

# Active beyond education?

A report exploring young disabled people's experiences of sport and physical activity, during the transition from education to adulthood.



# Contents

Foreword	3		
1.0 Executive Summary	4		
2.0 Introduction	6		
2.1 Background and aims	6		
2.2 Research approach	7		
2.3 Sample	7		
2.4 Analysis approach	10		
3.0 Research findings and recommendations	10		
3.1 Capability	10		
• Physical capability	10		
• Psychological capability	14		
• The provider perspective	17		
• Summary and recommendations	18		
3.2 Motivation	18		
• Competition and challenge	19		
• Self-identity	20		
• Socialising	20		
• Other motivations	22		
• Changes in motivation during transition	23		
• The provider perspective	23		
• Summary and recommendations	24		
3.3 Opportunity	26		
• Sport at school	26		
• Continued support and resources	28		
• Awareness of opportunities	31		
• The provider perspective	31		
• Summary and recommendations	33		
4.0 Conclusions	34		

# Foreword

The National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs) provide advice, support and opportunities for people with specific impairments to take part in sport and physical activity. For many disabled people the National Disability Sports Organisations can be their first calling point when thinking about getting active.

Statistics show that less than half the number of disabled people take part in sport or physical activity compared to non-disabled people. Whilst our previous research highlights various barriers disabled people can face when trying to be active, it also shows that many disabled people would like to be more active than they currently are.

A crucial time in all people's lives is when they leave education and move into adulthood. This period can be particularly challenging for young disabled people. It is a time when we know a large number of disabled people disconnect from sport. We want to use this research to better understand disabled people's experiences of sport and physical activity during this period. To explore how providers can promote and maintain people's active lifestyles into adulthood.

## **The National Disability Sports Organisations**

# 1. Executive Summary

**This research consulted with young disabled people to explore their experience of sport and physical activity, during the transition from education to adulthood.**

The findings highlighted a range of reasons why disabled people do and do not engage in sport and physical activity as they move on from education. These cover internal factors – having the motivation as well as the physical and psychological capability to take part. As well as external factors – having available opportunities.

- Young disabled people can struggle to participate in sport and physical activity due to a deterioration or change in their physical condition.
- Young disabled people are often lacking in ‘life skills’ such as confidence, independence and resilience. Skills that can be crucial in enabling people to effectively seek physical activity opportunities beyond education.
- Participation in sport and physical activity is dependent on opportunities meeting their motivations to take part, these motivations fluctuate over time.
- Young disabled people’s opportunity to engage in sport during this transition period is impacted by a number of key external factors. These include access to sport inside and outside of school, support received from family and friends, availability of adaptive support, equipment and other resources.

When looking to promote and maintain activity levels of disabled people after leaving education it is important that all these factors are considered. Specific recommendations have been outlined as to how achieving this could be supported.

- Healthcare professionals (e.g. physiotherapists) should be encouraged and guided to recommend suitable activities to young disabled people.
- Training and guidance for educators on how to better engage young disabled people in PE lessons. This should include strategies for developing young disabled people's 'life skills'.
- Early positive experiences of sport will make it more likely that people will re-engage or continue to be active as they get older. Providers need to reach out and engage with young disabled people earlier, either while they are still in education or in settings where they feel comfortable.
- Provide better funding opportunities to support sport and physical activity participation as young disabled people move into adulthood.

This research demonstrates that engaging disabled people in sport and physical activity at a young age is critical to maximising the chances of them staying active as they move into adulthood. If this opportunity is not taken it becomes much harder to engage with individuals at an older age.

A comprehensive, long-term strategy that addresses the underlying reasons for the decline in young disabled people's participation in sport is needed. This is likely to be more successful than one, which concentrates solely on quick wins that focus on re-engaging people after they have dropped out.

# 2. Introduction

## 2.1 Background and research aims

Research shows that participation in sport and physical activity declines with age. The data suggests that disabled people have a lower baseline participation in childhood<sup>1</sup>. The subsequent decline in participation in this population is more marked than for non-disabled people<sup>2</sup>. One of the biggest declines in participation of disabled people occurs around the time they are leaving education, between the ages of 16 and 25<sup>3</sup>. This is commonly referred to as ‘the transition to adulthood’<sup>4</sup>.

The two main aims of this research were:

1. To better understand reasons for the decline in disabled people’s participation in sport and physical activity, during the transition from education to adulthood.
2. To recommend how to promote and maintain engagement in sport and physical activity amongst young disabled people

The research was commissioned by six National Disability Sports Organisations (NDSOs) in partnership with the English Federation of Disability Sport (EFDS):

- British Blind Sport
- Cerebral Palsy Sport
- Dwarf Sports Association UK
- LimbPower
- UK Deaf Sport
- WheelPower - British Wheelchair Sport

1. DCMS Taking Part Survey 2014/2015

2,3. Sport England Active People Survey 8 Q4 October 2013-October 2014

4. Cerebra (2013) Transition to adulthood: a guide for practitioners working with disabled young people

## 2.2 Research approach

A combination of face-to-face and telephone research interviews<sup>5</sup> were carried out from April to September 2015. Interviews were conducted with young disabled people to understand their first hand experiences of participating in sport and physical activity. We also interviewed a selection of sport and physical activity providers to get their perspective of working with young disabled people. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

The young disabled person discussion guide included the following topics:

- Their experiences of taking part in sport and physical activity whilst growing up.
- A timeline exercise to capture the person's participation in sport throughout their life time, including type and frequency of activity.
- Who and what they felt influenced their level of participation.

The provider discussion guide included the following topics:

- Their current approach to inclusion.
- Barriers and facilitators for young disabled people accessing sport opportunities.

- Their views on how to develop an offer that is appealing and motivating to young disabled people.

## 2.3 Sample

57 young disabled people (61% male, 39% female) mostly between the ages of 16 and 30 were recruited to take part in in-depth interviews. Face-to-face interviews covered four main geographic regions: North West, South West, South East and East of England.

12% of participants were still at school, 26% were in further or higher education whilst the remaining 62% had left education. We aimed to recruit a mix of current activity levels and participation experiences. 54% of participants who had left education felt they were less active than when they were at school. Many of the older interviewees had experienced periods of inactivity since leaving school.

To ensure the user groups of each of the contributing National Disability Sports Organisations were represented, we sought to recruit people with the following specific impairments or health conditions (figure 1).

<sup>5</sup>. Thirty of the interviews were one-to-one, 7 interviews were conducted as pairs, 3 as triads and one as a quad.

**Figure 1: Sample summary by condition/impairment**

Health condition or Impairment <sup>6</sup>	Sample
Cerebral palsy	11
Visual impairment	12
Hearing impairment	8
Restricted growth	7
Limb loss	6
Wheelchair users	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>

In addition to the face-to-face interviews with young disabled people, we also conducted telephone interviews with ten organisations<sup>7</sup> who have experience of providing sport and physical activity opportunities for young disabled people.

## 2.4 Analysis approach

We generated a written transcript from each interview. Members of the research team analysed the transcripts and identified themes that addressed the research aims.

It became apparent when interviewing the participants that both internal (e.g. confidence and motivation) and external (e.g. availability of local sports facilities) factors influenced sports participation during the transition to adulthood.

In order to effectively organise the research findings we sought a behavioural model, which acknowledged the role of both these internal and external factors. The COM-B system of behaviour<sup>8</sup> fit these criteria. This widely utilised model of behaviour is, to date the only model that acknowledges the influence of both internal (i.e. physical and psychological factors) and external (e.g. the environment) mechanisms.

<sup>6</sup>. Note that some individuals fell into more than one category, for example, cerebral palsy and a wheelchair user. However, they were only counted as one interviewee.

<sup>7</sup>. Active Gloucestershire, Glo Active, Daisy UK, Peterborough United Deaf Football Team, Royal London Society for Blind People, RYA Sailability, Pompey in the Community, Albion in the Community, Sports Able and Deer Park Archers.

<sup>8</sup>. Michie S., van Stralen M.M., West R. (2011). The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science: IS*, 6, 42. <http://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-6-42>.

