gym in Conwy. Rather than explaining appropriately how to use the app, staff had helped by uploading the app to the participants phone but then assumed they would be able to use it and therefore did not explain how it functioned.

“They didn't really explain how to use it when I went for my gym introduction ...All I can say useless bloody wazocks ”

Positive examples of dedicated activities for Disabled people included Touch Wood bowls provided in Wrexham.

“I've been there four months. It's the best thing I've ever done” (On Touch Wood bowls).

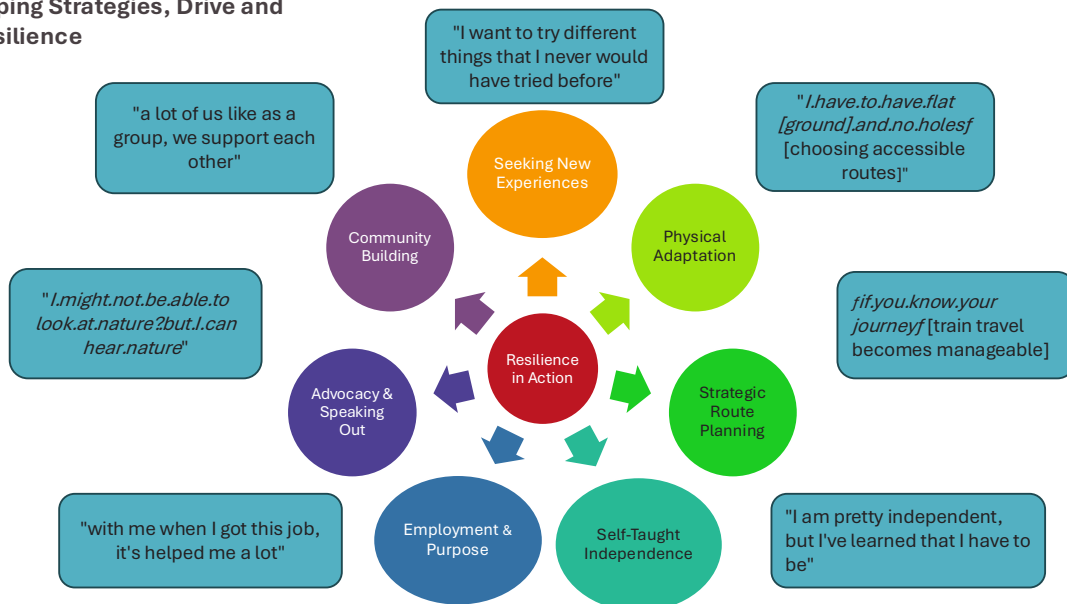
The impact of being able to regularly compete in a sport designed to enable those with visual impairment was profound. Providing social contact, competition and physical activity.

“I feel alive for them two hours. I feel like a normal person in them two hours”

Coping Strategies and Resilience

Despite barriers, participants demonstrate remarkable determination through self-teaching independence, physical adaptations, creating familiar routes, finding accepting environments (like Touch Woods bowls, guiding walking groups), using technology adaptively, and pushing themselves to maintain physical activity and social connections.

Coping Strategies, Drive and Resilience



Positive outcomes resulting from engagement in physical activity include mental health improvement; increased confidence, social connections; maintained independence; community contribution; personal growth and challenging stigma.

Summary of findings

Disabled people want to be physically active and live full and rewarding lives. The physical, economic, social & psychological barriers limit opportunities in all contexts.

Many people with disabilities are reliant on active and public transport, all participants had both positive and negative experiences to report. And many were impacted by broad policy changes that have reduced transport related benefits.

Themes- barriers to physical activity

Disabled people want to be physically active and live full and rewarding lives;

Environmental? economic? social?™ psychological barriers limit opportunities in all contexts;

- Transport and Accessibility Barriers
- Loss of Independence and Autonomy
- Physical Infrastructure Challenges
- Social Isolation and Loneliness
- Attitudes and Social Exclusion
- Financial Constraints
- Limited and Inappropriate Activity Provision
- Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing
- Lack of Support Systems and Resources
- Coping Strategies and Resilience

Disabled people experience significant restrictions on spontaneity and freedom of movement. The need to plan journeys weeks in advance, reliance on others for lifts, and inability to travel independently creates feelings of being trapped and dependent.

Access to the natural environment is also dependent on overcoming physical and transport infrastructure challenges.

Exclusion from opportunities for physical activity, resulted in loss of autonomy and decreased mental and emotional wellbeing. With reports of depression, anxiety, embarrassment, frustration and grief over loss of abilities, impacting the participants.

The lack of support systems and resources, combined with a general lack of awareness about disabilities from society and service providers, significantly affects opportunities and motivation to engage in activities.

The nationwide strategy, Get Out Get Active, specifically aims to support disabled and non-disabled people in activities together. Despite the strategy, the participants reported extensive barriers to inclusion. Including: lack of suitable activities for younger Disabled people, sessions scheduled at inconvenient times, activities designed only for elderly participants, insufficient provision for specific needs (such as

sensory considerations, ladies-only sessions, or visual impairment support), and activities concentrated in inaccessible locations.