The COM-B model was published in 2011 and has since been widely cited in behavioural science literature. It suggests that behaviour is influenced by ‘capability’, ‘motivation’ and ‘opportunity’.

Capability refers to the physical and psychological knowledge or skills required to carry out the behaviour. For example, knowing how to swim or having the confidence to go to a swimming pool on your own.

Motivation relates to “brain processes that energise and direct behaviour” such as habit, goals, intention and beliefs about what is good and bad. An example of the role motivation can play in behaviour

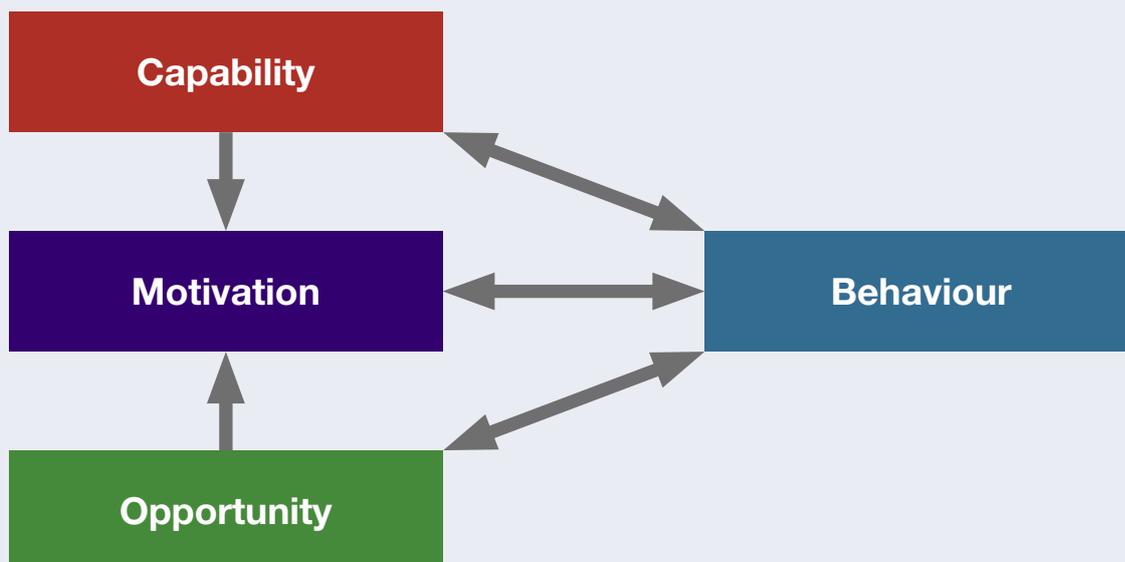
would be beliefs about the role that regular physical activity can play in health or enjoying the social aspect of being part of a sports team.

Opportunity refers to any factor outside of the individual that impacts their ability to perform a behaviour. Examples of this would be having a sports centre nearby or having access to equipment needed to play a sport.

The COM-B model is shown in figure 2.

The two-way arrows in the COM-B model describe how there is a lot of interplay between the factors and behaviour.

**Figure 2: The COM-B system of behaviour**



# 3. Research findings and recommendations

In this section, we explore the factors that lead to young disabled people engaging in sport during education and beyond. These are based on the interviews with both young disabled people and sport providers. The findings are organised by the three factors outlined in the COM-B model of behaviour. They are ‘capability’, ‘motivation’ and ‘opportunity’.

## 3.1 Capability

Capability describes both the physical and psychological skills and knowledge required to engage in sport and physical activity.

Physical capability refers to whether an individual possesses the physical skills or ability to take part in a certain activity. Some disabled people, due to their impairment are restricted as to what they are physically able to do.

Psychological capability refers to the ‘life skills’ and knowledge needed to access activity and take part. For example, if someone does not have the confidence to attend a sport session then they are much less likely to participate.

### Capability: physical capability

Many things influence a young disabled person’s physical capability to take part in different sports and activities:

- Impairment type
- Severity
- Secondary conditions/side effects (e.g. fatigue)
- Whether their impairment is acquired or congenital

Even within impairment groups, individual physical conditions can vary greatly. Over time, a person can experience a deterioration or change in their condition. If this occurs during the transition period it can have a significant impact on the extent to which they take part in sport and physical activity.

## Case Study

- A male in his late twenties, who became visually impaired at the age of 15 due to a genetic condition.
- He was previously active during primary and secondary school, in both compulsory PE and outside of school. He particularly enjoyed alternative sports such as roller blading.
- After becoming visually impaired he was allowed to opt out of PE by his school and his activity levels dropped.
- He felt that if a teacher gives any teenager the option to participate in PE or not, they are likely to opt out:  

“They just let me sit out if I wanted to, and I was sixteen, yes I’ll sit out.”
- He has very recently taken up wrestling which he enjoys. But was inactive for several years during his late teens and most of his twenties.



## Case Study

- A female in her early twenties with cerebral palsy and dystonia (a condition that causes muscle spasms and contractions).
- She had positive experiences of PE while at primary school with adaptations made for her.
- Unfortunately, her physical condition deteriorated during secondary school. She had brain surgery at age 16, which affected her movement and she contracted glandular fever when she was 19.
- This has left her unable to do any physical activity other than walking, although she said she would love to be able to swim and go to the gym.

Although changes to physical capability can be a barrier to participation, there are ways in which they can be managed to promote continued participation.

Advice and support from knowledgeable coaches, teachers or 'mentors', who have been through the same experiences, is noted as something which would be helpful.

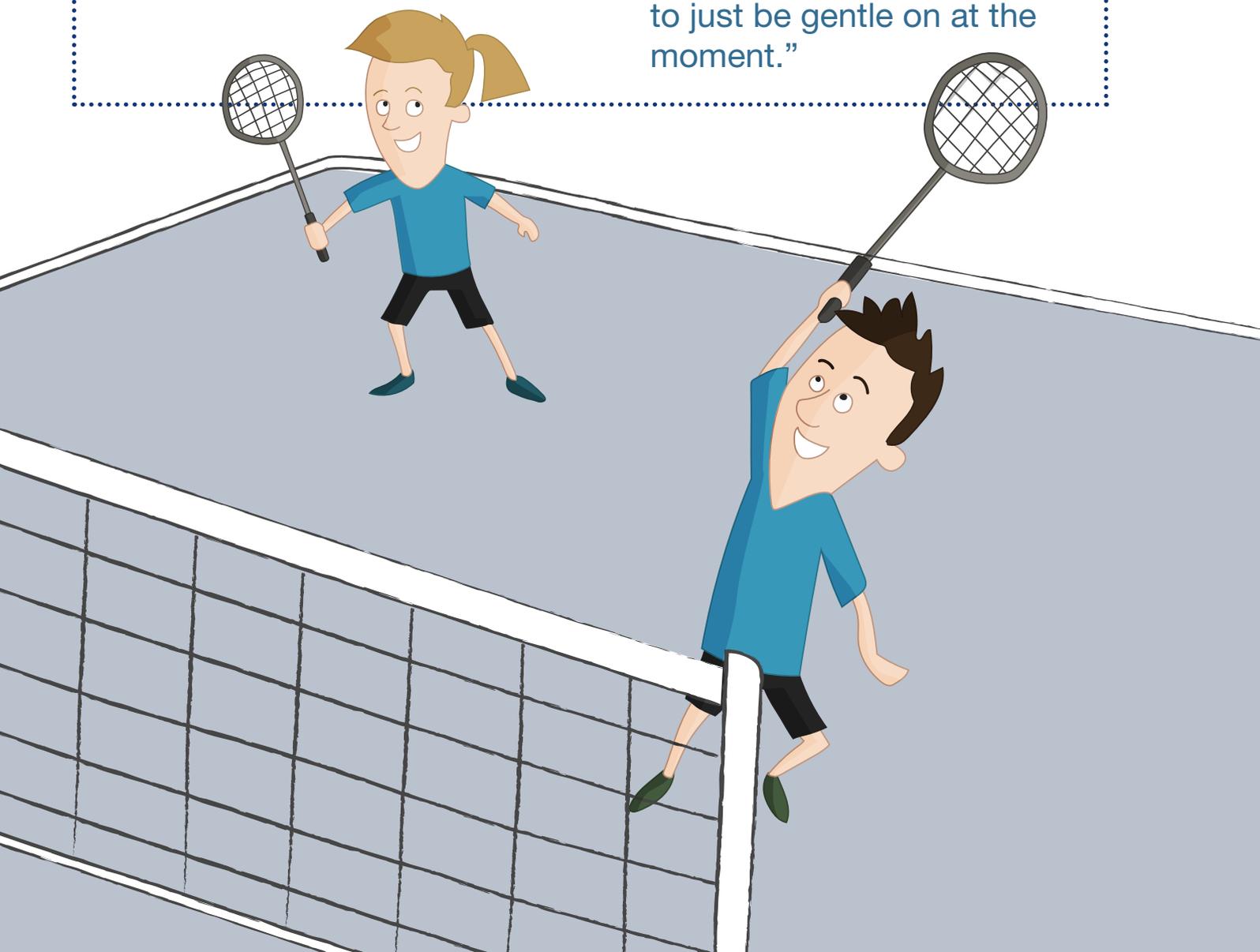
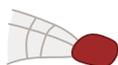
In addition, it is also important to ensure people's expectations and motivations to take part in sport and physical activity are realistic.



## Case Study

- A female in her late teens with restricted growth. She is a talented badminton player, who hopes to play at an elite level.
- She has had surgery in the past year to straighten her legs.
- This has had an impact on her training but she described having great support with her rehabilitation from her doubles partner and coaches.
- She felt that without this support it would be less likely she would be able to continue playing. With this additional support in place she would be able to resume training at her previous level in the near future:

“He [her doubles partner] had the same operation that I had, but two years ago, so they helped him get over that. So they have a knowledge of what I can do now and what they need to just be gentle on at the moment.”



Not all interviewees reported changes in their physical capability during transition into adulthood. However, they did describe how their impairment had made it difficult for them to engage in sport during this time.

### **Capability: psychological capability**

Psychological capability, in particular 'life skills' such as self-confidence, resilience and independence can have an important impact on participation. There were many examples where the young disabled person was not given the opportunity to develop these skills prior to transition into adulthood. This often resulted in them finding it hard to cope with continuing their engagement in sport beyond education.

This can be the case even if the young disabled person's general experience of sport at a school age is a positive one. A lack of focus on developing skills like resilience and independence can result in them becoming 'overwhelmed' or 'feeling lost' when they transition into an environment where there is poorer access to opportunities.

## **Case Study**

- A male wheelchair user, aged 25 attended a specialist school and college until the age of 19. He then went on to attend a mainstream college.
- While at specialist school he took part in a lot of sport, as his teachers readily provided opportunities. This made it easy for him to participate and there was no need for him to look for other opportunities in the community.
- However, these opportunities tailed off when he went to mainstream college. He would have to fill in a lot of paperwork at the mainstream college to participate in sport. He also did not have experience of organising his own transport to attend an activity.
- This suggests he had not developed the 'life skills' needed to involve himself in regular activity on his own initiative.
- He had a period of complete inactivity after leaving education.
- He has recently started attending a wheelchair football club after a friend persuaded him to join.

## Case Study

- A male in his late twenties with hearing loss.
- Was active almost every day whilst at a deaf secondary school.
- After making the transition to a mainstream college around the age of 16, his activity levels dropped dramatically because of the communication challenges he faced with hearing people.
- He felt “safe” while at deaf school because he was able to communicate easily with his peers and teachers. This changed when he went to the mainstream college.
- His lack of confidence communicating with hearing people meant he began feeling very isolated and withdrew from other students.
- He keeps intending to do more activity but has so far not managed this.



Negative experiences during school can also dramatically limit young disabled people from developing the confidence to access sport and physical activity opportunities after moving into adulthood.

Where psychological capability was developed, there were examples of young disabled people who were able to draw upon those skills to maintain involvement in sport, even when the opportunities available were not ideal.

## Case Study

- A female with a visual impairment, aged 17.
- She described how she was bullied by her classmates for several years whilst at school. Her peers would make comments about her visual impairment or not pass her the ball if they were playing football.
- While she received good support from teachers with her academic work, they provided little help to deal with the bullying.
- She was quite open about admitting that this put her off doing PE at school.

- She now goes to the gym outside of school but is less active than she was previously.

“I was bullied...it was a big part of my life for a little while. Saying I’m not good enough. I had quite low self-esteem, like, I didn’t really like the way I looked. The way my body was and stuff. The uniform was shorts and I just didn’t like showing my legs. It was just really awkward.”

## Capability: the provider perspective

Some of the providers explicitly acknowledged the role that ‘life skills’ such as confidence and resilience can play in young disabled people’s likelihood to engage in sport. One provider described how they take a very proactive approach to this.

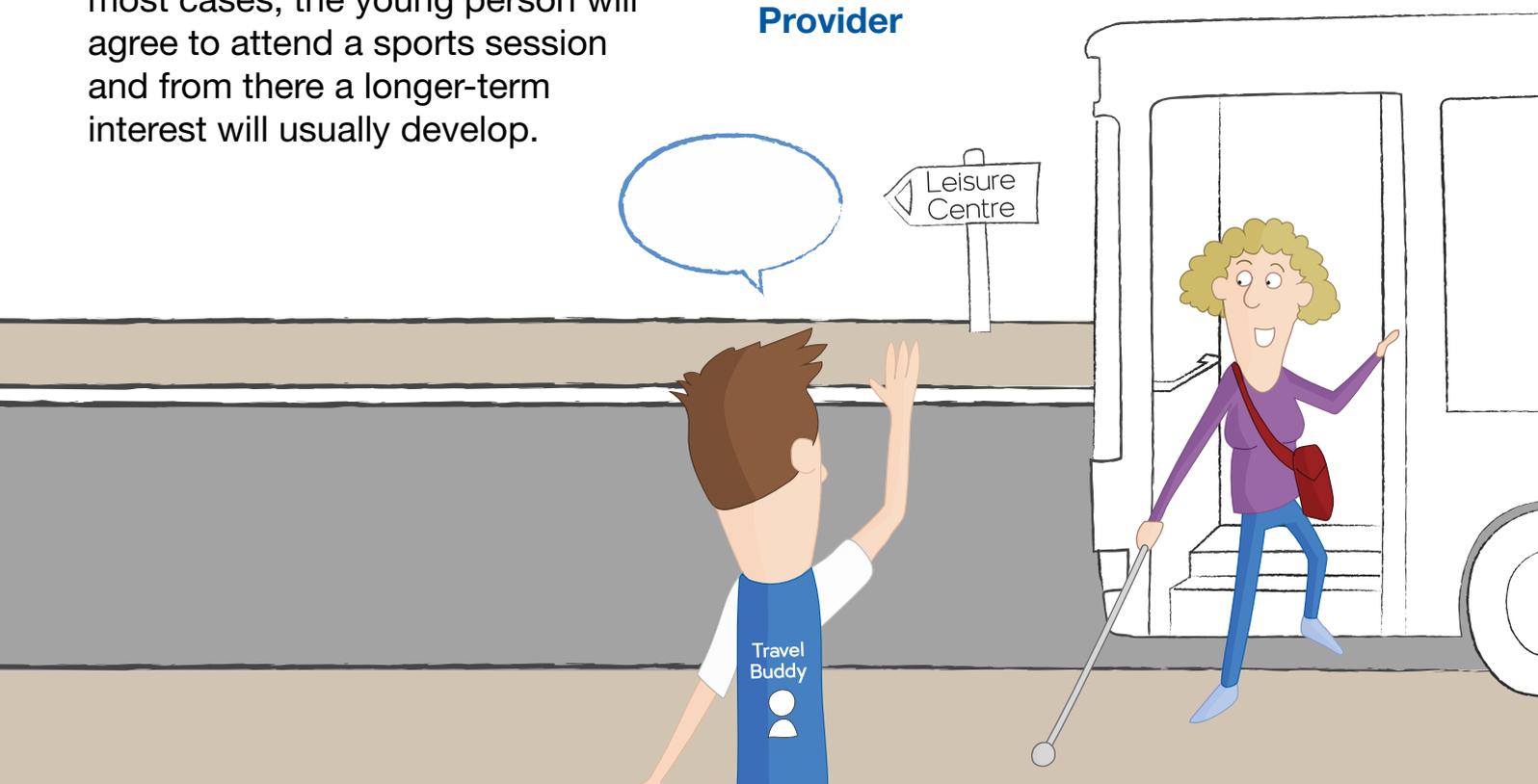
The provider’s staff visit schools in order to reach out to young people. Previous experience has taught them that young disabled people often do not approach provider organisations, particularly if they lack confidence.