Common to all participants was the economic barrier caused by living with an impairment. Including high costs of accessible transport (taxis), expensive activity participation, removal or variable access to benefits, and limited employment opportunities, all of which significantly restrict access to physical activities and independence.

Conclusion

The stories provided by the participants in this research clearly demonstrate that barriers to physical activity are best viewed through the Social Model of Disability. For DSW to achieve the goal of getting more people physically active in Wales, it will require advocacy for systemic change to address the physical, social, economic and psychological limitations that society puts on Disabled people.

The approach using the Social Model of Disability, can be advocated for and stories developed and reported here, can be used as a template for broader engagement with Disabled people and those that impact the lives of Disabled people in Wales. Breaking down the social, economic, environmental and psychological barriers, which prevent physical activity, creating a more inclusive society. Addressing the barriers not only improves health and wellbeing for Disabled people but gives greater opportunities to access employment, in turn, addressing the economic disadvantage faced by many people living with physical and mental impairments.

The challenge of accessing inactive Disabled people to contribute to the research, and the challenges reported by active Disabled people participating in this research, is a clear demonstration of why we need DSW to campaign to challenge the system wide issues that prevent Disabled people from not just being physically active, but also prevent Disabled people from reaching their potential and the full and active lives that they want to lead. This work supports the call to action issued recently at the DSW



annual conference in Llandudno, to proactively work across service providers, planners, sport and recreation facilities and with charities and sport associations to embed awareness and practical solutions to address the barriers faced by Disabled people in their daily lives.

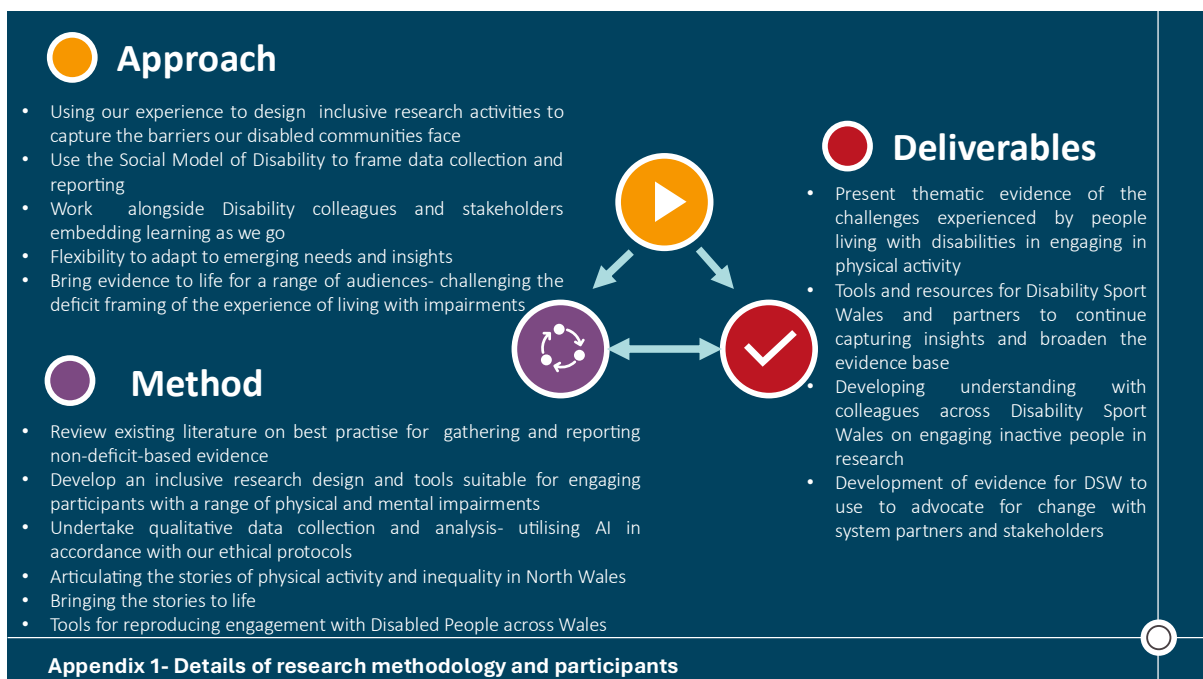
Appendices

Appendix 1- Details of research methodology and participants

Approach & methodology

Researchers from Press Red and the Disability Sport Wales research team prepared an information video, set up a focus group and supplementary semi structured interview, as well as participant information and consent which could be adapted to the needs of the participants. The research approach was guided by the Social Model of Disability and enabled embedding learning and training for disability colleagues and stakeholders.