With those who say they are not interested in engaging in sport, staff start an open dialogue, talking with the young person about their needs and interests. This is a process that staff recognise can take months and it is essential that staff are well trained to be able to handle this. In most cases, the young person will agree to attend a sports session and from there a longer-term interest will usually develop.

There is a big emphasis on encouraging independence in young disabled people. For example, where transport is not provided to attend sessions and they feel they need support with transport, a staff member will collect them from home and accompany them to travel by train or underground. In this way, they develop important life skills:

“What we find is that they’ve had to rely on family for the majority of their life and they don’t really know how to push themselves. They don’t really have the ability to do things off their own back. Some of the adults that we work with, when we have conversations with them, it can seem as if we’re being stern. It’s only because we know that the older they get the more things they’re going to have to do independently.”

### Provider



## Capability: summary and recommendations

Young disabled people can struggle to participate in physical activity due to a deterioration or change in their condition or the nature of their impairment.

- Encourage healthcare professionals such as physiotherapists and support workers to recommend sports and physical activities to young disabled people, appropriate for them and their capabilities. Some young disabled people can spend a lot of time with healthcare professionals and so build a strong relationship and rapport. This may mean that recommendations from a physiotherapist or support worker are more influential. This reflects findings from previous research conducted with paediatric physiotherapists<sup>9</sup>.

Young disabled people can often leave school lacking in the 'life skills' such as confidence, independence and resilience, needed to help them seek physical activity opportunities outside of school. This can result in a decline in their activity levels.

- Training for schools should include strategies for developing young disabled people's life skills, as well as developing their sports ability. Sainsbury's Inclusive PE training<sup>10</sup> programme encapsulates this through a multi-ability focus. This approach assesses and develops physical ability, thinking ability, social ability, healthy ability and creative ability.
- Educators should also be encouraged to help young disabled people plan where and how they will access sport once they leave compulsory education. To give them the confidence and skills to access provision on their own.

## 3.2 Motivation

As well as physical and psychological capability, motivation also influences behaviour. The findings suggest that motivation to engage in sport and physical activity varies for each young disabled person. However, the most common reasons were:

- Wanting to compete against others or challenge oneself.
- To not feel "different" from other people.
- To meet and socialise with others.
- To improve or maintain good mental and physical health.

<sup>9</sup>. [http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0000/9085/Understanding\\_sport\\_as\\_a\\_therapy\\_choice\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0000/9085/Understanding_sport_as_a_therapy_choice_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>10</sup>. <http://inclusivepe-eng.co.uk/>

<sup>11</sup>. [http://www.efds.co.uk/resources/research/2780\\_motivate\\_me\\_report](http://www.efds.co.uk/resources/research/2780_motivate_me_report)

Many of these reflect the life values identified in EFDS's 2013 'Motivate Me'<sup>11</sup> research. Namely progressing in life, having fun, friendships and maintaining health. Speaking to these motivations will help encourage young disabled people continue with sport and physical activity.

### Motivation: competition and challenge

Several participants highlighted competing against others and challenging oneself as reasons for participating in sport. This does not necessarily mean elite competition, but it does mean young disabled people are looking for clubs that feel 'legitimate' and offer opportunities to progress for those who want to.

### Case Study

- Female in her late twenties with a visual impairment, who is currently studying for a PhD.
- She did not particularly enjoy PE while at school although her family encouraged her to be active in her spare time as she grew up.
- She was introduced to goalball three years ago and found she really enjoyed it. She mentioned that the social side of goalball is important to her, she also said she "likes being good at stuff". Competing against others and challenging herself were powerful motivators for her:

"[Goalball] is a proper sport. When I used to think of disabled sport, it wasn't proper sport, not physical. Goalball is physical, quite demanding on you, huge amount of skill, agility, strength."

- Her goalball team is active in national leagues and she said she enjoys going to tournaments and playing against players who competed at the London 2012 Paralympic Games.



### **Motivation: self-identity**

The way in which a person views and defines themselves will play a significant role in whether or not they see an activity as something which is suitable and applicable to them.

An example of this is the extent to which disabled people identify with the term 'disabled'. There were a number of people who did not consider themselves to be disabled, and therefore they were often put off by sport opportunities that they felt were too targeted at disabled people.

“I think a lot of people don't think of themselves as disabled, so saying, 'Come and take part in disabled sport,' isn't going to make them feel like joining.”

#### **Female age 17-19, wheelchair user**

However, there were many different perspectives. A number of people felt identifying with the term 'disabled' was a way of making sure that their additional needs were recognised and met. When it came to taking part with other disabled people, some also felt that the environment was more accepting and understanding.

“It's okay to ask for help, tell people why you're asking. Nowadays I think it's great knowing other people who are visually impaired, because you can exchange tips. Little things you wouldn't find. Shared frustrations or amusing moments.”

#### **Female aged 24-29, visual impairment**

This period of young disabled people's lives is one in which they are still developing their own sense of identity. Their perspective can often change as they move into adulthood.

“People... are finding out who they really are. Do they fit into this disability character? Is that part of their identity? Are they going to try and be mainstream like the rest of their mates? I think it's an identity thing, whether or not you participate in disability sport. Have you accepted your disability?”

#### **Provider**

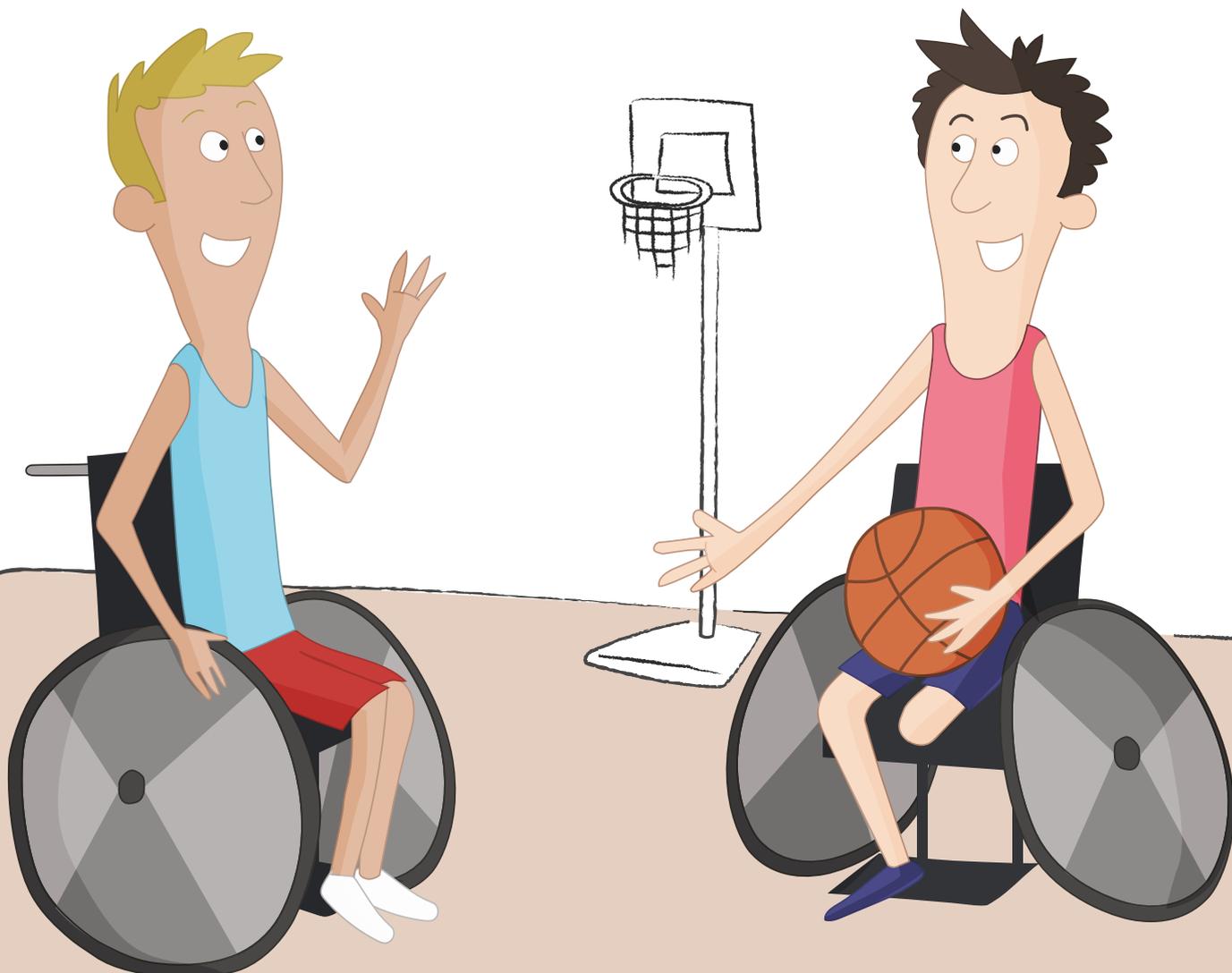
### **Motivation: socialising**

As with everybody else, sport for many young disabled people is about having fun, meeting people and experiencing a sense of community.

## Case Study

- A male amputee in his early twenties, who lost a leg at the age of 15 due to a car accident.
- He saw sport as primarily a social activity. He felt it was an important part of his rehabilitation because taking part in activities with other wheelchair users meant he was not dwelling on his condition.
- He was also able to discuss his condition with other people in an informal environment:

“The thing about disabled sport, it isn’t just about the competition side. The community side is very, very important. You look at everyone the same way, and the variety of disabilities is vast.”



### Other motivations

A smaller proportion of participants mentioned their physical and emotional health as motivators for taking part in sport and physical activity. For example, using sport and physical activity to control weight or manage stress. This was more common among the older interviewees.

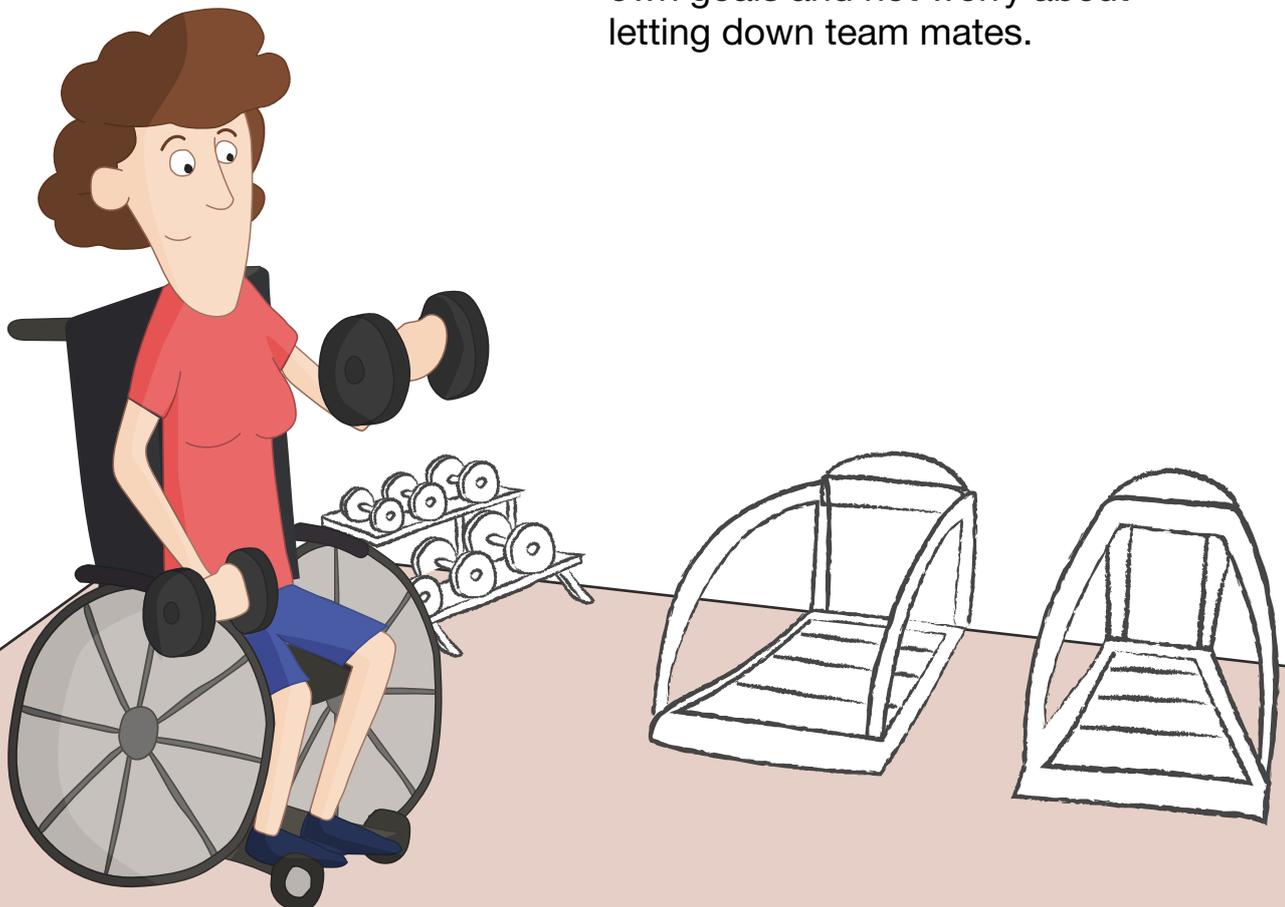
“It gives me something to aim for. It’s given me a motivation. It’s a coping strategy for when I’ve got other stresses, to take my mind off it I do sport. Mainly because I enjoy it, I get success out of it.”

**Male aged 24-29, cerebral palsy and wheelchair user**

“I was putting on weight, and I didn’t want to, and it was partly because I wanted something to do, and I had literally been doing nothing, and I was making myself depressed.”

**Female aged 17-19, wheelchair user**

It is important to note that organised sports are not for everyone and that recreational physical activity may be a more attractive choice. This may be due to previous negative experiences of sport or just personal preference. The perceived competitive nature of sport is not appropriate or attractive to everyone. More individual physical activities allow people to set their own goals and not worry about letting down team mates.



## Changes in motivation during transition

Motivation is often not stable during the transition into adulthood. Young people have many changing priorities, such as studying for exams, moving into employment, or wanting to spend time with friends. Often this can leave less time for sport and physical activity.

“I was at the age when I was out with friends, more interested in drinking in parks, sixteen to eighteen.”

### Male aged 24-29, visual impairment

#### Case Study

- A female in her early twenties, with hearing loss.
- Enjoyed sport as a teenager but found that when she went to university, trying to keep up with her workload meant there was less time for sport. She also had less money as she needed to fund a sign language interpreter to help with her studies.
- Shortly after leaving university she became pregnant and since then has not returned to sport.

## Motivation: the provider perspective

The providers interviewed appeared to appreciate the need to appeal to young disabled people's different motivations when offering opportunities. Sport is often presented as a fun, social activity and an opportunity to meet new people. However staff are also keen to enable young disabled people to experience achievement and success:

“We want to try and get disabled people in sports from a young age. That's also why it's more important to give them good, fun, safe environments. Let them know what it's like to have a bit of success. Teach them why it's important to work as a team and how to work individually as well.”