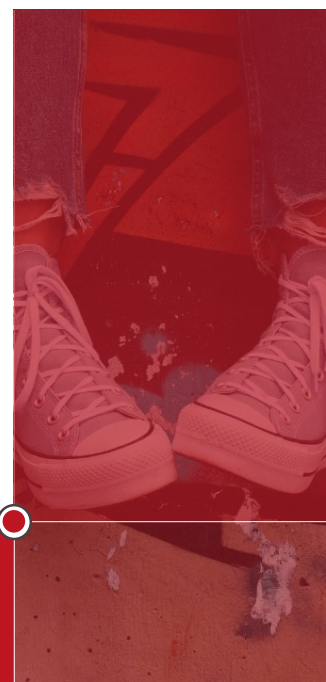
The flexibility to adapt to emerging needs and insights also assisted in bringing evidence to life for a range of audiences- challenging the deficit framing of the experience of living with impairments.



Research activity and outputs included:

- An inclusive research design and tools suitable for engaging participants with a range of physical and mental impairments
- A literature review on best practise for gathering and reporting evidence
- Qualitative data collection and analysis, using online and in person focus groups and semi structured 1:1 interview
- Thematic evidence of the challenges experienced by people living with disabilities to engaging in physical activity. Bringing the stories to life by articulating the stories of physical activity and inequality in North Wales
- Tools and resources for Disability Sport Wales and partners to use to continue capturing insights and broaden the evidence base
- Developing understanding with colleagues across Disability Sport Wales on engaging inactive people in research
- Development of evidence for Disability Sport Wales to use to advocate for change with system partners and stakeholders

Flexible & Inclusive Engagement



Using a flexible approach to the research allowed participants to engage in a way that met their needs. Including one to one semi structured interviews, in person focus groups and video meetings.

Participants living with a range of physical, mental and cognitive impairments engaged in the research, as well as support workers. Some people had acquired impairments, whilst others had lifelong impairments.

Despite best efforts, the sample was small. In total 12 participants living with disabilities and two support workers, in three different locations across North Wales were engaged. With some joining online from home.

The participants ranged in age from 16 up to 60 years old, six female and five male.

Engagement details

When	29 th September	29 th September	30 th September
Where	Llandudno Junction	Plas Menai, Llandudno	Wrexham
Organisation	Conwy Connect	Family Fund Team	COS- The Disability Access Charity-
Contact name	6 Health Champions- self selected	Mencap & others	Libby Deaf Insight team- Project Team Cowlyn Bay
Disabilities & Ages	Adults with learning disabilities & additional physical disabilities	16+ young adults with autism and their carer	Visual impairment
Number participants	7 (2 online) inc. 1 member of staff	4 (including 1 carer)	1
Engagement	Focus group hybrid in person online	Focus group, facilitated with 1:1 arrangement	1:1 semi structured interview
Extra needs	Easy read format Teams link for online	Short focus session 1:1 facilitation	Accessible venue, large print, quiet room, limited fluorescent light

Appendix 1- Details of research methodology and participants

Appendix 2- Recruitment reflections and improvements

Reflections on recruitment

Disability Sport Wales contacted several organisations to recruit participants but identified the following barriers

- Lack of financial incentive and financial compensation. This undervalues the specialist contribution participants provide and can leave people on low income worse off and therefore unable to engage.
- Challenge of deficit framing- people who are physically inactive. They may have a sense of shame and feel they may be judged about their inactivity
- Lack of engagement in the purpose of the research
- Inability to coordinate timing to undertake the research due to short lead times

Reflections on tools

The information YouTube video circulated to participants during recruitment was well received by the group with Learning Disabilities. The video was narrated and subtitled making it suitable for people with visual and hearing impairments. The video was also shown prior to the workshop using an iPad, and worked as an effective aid to focus the group on the task.

Despite DSW using rooms for the focus groups in accessible environments, some participants preferred to join online. The hybrid session was successful as the group in question were used to meeting in this way and had computer literacy. Future use of hybrid sessions would benefit from a digital white board for full inclusion. As well as the potential for support workers to be engaged to assist people without digital literacy to engage.

Recommendations

Provide financial compensation for expenses, and ideally a further financial incentive to reflect the value of the contribution of lived experience experts.

Use non deficit video messaging during recruitment. By framing the challenge through the Social Model of Disability and providing an explanation of the research purpose and approach in advance helps potential participants to feel reassured that they will not be subject to judgment and allows any potential barriers between potential participants and researchers to be broken down.

Provide online engagement opportunities so that people can join the focus group from home. Noting lack of digital literacy may also be a barrier to this solution and extra support may be required.

Use existing opportunities such as the Disability Sports Wales Conference to increase awareness of research, and potential for the impacts. The timing of the research before the conference, missed an opportunity to reach a much larger sample. As Jo Hendy (Research Lead DSW), had greater success in recruiting potential participants through face-to-face networking. However, the budget for the focus groups had been expended by this point. Recommendations for future work is to delay booking the focus group venues until a critical mass of participants can engage. Offering the opportunity to engage online, in person or in a hybrid setting either as a group or one to one, being led by the preference of the potential participants.