### Provider

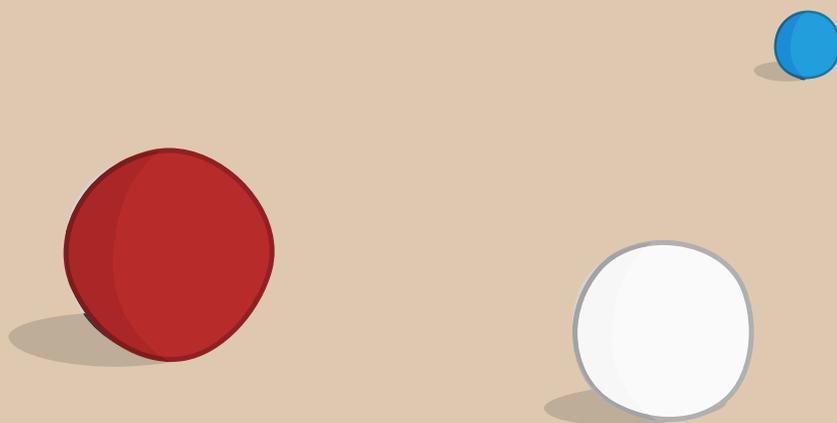
## Motivation: summary and recommendations

Some young disabled people are motivated to participate in sport to compete against others or challenge themselves. This appears to be a particularly important motivation for people during this period of their lives, as it can bring about a valuable sense of achievement for the individual.

- Providers need to ensure that grass-roots clubs feel well-run, with the appropriate equipment and facilities available. Those delivering activities should be able to adapt activities for young disabled people with different needs and levels of ambition, so that everyone can experience success.
- There should be links to high level sport (i.e. talent pathways) for those who have the desire to compete at a higher level.

Not all young disabled people think of themselves as being “disabled” and do not want sport or physical activity to challenge this self-identity.

- Providers should be aware of the need to provide more inclusive activities that disabled and non-disabled young people can attend together. However, this may not be appropriate for all impairments and specific needs. This reflects the findings of previous research into inclusive sport, which details how this can be effectively employed<sup>12</sup>.
- Consistent with the guidelines provided within EFDS’s 2014 ‘Talk to Me’<sup>13</sup> research, communications should avoid leading with a person’s impairment or health condition.



<sup>12</sup>. [http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0000/9948/Active\\_Together\\_Report\\_V6.pdf](http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0000/9948/Active_Together_Report_V6.pdf)

<sup>13, 14</sup>. [http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0001/0539/Talk\\_to\\_me\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.efds.co.uk/assets/0001/0539/Talk_to_me_FINAL.pdf)

The social side of sport and physical activity is an important motivator for some young disabled people, as they look to renew or establish new social groups upon leaving the school system.

- Providers should foster a sense of belonging and provide opportunities for attendees to socialise.

Motivation may not stay stable throughout the transition period. It can fluctuate with other activities taking precedence over sport. However, early positive experiences of sport will make it more likely that people will re-engage when they are older. The research has highlighted that disabled people's motivations to play sport will evolve over time and providers need to adapt with them<sup>14</sup>.



## 3.3 Opportunity

As well as having the capability and motivation, young disabled people need the opportunity to take part in sport. Interviewees described a variety of experiences related to the opportunity they had to engage in sport and physical activity during the transition period. These included:

- Access to sport inside and outside of school.
- Support they received from family and friends.
- Availability of adaptive support, equipment and other resources.

### Opportunity: sport at school

Young disabled people had varied experiences of physical education (PE). There were some young people who felt they did not have the level of opportunity they would have liked to play sport in school.

### Case Study

- A female in her late teens, who has cerebral palsy and a visual impairment.
- She was put on a pathway for Paralympic swimming when she was younger.
- Despite receiving a lot of support from her parents and coach, her teachers were less supportive:

“They didn’t believe that I could do sports. They had the equipment there and they wouldn’t let me use it.”

- She felt the attitude of the PE department in her school at the time was very much ‘You’re disabled, you go and sit in the corner’.



However, there were also many examples of positive PE experiences where educational professionals recognised and met a young disabled person's needs.

They made the necessary adaptations to ensure that they had the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way.

## Case Study

- A female in her early twenties, with restricted growth.
- She had positive experiences of sport at both primary and secondary school.
- She had someone to support her with PE at both schools, either with or separate from her class depending on the activity.
- Her mother was very supportive and held discussions with teachers about what she was able to do and what adaptations could be made so she could participate in activity.
- She felt that small adaptations can make a big difference to disabled people. For example, she was allowed to wear tracksuit bottoms instead of shorts because she felt self-conscious about how her legs looked.
- Her teachers appreciated that she was not able to run the same distances as her classmates and allowed her to run shorter distances, meaning she could still participate with her class:

“When I did the sports, everyone was really helpful and made ways for me to do it. No, if there's a sport that I haven't done, it's probably because I didn't really fancy it.”

Many people did not feel they had the opportunity to engage in a lot of sport outside of the school environment.

### Case Study

- A male wheelchair user in his early twenties.
- When he was at his specialist secondary school he played various sports but the equipment was rudimentary which affected his interest.
- He felt there were no local disability sports clubs in his area that he could attend as an alternative.

### Opportunity: continued support and resources

For many participants, parents or family offered not only encouragement, but practical support to access opportunities. This was primarily providing transport to and from sports clubs. In the absence of transport provision from their provider, this was important for their participation. The downside of this, of course, is that it is dependent on individual circumstances.

“If I didn’t have Mum to drive me or look after me... then I wouldn’t be able to do any of it. She’s more organised than me and makes it all work.”

### Female aged 20-24, wheelchair user

“There are a few people in our goalball club who really enjoy goalball but they’re reliant on other people to pick them up from their house to take them, which is unfair on one or two other people. If they haven’t got a lift to a tournament, then they won’t go to the tournament.”

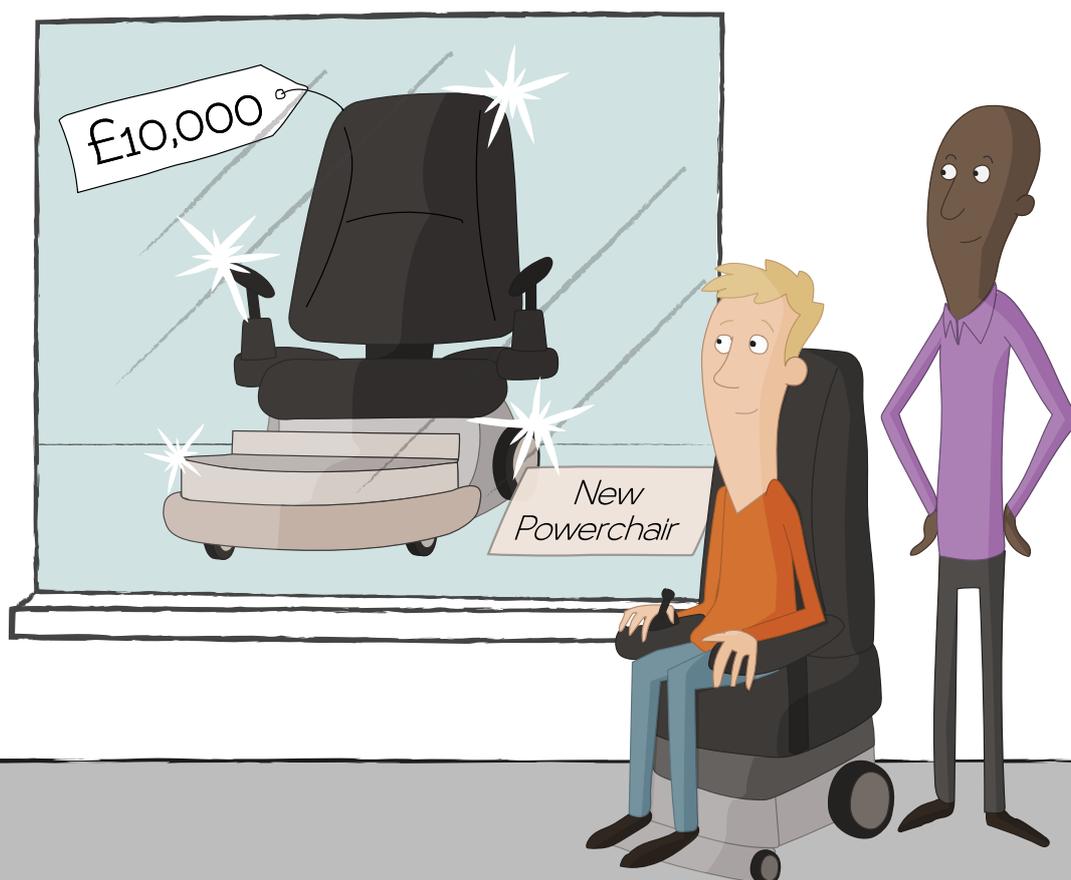
### Male aged 24-29, visual impairment

Not having access to the necessary adaptive resources to take part in sport or physical activity can also be a barrier. This can refer to specialist equipment (e.g. sport prostheses, adapted golf teeing devices) or professional support (e.g. support workers, sign language interpreters). However, this varies depending on the individual’s impairment and specific needs.

## Case Study

- A male wheelchair user in his early twenties.
- At college he began to play wheelchair football but equipment had to be adapted as the sport was still in its infancy.
- Since then he has found a regular club to play for and he gets a great deal of enjoyment from the sport.
- However, he said that ideally he would have a specially adapted wheelchair that would allow him to play to a higher standard. This would cost £10,000 and therefore is a major barrier for him.
- His opinion was that access to better equipment would make the sport more accessible and attractive to him.

“I’ve got hardly any visibility in this chair over my shoulders. Having a lot more power would help too, and I’d have more speed. It’d just increase my ability tenfold [if I had a specialist chair]. I’d be able to play at the level that I know I can play at with no setbacks. It’d be like running with a wooden prosthetic leg versus a carbon fibre blade.”



Some of the interviewees talked about how securing funding for these resources was even more challenging as they moved into adulthood. However, very often adaptations are simple and inexpensive, but can have a dramatic impact on a person's ability and motivation to take part in sport.

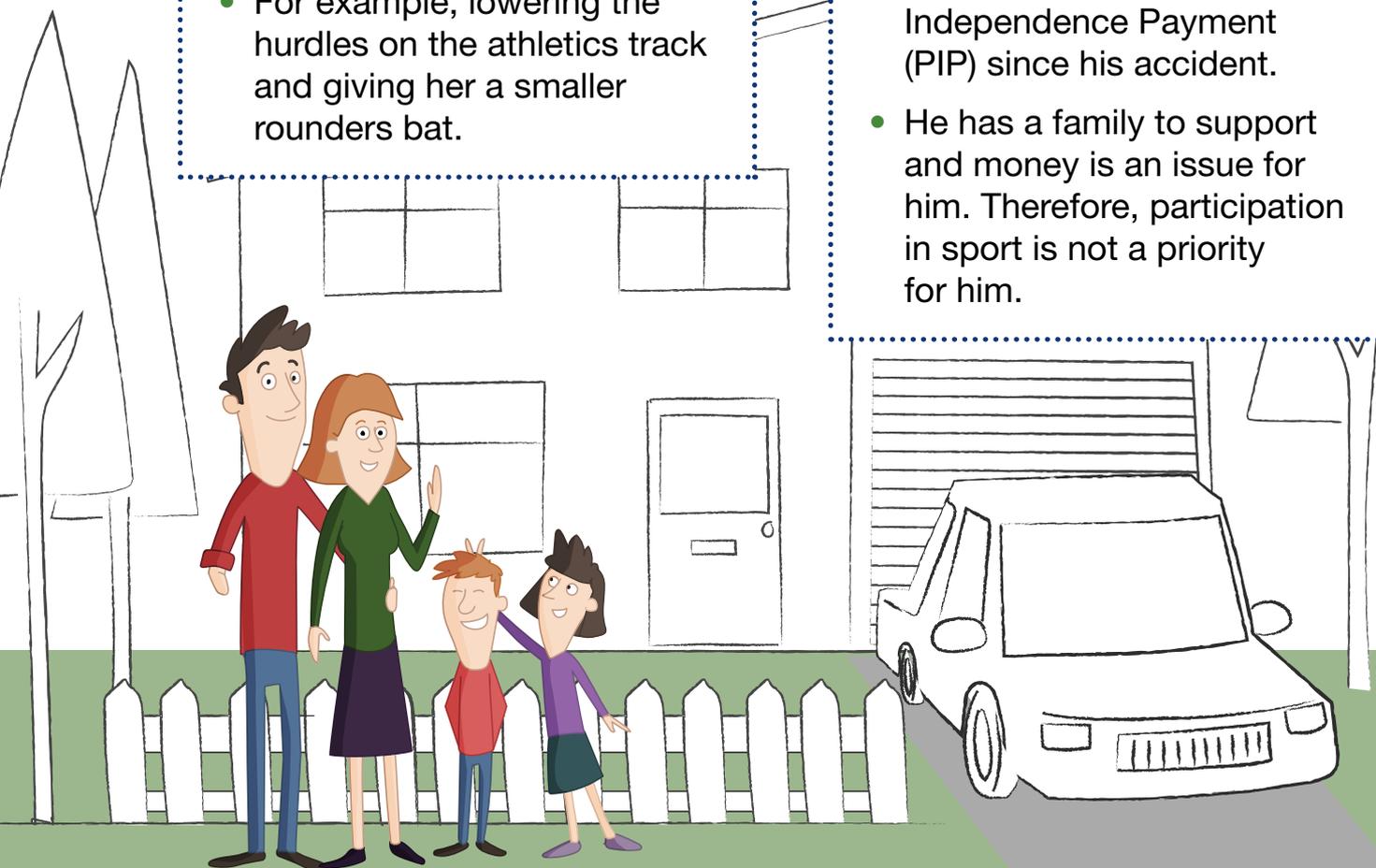
### Case Study

- Female in her early twenties, with restricted growth.
- She had a positive experience with sport at school.
- She talked about the simple adaptations that allowed her to take part in PE.
- For example, lowering the hurdles on the athletics track and giving her a smaller rounders bat.

Disabled people on average earn less than non-disabled people and are more likely to be unemployed<sup>15</sup>. Therefore the cost of continuing to play sport can be a major barrier as they move out of the school system. Fees to attend activities or the associated costs with getting there can mount up. Disabled people, especially when relying on disability related benefits, feel they have to prioritise spending in other areas of their life over sport.

### Case Study

- A male amputee now in his thirties.
- He has been living on Employment and Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) since his accident.
- He has a family to support and money is an issue for him. Therefore, participation in sport is not a priority for him.



## Opportunity: awareness of opportunities

A number of individuals commented on how difficult it is to find out what sports are on offer in their area. With compulsory PE ending at the age of 16 and there being few extracurricular sports on offer within schools, local clubs are an obvious alternative. However, it is not always easy to find out what is on offer, and young disabled people can feel as if it is their responsibility to identify opportunities:

“I think a lot of disabled sports are hidden, and it makes it very difficult to find them.”

### Female aged 17-19, wheelchair user

“Teachers or support workers will find ways to include you, whereas outside of school, you’ve got to make the effort and find the stuff that suits you. The onus is a lot more on you out of school, and as a disabled person, I think it can be a lot harder to find activities that suit you.”

### Female aged 24-29, cerebral palsy

## Opportunity: the provider perspective

The sport providers interviewed understood the need to provide appropriate opportunities to young disabled people. They are encouraged to move away from the “one size fits all” approach and to identify and meet the needs of different groups:

“We can get away from the idea that tennis is just a mainstream bat and a ball. It can be different equipment like a paddle and Velcro balls. They’re getting away from that idea that it has to be a particular type of equipment, and they’re also getting away from the idea that it has to be done in a tennis centre.”

### Provider

However, there are many challenges involved with achieving this. For example, the knowledge and attitude of people delivering sport can play a major role in whether a young disabled person feels that an opportunity is appropriate for them.

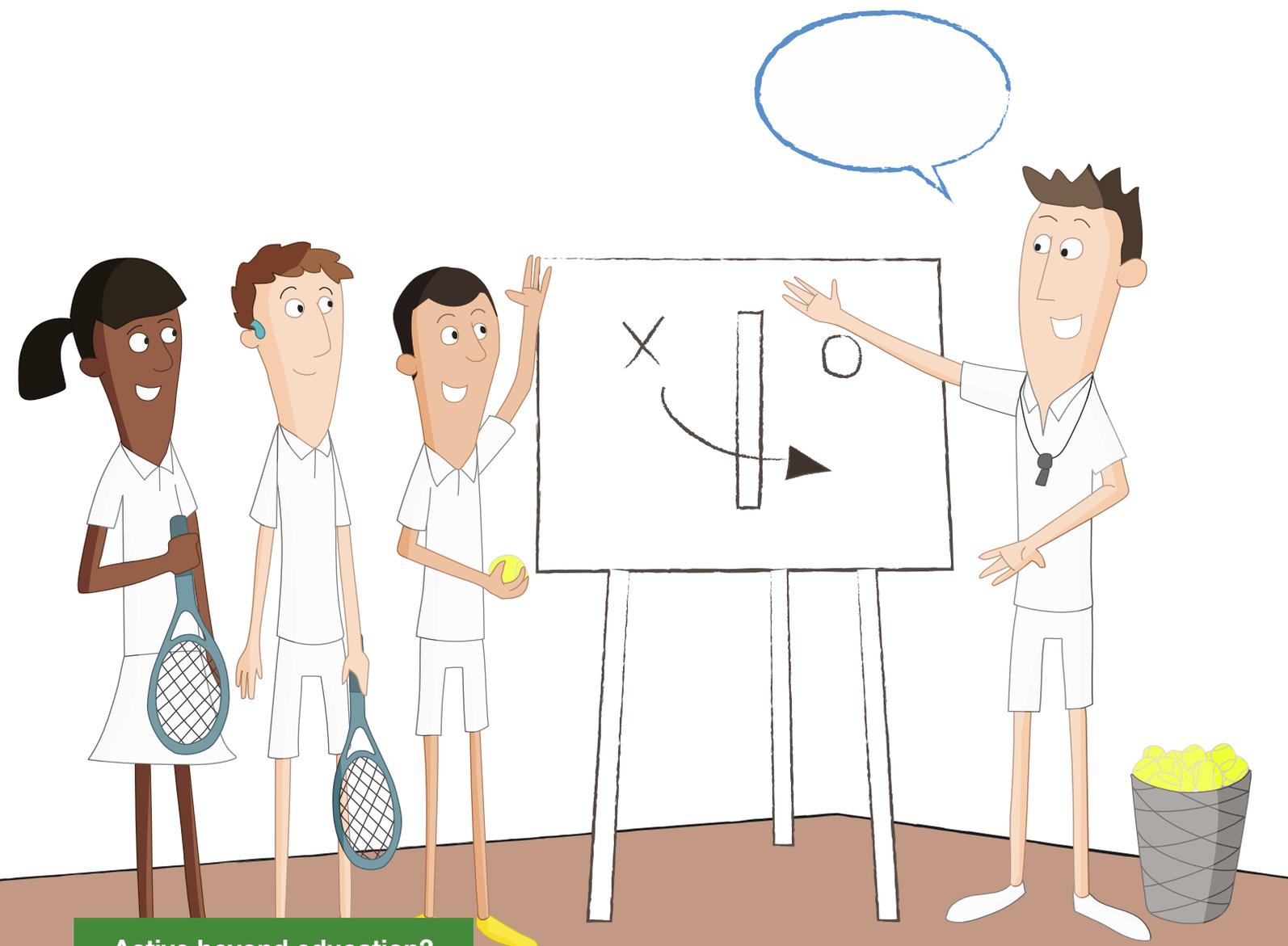
“I’ve had difficulties with coaches, not to do with delivering the session. It’s more to do with their immature attitudes or unwillingness to learn about things. My coach... just seems to understand a bit better on what’s to learn about sign-language and deaf awareness.”

### Provider

Many providers also talked about the importance of effectively promoting the opportunities available:

“You’ve got to have a strategy of how you’re going to continually promote the work you do. You’ve got to be social-media savvy and keep promoting what you do... People see themselves as consumers of something, not necessarily something that’s provided by a volunteer because of goodwill.”

### Provider



## Opportunity: summary and recommendations

There are practical and knowledge barriers that can prevent young disabled people accessing sport in education. Educators may not always be aware of a people's needs or know how to adapt activities. This can result in individuals not participating in PE lessons.

- Training and guidance for educators should include advice on how to enable young disabled people to engage in PE lessons. For example, how to adapt different activities whilst taking into account the needs of the individual. Sainsbury's inclusive PE training is a free training resource that delivers this.

Securing funding for adaptive equipment and specialist support is often challenging, especially moving into adulthood.

- Provide more opportunities for young disabled people and providers to bid for funds to support sport and physical activity participation during transition from education into adulthood.

Young disabled people can find it difficult to access sport or physical activity locally due to limited opportunities in the community.

- Develop the existing network of offers to be more accessible to young disabled people. Provide training, resources and support to providers and develop the young disabled person's ability to discover and access them.

There should be better knowledge-sharing of the opportunities that are open to young disabled people once they leave compulsory education.

- Providers should use channels and networks to connect with young disabled people to promote their opportunities. There also needs to be more awareness of where young disabled people and their families can find information on inclusive opportunities.
- Providers need to reach out to young disabled people either while they are still in education or in settings where they feel comfortable (e.g. youth groups or residential care homes). To provide them with experience of sport, as well as the confidence and skills to access provision.

# 4. Conclusions

**This research has explored young disabled people's experiences of sport and physical activity during the transition from education into adulthood. The findings have highlighted a number of key messages:**

- The importance that internal factors (having the motivation as well as the physical and psychological capability) as well as external factors (having available opportunities) play in continued sport participation post-education.
- The need to engage and equip as many young disabled people as early as possible whilst they are still in compulsory education. If this opportunity is not taken it becomes much harder to engage with individuals at an older age.
- A long-term, comprehensive and co-ordinated strategy is needed to lay the groundwork for a successful transition from education into adulthood.







A VISIBLE DIFFERENCE THROUGH SPORT

**British Blind Sport**

[www.britishblindsport.org.uk](http://www.britishblindsport.org.uk)  
Registered charity no. 271500



**LimbPower**

[www.limbpower.com](http://www.limbpower.com)  
Registered Charity no. 1132829



Cerebral Palsy Sport

**Cerebral Palsy Sport**

[www.cpsport.org](http://www.cpsport.org)  
Registered Charity no. 1088600



**UK Deaf Sport**

**UK Deaf Sport**

[www.ukdeafsport.org.uk](http://www.ukdeafsport.org.uk)  
Registered Charity no. 1158878



**Dwarf Sports Association UK**

[www.dsauk.org](http://www.dsauk.org)  
Registered Charity no. 1041961



**WheelPower**

[www.wheelpower.org.uk](http://www.wheelpower.org.uk)  
Registered Charity no. 265498



**English Federation of Disability Sport**

Making **active lives** possible

**English Federation of Disability Sport**

[www.efds.co.uk](http://www.efds.co.uk)  
Registered Charity no. 1075180



**LOTTERY FUNDED**

**Sport England**

[www.sportengland.org](http://www.sportengland.org)

This document is also available in a plain Word version.  
Please email [research@efds.co.uk](mailto:research@efds.co.uk) or call 01509 227750.

Illustrations by Tinmouse Animation Studio